

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Faith and Reason: The Junction of the Two Seas

Faith and Reason: The Junction of the Two Seas

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Ask a Muslim and he will emphatically affirm that there is no conflict between faith and reason in his religion. Ask a Christian and he will make the same assertion. Indeed, both sides will point the finger at the other claiming that it is the faith of “the other” that is irrational. Yet, a Muslim is hard pressed to explain why the rationalists were discredited, punished and sidelined in the eighth century Abbasid courts and why the Islamic world fell behind in scientific inquiry. And a Christian will fall back on his faith to explain his belief in the Trinity.

A critical outlook is a pre-requisite for human progress. The interface of faith and reason is at the heart of scientific inquiry. In this article, we take a fresh look at this age old question using the guidance of the Qur’an. Our objective is to encourage the study of the natural sciences within a paradigm of faith. This narrative is reinforced with a few examples. The essential vocabulary that permeates the debates between reason and space is summarized. The broad contours of how the Qur’an guides humankind towards a dynamic balance between faith and reason is outlined. Those who wish to pursue this subject may use these insights for further work.

Nature loves simplicity. It is man who makes things complex. Physicists have long searched for a single unifying element that integrates different phenomenon. Recently, claims have been made about the discovery of a so-called “God-particle” that unifies space-time, gravity, electromagnetism, weak atomic forces and strong atomic forces. Future generations may yet discover smaller particles that provide further insights. The question is: Is there a similar single unifying element that integrates faith and reason? We affirm that the answer is, yes.

Summarily, The Qur’an accords the same sanctity to the Ayahs (passages) in the Qur’an as the Ayahs (Signs) “on the horizon”, namely nature, history and the soul. These Signs point the way towards *Asma’ ul Husna* (the Most Beautiful Divine Names) and provide the basis for an integration of faith and reason.

### **The Limits of Reason**

There are several laboratories around the world that are actively engaged in research on the extraordinary maneuverability of dragonflies. The dragonfly has extremely complex eyes, made up of about 50,000 eyelets, wrapped around its head, so that it can see in every direction. Bees have similar compound eyes. The honey bee, which is mentioned in the Qur'an, has two sets of eyes. One set has two compound eyes and the other has three simple eyes. The compound eye consists of a large number of individual eyelets, like a honeycomb, each connected separately to a neuron in the tiny brain of the bee. It is like a miniaturized version of a giant segmented optical telescope. These eyes enable the bee to lock onto a target. The three simple eyes are like a fine guidance sensor, fixing directionality through triangulation just as is done in space sensors.

The dragonfly, and the bee, can fly in six degrees of freedom, meaning, up and down, sideways and rotate along three axes. How does the bee do it? Enormous research has been done in this direction but we still do not understand how such a small creature can see in three dimensions. In addition, it can see in a rather large electromagnetic spectrum, from yellow to ultraviolet, lock onto a target through a calculated and projected understanding of the trajectory of its prey, and fly like a missile in six dimensions to kill its prey.

The research about dragonflies and bees, is not just for scientific curiosity. It is directed towards the development of highly maneuverable miniaturized homing devices and defensive measures against them. It is the onset of the age of robots which will challenge the worldview, the culture and ethics of our grand-children.

The tiny dragonfly teaches us humans a lesson in humility and the limits of reason. We do not even understand how a bee sees or how it flies. Yet, man dares to confront and question his Creator, He who creates billions of universes, and creates them out of nothing!

Reason is limited in its reach. Faith is not. This is the first difference between the two.

### **The Constraints of Space-Time**

I have heard illuminating lectures from some of the most brilliant people in the world from the celebrated Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman at Caltech to religious scholars such as Maulana Maududi. Yet, "space-time" remains an enigma within a riddle within a mystery.

