

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Is there a Spiritual Perspective on Science?

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The reader may ask: "Modern science has given us precision and discipline. It has yielded us prosperity and wealth. Before we discard our "scientific" thinking, we would like to know if there is a more comprehensive approach". The answer to this question is a resounding "yes". We summarize here a spiritual approach to physical understanding that is consistent with Qur'anic teachings which puts God at the center of Creation and the human soul as the primary vehicle for understanding God's work.

To state this position summarily: God is the efficient cause of all. His will pervades the universe. Nothing happens except with His permission. It is He who created man, bestowed upon him a soul, endowed it with speech and intelligence and illuminated it with the knowledge of all things. It is He who made humankind his trustee on earth and gave it authority over all that is between the heavens and earth. Time is a sign from God. At every "moment" (quanta) of time, however small, the will of God intervenes and decides the outcome of events. *The search for interrelationships in the physical world is thus a search for the will of God.* Man is enjoined to observe, study and interact with the cosmos so that through it he may witness the magnificence of the work of God and marvel at the majesty of his own soul.

We will summarize this position as a set of seven principles.

Principle 1: The first principle is the omnipresence and omnipotence of the Divine. *"His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Is there anyone who can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what appears to you as before and after. Nor shall they comprehend any of His knowledge except with His permission. His sovereignty extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. He is the Most High, the Supreme in glory." (Qur'an, 2:255). "To Him go back all questions for decision." (Qur'an, 3: 109) "The Command rests with none but God". (Qur'an, 6:57)*

Principle 2: The second principle deals with the nature of man. Man is not autonomous. His intellectual faculties are a gift from the Creator. *"Proclaim! In the name of thy Lord, Who created. Created man, out of a mere clot. Proclaim! And your Lord is most bountiful, He Who taught by the Pen, taught man that which he knew not. Nay, but man transgresses all bounds and thinks he is autonomous. Let him beware! If he desists not, We will drag him by the forelock, a lying, sinful forelock (Qur'an, 116:1-16) " The Most Gracious, infused the knowledge of the Qur'an, created man, taught him speech. Qur'an (55:1-4)*

Principle 3: The third principle is the trusteeship of man on earth. Humankind is the *khalifa* (trustee) of God on earth and nature is subject to him. *“And We have made subject to you all that is between the heavens and the earth.” (Qur’an, 31:20)*

Principle 4: The fourth principle is the nature of time. Time is a sign from the Creator. *“In the alteration of the day and night...there are Signs for those who reflect and understand”.* (Qur’an 2:164) Time is a clock built into the cosmos and into the soul of man, so that he can understand the Signs around him and exercise his moral regency on earth.

Principle 5: The fifth principle is the affinity of humankind and nature through their relationship with God. Man and nature are both created by Divine command. There is no subject and no object. Both are a part of God’s purpose and plan. The affinity between them is based on justice, balance and proportion. *“And we have created the vast expanse of nature, and endowed it with balance, justice and proportion, so that you may not violate justice in your own lives.” Qur’an(55:7-8)* Thus there is a Unity of purpose in creation.

Principle 6: The sixth principle is the Unity of Knowledge. All knowledge springs from God. It is He who created humankind from a single *Nafs* and taught (men and women) the names and nature of all things. But humankind is forgetful and has to be reminded of what it has forgotten. This reminder takes place in three ways: (1) Empirical means, namely, man’s struggle and interaction with the world, (2) Extension through an exercise of reason, and (3) Infusion, as when God reveals his Word through the Prophets. The principle of knowledge derives from *Tawhid* (Oneness of the Divine Essence) and represents the Unity of Knowledge.

Principle 7: This is the Principle of Intervention. According to this Principle, humankind is endowed with a free will and is enjoined to intervene in the cosmos to realize its existential potential.

The Qur’an enjoins humankind to observe the Signs in nature, to reflect, reason and ponder so that the Will of God becomes clear. A search for Divine Will is thus a passion for a person of faith (one who always lives with the consciousness of God, surrenders himself and has become a vehicle for His Will). It is the nectar that sustains such a person through this life. *“Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alteration of night and day, in the sailing of ships through the oceans for the benefit of humankind.... In the change of winds, and the clouds which trail them, under their power between the heavens and the earth, in these are Signs for a people who think and reflect. Qur’an (2:164)*

How is this framework different from that of modern science? The modern, secular framework is bound by assumptions of before and after, of cause and effect, of subject and object. The secular framework leaves no room for Divine intervention. In this framework, nature makes decisions and determines what the future of humankind is to be.

In the spiritual perspective decisions are made by the Will of God. In the classic Islamic period scholars intuitively understood this. Without access to our current knowledge of statistical mechanics they boldly postulated that time moves in discrete steps. For instance, Al Ghazzali observed that the shadow on a sundial moves in small steps rather than continuously. The classical scholars were limited by their instrumentation. Today, atomic clocks measure time to 10^{-12} parts of a second (a million millionth of a second) and our advanced theories predict time quanta to 10^{-23} seconds (ten billion billion million parts of a second).

Recent advances in theoretical physics have postulated that the universe is built up of “strings” so small that the size of a string is to the size of an atom as an atom is to the world. These strings are theorized to vibrate in ten dimensions, three of which are related to our view of space and one to our view of time. In

other words, the quantum of time associated with change is many billions of times smaller than we have previously assumed. Nonetheless, this is a discrete picture in which time moves in measured small steps not in a continuous straight line.

The arguments of the classical scholars are still valid. At each time quanta, that is, ten billion billion million times a second and in between each time quanta, the Will of God intervenes and decides the outcome of events. This is the meaning of *Inshallah!* (God willing). It means that all actions are subject to the Will of God. The rains will fall, the crops will be good, we will be alive tomorrow, *Inshallah!*

A secular physicist may say, "An apple will always fall to the ground". A spiritual person will say, "An apple will fall to the ground, *Inshallah*". A secular botanist may say: "Plant your seeds, give them water and the sun and nature will give you a bountiful crop." A spiritual person will say, "Plant the seeds, give them water and the sun and there will be bountiful crop, *Inshallah*".

Whereas the secular approach is restricted by the principle of uncertainty, the spiritual view is embellished with the Will of God.

In the secular perspective, man is alien to nature. His world has no color and no beauty. It is cold, devoid of feeling or emotion. In the spiritual perspective, man and nature are bound together. This world is full of beauty, joy and happiness. In it, there is room for energy and motion, as well as for emotion and feeling.

In the world of secular science, there is no justice, only atoms, protons and electrons. In the spiritual perspective, man and his world are part of the same cosmos, created by Divine intervention, and affiliated through a magnificent cosmos created for just ends.

In the secular world, man is lonely. He cannot talk to the world. In the spiritual perspective, man is at home with the world. He enjoys a close affinity with the earth, with plants and animals, with insects and birds, an affinity that is enshrined in his endowed regency on earth.

Secular science is helpless in the face of arguments of causality and issues of before and after. In this framework, man is condemned to ask but receives only partial answers. In the spiritual perspective, knowledge is a gift from the Creator. Human consciousness is illuminated by Divine light. Man knows the names, attributes and nature of things. To rediscover what he knows, he has to ask, see, hear, observe and search and the true nature of created things will reflect in his soul.

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