

### ***An Invitation to Science?***

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#### **On Oversimplification**

I do not understand Stefano Bigliardi's (2014) breast beating about oversimplification. Any of us interested in in the landscape of Muslim ideas about science and religion have to do our best to find some representative figures. Usually, these are people who have found an audience.

Harun Yahya is at least somewhat representative of popular creationism. In other contexts, the Yahya brand is more of an outlier. Adnan Oktar is a controversial public figure in Turkey. Some of Yahya's theological positions, such as matter being an illusion, are not exactly mainstream. So anyone writing about ideas put forth under "Harun Yahya" has to be attentive to the context.

I can say similar things about the more academic "new generation" writers. They are reasonably representative, as far as I can tell, of some common and mildly influential thinking, particularly among natural scientists, about the harmony of science and Islam. They have not come from out of the blue. Their visibility, because of their relevant publications, both displays and partly increases their influence and representative nature. There is, naturally, more than enough disagreement on details and theological matters to go around. Among Muslims worldwide, few may know of or care about their work. But again, anyone studying the landscape has to be attentive to context.

All of this is normal. It's an error to oversimplify, but it's also an error to refuse to simplify.

#### **False Sophistication?**

I would not take Bruno Latour as a reliable guide to either science or religion.

In the context of debates over science and Islam, I think a Latourian perspective is particularly misleading. Bigliardi's—"There might be a mismatch between an interpretation of religion in Latour's terms and the way in which religious people commonly understand their own religious beliefs and practices" (2014, 64)—seems very much an understatement.

Writers concerned about the overlapping territory between science and religion are not looking at a random area on the landscape of ideas. As a rough, broad-brush description, it might make some sense to say that religion is not about fact claims closely analogous to those that occupy the sciences. But this is not quite as accurate when we discuss science and religion. Would Harun Yahya have a market, or the new generation authors written their texts, if many Muslims did not think that their faith included *some* fact claims about the world, and that *some* of these were at least apparently challenged by the present state of science?

So to the extent that there is more to Latour's statements than rhetorical effect—never easy to tell—it seems to vacillate between trivial truths (religion is not some kind of straightforward alternative to science) and trivial falsehoods *when applied to the science and Islam literature*. Unless Bigliardi abjures his ambitions of neutrality and wants to engage in finger-wagging about what religion truly is, I do not see what this inspiration by Latour adds to his work.

Indeed, I worry that going in this direction will invite much confusion. For example, the notion that “the Qur'an invites the pursuit of science” (Bigliardi 2014, 65)—how is one to understand such an odd statement? Many writers on Islam and science appear to take the claim at face value, but if the Qur'an is treated as a historical document, such a claim is a gross anachronism. Where, then, does the mistake lie—does Yahya, say, or a new generation author, misunderstand the true claim made by the Qur'an? Is the proper understanding of the invitation to science revealed by some Latourian interpretation? If Bigliardi is toying with this sort of approach, he is doing theology rather than the modest descriptive work in which he professes to engage.

My view is that such claims illustrate how religious texts like the Qur'an can be remarkably meaningless, and hence particularly suited to be pressed into service for pragmatic purposes, with the aid of some imaginative interpretation. There is no Quranic invitation to science—there are religious people reading their sacred texts this way and making their interpretations stick. And it is certainly possible for an outside observer to try so see what interpretive communities do, and, as in the case of writers on science and Islam, to try to map some portion of a landscape of ideas. I am not convinced, however, that being inspired by Latour will help.

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## **References**

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- Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.