The most thought provoking insight I have received about the meaning of time was from the renowned Sufi Shaikh Nazim al Haqqani al Qubrusi (1922-2014) of Turkey. In the year 2000, I travelled with the Shaikh as part of a delegation to Uzbekistan. One quiet morning, I caught up with the Shaikh in the courtyard of a masjid in Samarqand after fajr prayers, and asked him about the hidden meaning (the *asrar*) of time. "Time is like a fish in an ocean", he said. He gestured with his right hand simulating a serpentine movement, like the fish lost by Prophet Moses (pbuh) at the junction of the two seas. "This wisdom is from Grand Shaikh Abdullah Dagestani (1891-1973)", he continued, "He received this wisdom from his Shaikh. It is a special gift for you". In that moment I grasped the essence of the classical debate between al Gazzali and Ibn Rushd. Ibn Rushd was riding the fish; al Gazzali stood in the ocean.

Reason is bound by space-time. Faith is not. This is the second difference between the two.

### **Ilm ul Ibara and Ilm ul Ishara**

Broadly speaking, human knowledge is of three kinds:

- o Knowledge that is descriptive and can be taught
- o Knowledge that cannot be taught but can only be alluded to
- o *Ilm al Laduni* that is bestowed by Divine Grace only upon the Prophets.

Knowledge that can be taught or acquired through books is called *ilm ul ibara* (root word 'abara, meaning, to wade as if in a stream from one shore to the other). In this category belong physics, chemistry, biology, history, mathematics, geometry, civics and languages. In philosophy, this is also called discursive knowledge.

Knowledge that cannot be taught but can only be alluded to is termed *ilm ul ishara*. In this category belong faith, love, honor, valor, courage and compassion. *Ilm ul Ibara* can be measured and taught in a school. *Ilm ul Ishara* cannot; it is a Divine gift, a moment of Grace.

The Qur'an uses parables and similes to convey transcendent ideas that are difficult or impossible to communicate through discursive language. Transcendental ideas such as love, grace, beauty, wisdom and peace are best felt, not expressed. I have provided a detailed description of the origin, nature, methods and limits of knowledge (the epistemology of knowledge) in the Encyclopedia of Islamic history ([www.historyofisloam.com](http://www.historyofisloam.com) (<http://www.historyofisloam.com>)). Interested readers may please refer to it.

Reason and faith are two different branches on the tree of knowledge. This is the third difference between the two.

### **What is time?**

There are at least sixteen different descriptions of time in the Qur'an. The meaning depends on the context.

1. Clock time: "Those who give in charity by night and by day" (2:274)
2. Relative time: "The Angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a moment, whose measure is fifty thousand years" (70:4)
3. Timeless time: "Has there transpired upon humankind a time from *ad Dahr* (timeless time) when he was not even an item mentioned?" (76:1)
4. Transient time: "So, leave them in their confusion for a time that is transient (fleeting). (23:54)
5. Pre-ordained time: "And He made the sun and the moon follow the Command. They all move in their orbits for a time determined." (13:2)
6. Time as a moment: "There is a term decreed for every spiritual community. When the decreed time arrives, they cannot hold it back one moment or move it forward (one moment)" (7:34)
7. Perceived time: "One of them said: How long have you stayed (here)? They said: We stayed a day or part of a day." (18:19)
8. The passage of time: "By the passage of time" (103-1)
9. Illusory time: "Nay! The (deceptive) impressions of the life of this world (have distracted you)" (87:16)
10. Time as in the Day of Judgment: "Of no benefit will be your relatives, nor your children, on the Judgment Day" (60:3)

11. Time as a Sign from Allah: “And remind them of the days of Allah.

Indeed, in these are Signs for all those who persevere and are grateful.” (14:5)

12. Cyclical time: “Lo! In the alteration of the night and the day, and in what Allah has created in the heavens and the earth are Signs for a people who are conscious of the Divine.” (10:6)

13. The unknowable present: “He knows what is in between before and after” (2:255)

14. The unknowable beginning and the unknowable end: “And verily, Ours is the beginning and the end.” (92:13)

15. The impenetrable space-time bubble: “O assembly of jinns and humans! If it be within your power to escape the layers of the heavens and the earth, then escape! You shall not escape without the authority (of your Creator).” (55:33)

16. Time as an infinitesimal, imperceptible small measure: “Are they only waiting for the Moment that it should descend on them suddenly, while they perceive it not? (43:66) (To put this Ayat in context, one should remember that time as energy is  $10E-45$  seconds in quantum physics)

### **The assumptions of “before and after” and “cause and effect”**

Reason depends on the assumption of a linear flow of time from “before” to “after”. The arrow of time in rational discourse points “forward”. A consequence of this assumption is the notion of cause and effect. Al Gazzali attacked this assumption, postulating that what humans perceive as “cause and effect” are illusory. In his schema, cause and effect take place “at the same time”. However, he did not explain what “at the same time” means. He left it dangling in the air.

