

**Mehdi Golshani's Philosophy, Islamic Science(s), and Judeo-Christian/Muslim Dialogue: A Reply to Azadegan**  
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In his reply “Islamic Science: A Missed Subject in Bigliardi’s Monograph?” Ebrahim Azadegan (2014), albeit only mentioning in his title *one* challenge to the definition of “New Generation” in the debate over Islam and science, actually discusses *two* objections to it and further formulates a critical question. Moreover, his first objection is twofold, i.e. articulated in two different doubts. I shall try to address each of them in detail.

**First Objection and Initial Doubt**

Azadegan’s first objection concerns the inclusion of Mehdi Golshani in the “New Generation.” The second of the defining traits that distinguish the “New Generation” is that “The authors at stake recognize that the scientific method cannot be changed and therefore do not advocate any kind of ‘Islamization’ of science” (12). The last one is that: “The ‘new generation’ simply accepts that Islam can be in harmony with science *qua* religion or at least on a footing of equality with other monotheistic religions. The older generation considered Islam to be in harmony with science by virtue of a privileged relationship (as the exclusive repository of concepts with which science should be reformed *or* as the only scientifically validated religion)” (12). Azadegan seriously doubts that Golshani fulfills both criteria.

Azadegan is not the first scholar who points out to me the difficulty related to Golshani’s inclusion. A similar objection for instance has been personally raised to me by Ziauddin Sardar while my monograph was still in the making.<sup>1</sup> To start with it should be pointed out that perhaps my choice of the expression “any kind of ‘Islamization’ of science” in the afore-mentioned trait is slightly unfortunate since “Islamization” has more than one meaning. One should remember that my monograph was conceived as a reply and update of Leif Stenberg’s one (Stenberg 1996). Stenberg uses “Islamization” in his title while referring to the four positions of Maurice Bucaille, Ziauddin Sardar, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr; this probably in the interest of succinctness and because he considers each and every “thematic fusion” of Islam and science as an attempt at “Islamizing” the latter. However it should also be clear that when I use the expression “Islamization” of science I am referring to the idea, mainly defended by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and his followers, that science can be *radically reformed* or *remolded* according to methodological Islamic/Qur’anic principles and therefore become Islamic (Islamized) science (proper). This is the meaning that we should keep in mind while defining the “New Generation”.

I think that we have to distinguish between Golshani’s explicit take on the matter and what the consequences of his philosophy might be. When it comes to the declared stance that he takes towards the Islamization of science (once again: strictly defined *à la* al-Faruqi), Golshani seems in utter disagreement with attempts at founding the scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Private communication in Abu Dhabi (June 23, 2011).

method *ex novo* in Islamic concepts; the methodological core of science, according to Golshani, is already defined and cannot be reinvented.<sup>2</sup> If we stick to this declaration, Golshani seems part of the “New Generation”. He would be rather the advocate of a theistic interpretation of science, in which a metaphysical layer (this, in its turn, derived from Qur’anic and Islamic concepts) is superimposed on science. This also seemed to be Nidhal Guessoum’s interpretation of Golshani’s thought,<sup>3</sup> and it encouraged me to include the Iranian scientist and philosopher in my definition, as well as Guessoum himself to establish a continuity between his own work and Golshani’s.

However, while reading Azadegan’s remarks, I suddenly remembered that already in my first paper about the “New Generation”, I was pointing out that:

In the case of Golshani the intention to distinguish his theory from older attempts at “Islamizing” science is quite clearly stated ... Furthermore, Golshani’s general plea for a metaphysics of science ... is rather articulated. However, the Iranian author does not extensively develop a clear, full-blown Qur’anic-based metaphysics, a system coordinating all the notions he singularly discusses ... It is also not clear whether such metaphysical system should be seen, in the last resort, as the only viable one (which would push Golshani’s theory back on the way of an Islamization of science) or rather in a metaphysically pluralistic perspective according to which other systems are also acceptable. At some points, thus, Golshani’s distance from some exponents of the older generation seems rather attenuated.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, I think the remark explicitly stated by Golshani, according to which religion/Islam invites one to pursue science, is not enough to qualify an author as the advocate of Islamization of science proper. Once again: this amounts to the claim according to which science should be methodologically and radically reformed. However it can also be legitimately asked whether Golshani’s “layer” isn’t, in fact, a *basis* that inevitably leads to the reformation of science. Azadegan poignantly observes:

