

***On Harmonizing Religion and Science: A Reply to Bigliardi***  
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Stefano Bigliardi presents an interesting discussion of what he calls a “new generation” of harmonizers of Islam and science. Let me attempt two comparisons that might help put this new generation into context. First, I think it is interesting to compare these latest attempts to establish harmony to other recent developments in adapting Islam to modern circumstances. Second, I will suggest what the equivalents of the new generation might be in a Christian environment.

The Muslim Middle East has a history of women’s movements criticizing rigid gender roles prescribed by traditional religion, which have hoped to take advantage of the modernization process. The older generations of feminists in Muslim lands — until the mid- to late twentieth century — have tended to hail from among westernized, educated elites. Hence their feminism had a secular character. They assumed that an expanded public presence for women was compatible with a modernist interpretation of Islam. But secular feminists were usually not greatly interested in detailed reinterpretations of sacred texts. They often bypassed religious institutions, engaging instead with westernized state structures (Badran 2009).

Today, however, in most Muslim countries the political imagination has become dominated by Islamist movements, and social life is colored by very public styles of religiosity. Democratic openings, especially in countries such as Indonesia and Turkey, have broadened political participation beyond educated elites — to include traditionally very religious constituencies. Therefore today, bypassing religious texts and institutions is not an option. Accordingly we have seen increasing visibility for an “Islamic feminism” centered on reinterpreting sacred texts (Wadud-Muhsin 1992; Barlas 2002) and increasing female participation in religious institutions (Van Doorn-Harder 2006). Islamic feminism is in many ways more conservative than its secular precursor, since it stays closer to the texts. But it might also be more threatening to religious establishments, as it can more plausibly claim religious legitimacy.

My past experience with Muslim scientists, particularly those in Turkey, suggests that most have adopted a more secular model of coexistence between science and Islam. They assume that a suitably modernized religiosity is compatible with science, without feeling a need to deeply engage religious texts or institutions. In this regard, they have been like the older generation of secular feminists — indeed, they have come from a similar social background of educated elites comfortable with modern institutions. The emergence of the new generation of harmonizers, who deeply care about the texts and want to preserve a much more explicit divine presence in their perception of nature, is similar to what has happened with Islamic feminism. I would speculate that the reasons are similar — the success of religious revivals and Islamist politics. Today, saying that modernized religion does not contradict science is not enough. The detailed reinterpretations must be actively performed, and the process might generate criticism of science as well as traditional beliefs.

The new generation of harmonizers are also similar to the Islamic feminists in their fundamental conservatism: the reinterpretations they propose are ways to update and preserve familiar conceptions of faith. Old-fashioned secular compatibilists typically assert that science and religion have separate spheres and that religious doctrines should not interfere with science (Aydın 2007; Hoodbhoy 1991). The new generation are not satisfied with such a cheap solution. For example, Nidhal Guessoum calls for a “multi-level,” more metaphorical interpretation of the sacred texts, but he does not ask religious conceptions of nature to give way to secular science — he proposes a “double programme” that makes demands on science as well:

- (1) Some new theology must be proposed that would be consistent with modern science even if it does not adhere to the sacred beliefs and writings in a literal way;
- (2) A less materialistic cosmology must be produced, one that would allow for some meaning and spirit to be found in the universe and in the existence. (Guessoum 2011, 218.)

Indeed, there is a tension in new generation writings between reinterpretation as applied to religious texts and scientific theories. They want some of both. Religious engagement with ancient, obscure texts such as the Quran inevitably calls for considerable creativity — they are perceived to be extremely meaningful precisely because they are often partly incoherent, almost meaningless (Berlinerblau 2005). But Guessoum in particular hopes for an interpretive license to find readings of quantum mechanics or biological evolution that allow for divine design. As I see it, such interpretations have no evidence in favor of them, or evade reality-testing altogether. Furthermore, seeking religious interpretations of science goes against an ethos of scientific communication that attempts to reduce ambiguity and the scope for alternative understandings. We want our bridges to stand up, and we want to clearly communicate how to make them stand up. A public relations flack for an engineering firm may want to reinterpret a collapsed bridge as a demonstration of even deeper competence in engineering. But that is no part of a technical understanding of bridges. Harmonizing science and religion often conflates creative meaning-making with explanation.

At this point, I think it is also illuminating to compare the new generation to their counterparts among Christian harmonizers of science and supernatural religion. The new generation is more sophisticated and academically oriented than purveyors of popular nonsense such as Harun Yahya or apologists in the *ijaz* genre. And yet, the new generation, perhaps because of their scientific rather than theological backgrounds, are not Muslim equivalents of those Christian theologians who construct elaborate schemes for compatibility between the present state of science and alleged supernatural realities (e.g., Haught 2004). Many theologians achieve this harmony — even accommodating quantum randomness and blind Darwinian evolution — by constructing what are in effect cosmic conspiracy theories that are immune to evidence. In contrast, the new generation harbors some ambition to show that the world is different from how scientific naturalists

imagine it is. From my perspective, this is a good thing. I am interested in genuinely explaining nature, not debating theological narratives that are not even wrong.

On the other hand, the new generation is also not like the mostly Christian Intelligent Design (ID) movement that has unsuccessfully attempted to directly challenge the present state of natural science. ID proponents have tried to give substantial content to intuitions of divine design, but in doing so, they have risked being wrong — and they are wrong (Young and Edis 2004). While the new generation is very sympathetic to ideas about divine design that might link up with biology or physical cosmology, they do not commit themselves to concrete claims that can be of use in a scientific context. Their notions of design remain vague, so that they do not risk being clearly wrong. Again, from my perspective, this is not good. We can learn from mistakes, but the new generation is too invested in reinterpretation and hopes that alternatives to mainstream science might somehow be realized. Where explanations are concerned, they offer little of substance to criticize.

Among Christians, especially those who approach the question of harmony between science and religion from a scientific background, there is some sympathy to the intuitions about divine design that drive the ID movement. Many religious scientists and engineers are understandably dissatisfied with the naturalist bent of present science, even if they are dubious about the overtly creationist direction ID has taken (see, for example, contributions in Dembski and Ruse 2007). The new generation reminds me of this disorganized penumbra of ID. They are too much a part of the culture of science to be fully satisfied with theological excuse-making, and again, too aware of the details of science to commit themselves to clearly mistaken alternatives to mainstream science such as creationism. And yet, they are also convinced that there is something wrong with the materialist character they perceive in modern science.

So far, it is hard to judge the significance of the new generation — Bigliardi does not say much in this regard, probably because it is too early to tell. It may, like Islamic feminism, become a tendency that is of more than merely academic interest. For now, though, the ideas of the new generation appears to be only minor features in the landscape of attempts to maintain an illusion of harmony between science and Islam.

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