The “present” is beyond human perception. It is at the intersection of “before” and “after”. It is a moment of Divine Grace and is known only to God. It is an imperceptible mystery. The “present” belongs to *ilm ul ishara* whereas “before and after” belong to *ilm ul ibara*. By the time the mind reaches this junction, it is past. It is for this reason that the correct translation of “*Kun fa Yakoon*” cannot be: “Be, and it is”. It is: “Be, and it was!”

### **The Principle of Objectivation**

In addition, rational perception depends on the assumption of objectivation, namely, that we as human beings are separate from the rest of creation and as “subject” are able to view the cosmos as an “object”. This assumption is open to question. The human is a part of nature, not separate from it. Humankind is subject to the same physical laws as is all other creation with the exception that the human is infused with the spirit from God (the *ruh*) and is able to “know” the world.

### **How We Simplify our World View**

Now that we have documented the assumptions that govern our rational perceptions, we are in a position to ask if our world view that rests on the foundation of these assumptions is “valid”.

The answer to this question is “yes, it is valid” as long as those assumptions are kept in mind. We make assumptions to simplify an enormously complex cosmos. Without these assumptions the cosmos becomes overwhelmingly complicated and incomprehensible. The simplifications enable us to gather some knowledge about the world that we are a part of and use that knowledge for our benefit.

For instance, Newton’s laws of classical physics are valid on earth when the velocities are small compared to the speed of light. They break down when the velocities are large and approach the speed of light.

What is important is to remember the assumptions as well as the initial and boundary conditions and the limits of our assumptions when we make a statement about the nature of things. One must always be conscious that the human is not separate from nature. He is not a subject and the cosmos is not an object. We are a part of nature and are subject to the same physical laws. The laws of dynamic balance that govern the cosmos also govern the physical world of man. These laws are built into the structure of the cosmos. The interface between the two is “built in” and cannot be rent asunder.

The journey towards the Truth of a believer as opposed to that of a disbeliever is guided by a different perspective. In his research, a believer asks himself: What is the will of God? And when he makes a discovery, he exclaims “*subhanallah*” (how great is Allah). He continues his journey towards further discoveries until he reaches the Arsh (the Divine throne). A secular man asks himself: What is the law of nature? And when he makes a discovery, he exclaims, “Eureka” (I have found it). It is a matter of perspective. The first perspective keeps one humble and takes one towards divinely presence; the second one takes one towards *Anayah* (the insatiable ego), self-adoration and self-glorification. It is a pharaonic attribute.

Muslims fell behind in scientific work because they forgot to ask, as they were commanded to in the Qur’an: What is the Will of God? (*Yas’al Bihi Khabeera*, Ask about it from Him Who knows). Instead, they said, “It is the Will of God”, and went to sleep.

### **What is faith?**

“The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Rabb, and so do the believers. All of them have the conviction of faith in Allah and the Angels and the Books and the Messengers (saying). We do not differentiate between any one of the Messengers.” (2:285)

Truth is one. Islam stands at the intersection of the Truth as it was revealed to all the Prophets and hence it honors and accepts the Truth of all the earlier revelations. According to the Qur’an, Iman is to have certainty of faith in Allah, the Angeles, the Books, and the Messengers and not to differentiate between any one of them.