[Golshani] defines Islamic science as a science whose metaphysical basis is Islamic. Through changing the metaphysical basis of science our scientific theories will be changed accordingly. The entailment of this idea is that scientific methods which are theory-laden would have to be changed provided our metaphysical basis had changed. This seems to be an inference from Golshani’s ideas however he himself does not explicitly emphasize such a consequence (13).

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<sup>2</sup> See Golshani 2004, 45-51.

<sup>3</sup> “I have even fewer differences with Golshani, surprisingly enough. Golshani, like others, upholds what he calls ‘theistic science’. I think in the way Golshani defines it I have absolutely no problem with it. It is what I call in my book ‘a theistic layer of interpretation on the top of real science’. As long as this theism does not enter into the scientific process, then I am all for it. As far as I could read, I think that is how Golshani sees it, so I have no disagreement with him” (Nidhal Guessoum in Bigliardi 2014b, 162).

<sup>4</sup> Bigliardi 2013, 11.

I think Azadegan touches upon a very important problem here. Golshani distances himself from what I have called the “Islamization of science proper”, but it can be legitimately asked how much he *de facto* shifts towards it – and perhaps unwillingly. In this sense, Azadegan’s objection to my classification turns into a question, or objection, to professor Golshani himself. Azadegan indeed points out that he is expanding on an “inference” from Golshani’s philosophy rather than on an explicit claim. Perhaps professor Golshani himself might help us to solve this doubt.<sup>5</sup> This, in my opinion, points at another important methodological question. I think that we, as scholars engaged in the reconstruction of the debate over Islam and science, should arrive at some shared agreement as to when to consider an author a *de facto* “Islamizer” of science, besides and beyond that author’s explicit take on al-Faruqi’s ideas.

### **A Second Doubt**

The second doubt that Azadegan raises as to the inclusion of Golshani in the “New Generation” concerns his religiously pluralistic stance. Does Golshani really not regard Islam as in a privileged relationship with science? Once again I would start with the Iranian professor’s declared stance. We read in *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science*:

What I have suggested many times is to look at the common ground between monotheistic religions. This helps one to have a good understanding of the basis of things. I worked on it for a while myself, but since it has to include all of the three monotheistic religions, it has to be enriched in the company of scholars from other monotheistic religions (Bigliardi 2014b, 65).

When I refer to authors or scholars who advocate a privileged relationship of Islam and science I mean al-Faruqi and his followers (according to whom the Qur’an is the only repository of concepts through which science should be reformed) and Bucaille and Bucailleists, who see Islam as the only scientifically validated religion. As to the latter point, I think Golshani’s stance is quite clear. He definitely is no Bucailleist. As to the former point, it is clearly related to Azadegan’s first doubt, so that it might be solved as soon as the problem regarding Golshani as “Islamizer of science” is also solved. It should also be added that *de facto*, with initiatives such as the several editions of *Can Science Dispense with Religion?* Golshani did support interreligious dialogue about religion and science.

All these points seem to me more relevant than Azadegan’s platitude that “Golshani also pushes on the idea that Islam has special emphasis on rationality and scientific investigation.” This is beyond question: Golshani *is* an advocate of the harmony between Islam and science, i.e. a specialist of such debate. At stake is whether he thinks of that as an exclusive relationship. It is also true that Islam is considered as the revelation that seals (and up to a certain extent includes) the previous monotheistic ones, so that one

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<sup>5</sup> I engaged in a more nuanced interpretation of Golshani’s philosophy in Bigliardi 2012 and Bigliardi 2014c.

might even argue that Judeo-Christian doctrines equally are in harmony with science insofar as they coincide with those that were conserved in Islamic revelation.

Once again, I think that Azadegan points at very important exegetical doubts regarding Golshani's philosophy. In other words, our disagreement might reflect the presence of subtle tensions in Golshani's thought, different sides on which Azadegan and I place different emphasis.

