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Some Reflections on Stefano Bigliardi's "On Harmonizing Islam and Science"
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I enjoyed this paper and found it immensely stimulating and suggestive. It's also nice to read a scholar who is humble and sees his work as part of a journey of exploration and a mediation for others!

When I was doing research for *Being Human in Islam* (2011), I found myself nonplussed by the claims of the writers covered in Stenberg's work. They were rather defensive in the face of science and at the same time overly assertive about aspects of the Islamic tradition which are actually quite secondary. It was a combination which I found suspect. The "new generation" seems to represent an altogether healthier approach: open to science and modest about the value and achievements of tradition, even as they hold, of course, to the ultimate authority of the Qur'an. For them, as Bigliardi shows, the crunch comes when the Qur'an says something which is not corroborated by science. Do they have the means to reinterpret scripture in the light of scientific findings and "restore harmony"? One could imagine that there ought to be another pressing question for them: can science tell them anything about God's way with the created world which they could not obtain form the Qur'an? If, as Bigliardi suggests, they are favourable to the idea of biological evolution (which, I think we have to admit is not present as an idea in either the Qur'an or the Bible) can that in any way enhance their religious outlook, beliefs and practices? And if not, why not?

Bigliardi's section on Bruno Latour is, in my view, of the utmost importance, because it points to the severe limitations of the above approach and offers an indication of where "new generation" thinking might really come from. What I want to do below is just to flesh out what I take to be Bigliardi's insight in a way that also touches on the delicate question of how contemporary Christians and Muslims approach these questions rather differently – and not infrequently to each other's utter bewilderment. Let me elucidate by offering another taxonomy which will also complexify Bigliardi's idea ever so slightly. The key question here is not about the nature of science but of what we take religion and religious language to be about.

The Christian theologian George Lindbeck (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1984) famously proposes three contending paradigms for how religious doctrines function:

1. The traditional approach, cognitive-propositionalism, i.e. religious doctrines, rather like scientific theories (in a naïve but widespread view), tell us "how the world is".

2. A second, romantic (and typically liberal) model is experiential-expressivism. Here, religious doctrines tell us something about the religious person's apprehension of reality, their subjective, emotional life and value decisions.

3. The third, post-liberal paradigm (and the most interesting from Lindbeck's point of view) is the cultural-linguistic model. Here, the guiding light is Wittgenstein. Religious doctrine initiates the believer into a world of shared language and practice. It functions more like the rules of football, the condition which allows us to play the game, rather than giving a statement about how reality is.

Now, one's understanding of the relationship between religion and science is drastically affected by which paradigm you are operating with.

1. Cognitive propositionalism obviously tends to generate a conflictual relationship. If what is said in the Bible/Qur'an conflicts with scientific observations/theory then we have a problem which must be adjudicated. If the religious pre-supposition is that religion and science cannot conflict then that adjudication is urgent and will either be religiously dogmatic (to the expense of the science) or scientifically dogmatic, usually forcing on the religion the adoption of some kind of strategy of reinterpretation.

2. Experiential-expressivism leaves scarcely any room for conflict; science and religion are not talking about the same object at all. One is about the outside world, the other is about inner feeling. This is why liberals tend to wonder what all the fuss is about…

3. A cultural-linguistic approach leads to a variety of possibilities. The fundamental question is: how does the playing of two games, science and religion, by the same agent lead to some sort of interaction between the two activities?

   a. One answer could be that it doesn't: the games are hermetically sealed, each having its own integrity and coherence. Thus each continues in its own time and space. The individual will have to negotiate the compartmentalisation of knowledge involved, much as with the experiential-expressivist case.

   b. However, it does not have to go like that. You can see that where either of the two games involves the aspiration *to say something about everything*, then something interesting happens. This is the case, surely, with *both* religion and science. Religion needs to situate for itself the nature of the created world (the word "created" is evidence of religion's determined reach…) and of the human, whilst science will brook no limit placed on its right to explore any material phenomenon, "religion" included. The two "games" are not hermetically sealed after all but speak to each other. Hence, there is a real and pressing need for dialogue and mutual critique. But it's not about achieving "harmony" once and for all as in cognitive propositionalism but a constant dialectic of mutual interrogation. Which is rather a good description of one's

actual experience of the field. There is no final answer, no ultimate stability.

So now, after all that, let me ask the question: which model do the "new generation" Muslims espouse (knowingly or not?). The suggestion of the article (62) is that they are cognitive propositionalists to a man. If this is the case, then the distance between them and most mainstream Christian theologians is immense. The kinds of Christians who work in this area tend to be either liberal or post-liberal and not unusually they find the extremely naïve cognitive propositionalism of Christian creationism rather painful. Hence, they can be bemused to find themselves in dialogue with Muslims who are operating out of a paradigm which is problematic to them. Bigliardi's question seems to be: is there the prospect of an Islamic cultural-linguistic approach on the horizon? And a very good question it is too. (I should just add, for the sake of fairness, that the cultural linguistic approach has its critics, not least because it does not always sit easy with the idea of interreligious dialogue. But that is for another time…)

I think this taxonomy is a little fuller than that suggested in Bigliardi's fine article and will allow both for a better understanding of the Muslim writers examined by him and, I hope, promote better mutual comprehension between Christians and Muslims involved in this fascinating debate.

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References

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