### **Why did the Classical approach fail?**

The classical approach for the reconciliation of faith with reason failed because it was deductive. It started with the premise of God’s omnipotence and speculated on where and when this omnipotence interfaced with nature. The attempt was bound to fail because the will of God is transcendent, beyond space-time, and beyond human reach. It is futile to try to define where and when the will of God interacts with the cosmos because His will is built into the natural phenomenon. It is like a fish swimming in a pond and trying to find out where the water is. Another parable is for a man to try to define where the interface between man and God is. Upon being told that God is closer to him than his jugular vein, he proceeds to slit his throat to discover God!

Every universe, every galaxy, every planet, every molecule, every atom, every string beats to the laws ordained for it. It is for man to discover the “how” of these ordinances, not to discover “where and when” these ordinances interact with the cosmos, as the ordinances are built into the very essence of the cosmos.

In contrast to the deductive philosophical approach, the guidance from the Qur’an is inductive. It guides humankind to become a witness to the beauty and majesty of God’s creation, interact with it, discover the Divine Names through this interaction, and create divine patterns on earth in servitude to His

commands. Man is uniquely qualified for this mission in that he is endowed with eyes with which to see, ears with which to hear, a body with which to sense, reason with which to integrate and contemplate and a heart to perceive the Most Beautiful Names. In the perspective of a man of faith, philosophy becomes an integrative tool, and reason becomes its normative process.

The soul is the mirror of the invisible world. God's creation is good. It has beauty and grace. It beckons the soul to discover it and through this discovery to know, serve and worship the Creator. The soul can grasp onto the beauty and grace "on the horizon" because of the beauty and grace within. Man and nature are not antagonists; they are related to each other through God. This is in contrast to the secular perspective where man and nature are antagonists and are divorced from each other so that man may abuse and exploit nature without compunction.

The interface between the world of reason and the realm of the heart (the realm of faith) is elastic and the boundaries are ever expanding. Each individual experiences this interface in accordance with his innate capabilities bestowed upon him by Divine Grace. .

To be a witness to God's creation requires action. Faith that is reinforced with action finds its goal, namely, the Truth. Faith without action dangles in the air. The inverse is also true. Deeds without faith are like building castles in the sand. That is how the Qur'an brackets faith with noble deeds ("*Amanu wa 'amalus salehat*") and emphasizes that they are co-extant.

### **Attributes that Make Us Human**

A physical description of man takes us in the direction of organs, cells, molecules, DNA and RNA. Such a description is useful for physicians, biologists and chemists but it is far from satisfying. Man is more than his body. He is endowed with knowledge, reason, free will, feelings and emotions. Most importantly, he is animated by the spirit, a Trust from God.

Accordingly, a more complete description of man takes us in the direction of his attributes, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The Qur'an provides such a comprehensive perspective. It embraces the physical, the emotive and the spiritual.

1. The body (*jism*) which enables us to see, hear, taste, walk, talk and interact physically with the physical world. It is the means for gaining empirical knowledge.
2. The mind, the seat of reason (*aql*), comprehension (*fahima*) and contemplation (*fikr*). It is the means for extensional knowledge. The body and the mind are the means for *ilm ul ibara*.
3. The heart (*qalb*) is the seat of awareness, feelings and emotions. There are four parts to the heart: the outer heart (*sadr*), the heart (*qalb*), the inner heart (*fuad*) and core (*birr*). The heart is the seat of *ilm ul ishara*, the intuitive and infusive knowledge,
4. The Nafs (soul) is the hidden motive power of *insan*, the medium of cognition, judgement, responsibility, will, belief or disbelief. The term Nafs is also used to describe an individual.
5. *Insan* (the human) is a composite term that includes the body, the mind, the heart and the Nafs.
6. The Spirit (*ruh*), bestows life, knowledge and power on the human. The Nafs is from God and returns to Him upon death ("*Inna Lillahi wa Inna Ilayhi Rajعون*"). We know but a little about it. When it animates the body, the human is alive and is a witness to the majesty of creation. When it departs, life, knowledge and power depart with it and the body is dead.

### **Reconciling Faith and Reason**

We are now ready to ask the question that we asked at the outset: Just as there appears to be a “God-particle” that unifies space-time, gravity, electromagnetism, weak atomic forces and strong atomic forces, is there a building bloc that unifies faith and reason?