Maybe I am still under the spell of Guessoum's reading, however I am optimistic towards a reformulation of the concept of a "New Generation". We should remember that I proposed it as a heuristic tool. Instead of rejecting *tout court* Golshani's inclusion, if some of the preceding doubts will be confirmed, we might still take into account his declared stances, and, while fully recognizing their discrepancies with some implications of his ideas, argue that he initiated the process that would lead to a fully-fledged "New Generation" culminating with Guessoum.

## **Second Objection**

The second main objection by Azadegan is that the concept of a "New Generation" leaves out several authors like "Ayatollah Jawadi Amoli ... [who] believes that there is no non-Islamic science because the world is the creature of God and the sign of God, so science as inquiring the signs of God could not be non-Islamic" (13). My monograph made no claims to be exhaustive (as I also repeated in my more recent self-criticism, Bigliardi 2014a). I thus assume that Azadegan, who definitely is an acute and attentive reader of my texts, under the appearance of a severe remark, is rather following my invitation:

Hopefully I could convey at least an idea of the complexity and diversity of the ideas at stake. Clearly, my six interlocutors do not represent all the voices currently dealing with the sensitive issue of Islam and science, nor does each conversation exhaust an author's views on specific points ... What I am sharing are the partial results of an on-going investigation that aims at attracting the attention of academic circles as well as laypeople ... It is my hope the readers will be enticed into reading the work of these six authors and others and, ultimately, to join the debate itself either as newcomers or with their specific expertise (Bigliardi 2014b, 34).

I am also unsure whether the criticism to have "left out" the authors he mentions should be interpreted in the sense that they also satisfy the criteria for the "New Generation" (that, as I often repeat, includes *but is not limited to* four of my interlocutors) or that they are not sufficiently referred to while reconstructing the contemporary landscape.

However Azadegan is surely right in pointing out that the only Iranian author treated in *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science* is Golshani. I take this once again as a constructive suggestion pointing at the opportunity of producing a more specific survey of this Iranian debate, similar in spirit to my monograph or essays but more focused on such authors. What I am most interested in is to know whether such authors would be

considered part of (or at least analogous to) the “New Generation” as I analytically defined it (i.e. not just “new” chronologically) or if they could be assimilated to the Islamization of science proper, or finally if they would stand out by virtue of highly individual traits. Once again we must very carefully distinguish which ideas are precisely advocated under the umbrella-expression “Islamic science”. The quotations and references employed by Azadegan seem to point at ideas that have similarities as well as differences with those I have studied myself and are not enough to solve my curiosity.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, Azadegan focuses on the last point I have employed to define the “New Generation”, that is the authors’ pluralistic stance towards science and religion and the possibility of setting up a dialogue with scholars coming from other monotheistic traditions. Also Edis (2014) has pointed out the analogy with some Christian authors. Azadegan thus states: “If [such point] is true it is then up to Bigliardi to show us how his monograph can shed specific light on the debate between science and religion which has not yet been explicated by Christian philosophers/ scientists who have engaged in this type of debate” (14). He also defines the observation according to which the analogy between the Muslim and the Christian scholars exists as “trivial”.

First, the point I have stated is the result of an observation that, I would dare to say, is among the most solidly demonstrable through my interlocutors’ words and works. A simple inspection of their respective bibliographies and academic activities (i.e. even regardless of what they stated in conversation with me) will show how active they have been in setting up a dialogue with colleagues from the Judeo-Christian tradition (and Guessoum in conversation makes some overtures towards even non-monotheistic religions!). This point is far from being trivial for me since I have taken as a starting point the debate over Islam and science as it was reconstructed by Stenberg, where such dialogue clearly was no priority (not to say that in some cases it was rejected). Second, not even the existence of a general trend aimed at a dialogue towards finding common ground, and a general awareness of it, can be taken for granted; some two years ago, an attempt on the very pages of the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* to set up this kind of exchange was met with supercilious refusal on part of some prominent Christian authors. I do not claim that I have made a ground-breaking discovery, I only observed the “New Generation’s” engagement in an unfolding exchange.

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