The Qur’an accords the Ayahs (Signs) in nature and history the same sanctity as the revealed Word. “We shall show them Our Signs on the horizon, and within their own souls, until it is clear to them that it is indeed the Truth.” (41:53) God reveals His Word through the Books as well as through Signs “on the horizon”. The heavens as well as the human soul become the tablet on which the Pen writes so that the human become aware of Him and cultivates faith with certainty.

The goal of knowledge is to find the Truth. God is the Truth (*al Haqq*). The man of faith finds the Truth by the certainty of *iman* in his heart. The man of science finds the Truth through the Signs (Ayahs) in nature. The historian finds the Truth through a study of the majesty of human interactions. For the scientist and the historian, reason becomes a process for finding the Truth. The Awlia (the Gnostics) find the Truth through an understanding of the Signs in the human soul.

Thus the Ayah (Sign, symbol) is the common building block, the unifying factor for faith and reason. Each passage in the Qur’an is an Ayah. Every atom manifests itself as an Ayah. All creation is a mystical wonder which is like an arrow pointing towards the Throne.

Hence, the study of nature and of history becomes mandatory for the believers just as is the study of the revealed Word. Beautiful is God’s creation which changes every moment revealing the Most Beautiful Names. (“Whatever is between the heavens and earth ask; He bestows every moment with majesty”, 35: 17). The Signs in the deep recesses of the soul also point to the transcendence of the Creator. A study of the inner dimensions of human nature, the attributes of the heart and the soul, becomes mandatory for believers. An *Alim* is not just a person who studies the Qur’an in a seminary. The honor is also due to one who studies nature (a scientist like Ibn Sina), history (a historian like Ibn Khaldun) or is a master of the sciences of the soul (a Shaikh like Shaikh Abdel Qader Jeelani).

The Qur’an integrates faith and reason. Nature is not compartmentalized as it is in the secular perspective. It is a stage for the manifestation of His Signs. Similarly, the soul is a platform for the manifestation for the majesty (*tajalliat*) of Divine Names. In this perspective, reason remains the supreme power for understanding nature but it becomes a servant of faith in the domain of the transcendent. It leads humankind to “the junction of the two seas” but then it bows out, the light of reason becomes dim, and humankind must advance further with the light of the heart. (O Assembly of jinns and humans! If you can penetrate the layers of the heavens and the earth, then do so. Not without authority shall you be able to do so 27:33). It is significant that humankind cannot reach “the junction of the two seas” without reason. By the same token, it cannot advance beyond this junction with reason alone; it requires the light of faith of which the heart is the reflector.

### **The Ayah as the Common Building Block for Faith and Reason**

The Ayat serves as the building block for the message of the Qur’an and provides the linkage between faith and reason. According to the Qur’an, all creation is a symbol. The Qur’an must therefore be interpreted as a grand scroll of divine symbols. A prosaic, literal interpretation of the Qur’an leaves one thirsting for more knowledge. Similarly, nature must also be looked upon as a majestic panorama of symbols. The Signs in nature and history act as evidence for the Truth and in their collective thrust foster certainty of faith.

## 1. The Ayah (Sign) as a passage in the Qur'an

"These are Signs from the Qur'an. Verily, a Book, illuminated, giving guidance and good news to those who have certainty of faith." (27:1-2)

The Qur'an refers to itself as a collection of Ayahs. Only a symbolic representation gives the latitude to interpret the Ayahs for application in space-time, in different cultures and locales. "If the ocean were ink for (writing) the Words of my *Rabb*, then, the ocean will be exhausted before the Words of my *Rabb* are completed, even if We bring another ocean to help it." (18:109). A literal interpretation constrains the freedom of interpretation and may lead to stagnation, dogmatism and extremism which are contrary to the dynamism of faith.

### 1. Ayahs (Signs) on earth

"Do they not see on the earth how much of every blessed kind We have grown therein, in pairs. Indeed! In it there are Signs! But most of them have no certainty of faith." (26:7)

The flora and fauna of earth offer boundless Signs for man to witness and contemplate its majesty. These Signs form the basis of the physical, biological and geological sciences.

The universe is a mystery. It must be looked at with awe and wonder. It is a means to an end, not an end itself. "Lo! We created not the heavens and the earth and what is in between, for amusement." 21:15). A scientist must keep the symbolic nature of the physical world in mind. Science does not tell us the absolute Truth. It is a symbol for a higher truth. This is confirmed by the Sufi and the scientist alike. As an example, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty in quantum mechanics affirms this. It states that the more precise our knowledge of a particle, the less precise is our knowledge of its momentum. And yet another example, the "observer effect" predicts that it is not possible to know a system without affecting it thereby denying us its pristine attributes. In other words, "the thing in itself" is forever hidden from us. What is known is only its relational behavior within the framework of assumptions made.

### 2. The Signs (Ayahs) in the Cosmos

"And among His Signs (are) the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences in language and color. Indeed, in that are Signs for those who are perceptive. (30:22)

The sheer expanse of the universe baffles the imagination. The eye stares in wonderment at the cosmos and comes back tired and humbled (67:4). These Signs form the basis of the astronomical sciences and astrophysics.

### 3. The Signs (Ayahs) in the Nafs (The Self or the Soul)

“By the Nafs and what perfection was bestowed upon it (91:7)”

The Nafs is a composite term that includes the body, the mind, the heart and the soul. The Nafs is the repository of perception, the owner of human will, and the knower of right and wrong. When it is purified, it becomes a vehicle for the manifestation of Divine Names. When it is corrupted, the human insulates himself from Divine light. The attributes of the Nafs are the basis for tasawwuf, the sciences of the soul.”

### 4. The Signs (Ayahs) in history

“And when the people of Noah rejected their Messenger, We drowned them, and We made them a Sign for humankind.” (25:37)

The lessons of history are Signs for humankind. When humankind obeys the universal laws of justice and strives to find the Truth and serve Him, it prospers. When justice is violated and humankind exceeds its limits, it destroys itself. The rise and fall of civilizations can be explained through the conformance or discordance with divine laws. “And the heavens have we raised up and established dynamic balance therein, so that you do not violate justice in your own lives 27:7-8).

### 5. Time as an Ayah (Sign)

“And remind them of the days of Allah.

Indeed, in these are Signs for all those who persevere and are grateful. (14:5)

Time is a sense built into the cosmos as well as in the human. It is neither real nor is it unreal. It is the process that governs all creation. It serves its purpose for the fulfillment of the commands of Allah, and it provides an opportunity to know Him through His attributes manifest in creation. A Hadith e Qudsi

states: “ I was an unknown treasure, I willed that I be known, so I created.”

### **The Future: Guidance from the Qur’an is empirical and inductive**

The guidance of the Qur’an is both empirical and inductive. Numerous are the Ayahs which draw the attention of humankind to Signs (Ayahs) in nature (2:29; 3:190; 6 38; 6:95; 6:97; 6:99; 6:101; 10:5-6; 10:31; 10:101; 13:2-4; 13:65; 15:16; 16:10-16; 20:50; 24: 41; 29:19; 30:11; 31:28; 50: 6; 51:20-21; 78: 6-7; 87:2) and history ( 3:137 (<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/QURAN/3.htm#137>); 6:6; 6 42; 12:110-111 (<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/QURAN/12.htm#110>); 14:5 (<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/QURAN/14.htm#5>); 29:20).

In the Qur’anic approach reason is accorded its dignity as the queen of the empirical and rational sciences. However, it is tethered as a means, a process to find the Truth, and to develop certainty of faith. It is not allowed to roam like the unfettered reason of modern man who has separated faith from reason and finds himself wandering alone in the wilderness of disbelief, dangling between heaven and earth, with his feet planted neither firmly on the ground of faith nor his reason reaching up to heaven. He is lost to the peace that comes with the presence of God.

Faith and reason are two seas. At the junction of the two seas stands the Ayah, that transcendent “God-particle” of Revelation. It is the missing link in the faith-reason discourse.

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