

Islam, Science, and Cognitive-Propositionalism

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Introduction

The discussion initiated by Stefano Bigliardi's *Social Epistemology* [article](#) on proponents of the harmony between Islam and science currently includes, in addition to this article, ten contributions. Before I offer my own thoughts on the discussion it would seem appropriate to first offer a summary of its progression. After summarising, I present some observations on the tendency of Muslim scientists toward cognitive-propositionalism. This view on the interpretation of religious teaching was made relevant to the discussion by the [contribution](#) of Damian Howard.

A Summary of the Discussion so far

In his article Bigliardi (2014a) introduces an area of research pioneered by Leif Stenberg in the 1990s. This area of research concerns the thought of Muslim intellectuals who insist upon the harmony of the Islamic tradition with science. Bigliardi discerns a change in the views of contemporary advocates of harmony and thus distinguishes between a “new generation” and “old generation”, giving characteristic features of each. Taner Edis ([2014a](#)) (identified by Bigliardi as a critic of the harmony thesis) is somewhat sceptical that the new generation will show itself to be a group of social significance.

In a response to Edis, Bigliardi ([2014b](#)) clarifies his views and proposes five characteristics which, if jointly present in a thinker, serve to identify him/her as a new generation advocate of the harmony between Islam and science. But Bigliardi is cautious and expresses concern that he has over-simplified the thought of individual and independent thinkers by labelling them as part of a new generation. Bigliardi also suggests that the work of Bruno Latour may help the thought of thinkers who advocate harmony between Islam and science. Edis ([2014b](#)) is puzzled by Bigliardi's caution and would seem to believe that over-simplification, being an occupational hazard, needs little apology. Edis is also puzzled by Bigliardi's appeal to Latour. Bigliardi ([2014c](#)) responds to Edis one more time to explain and defend himself.

Moving on from the exchanges of Bigliardi and Edis, Abdali S. Kamal ([2014](#)) summarises the 2014 monograph of Bigliardi, *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science*, to which the article which initiated this SERRC thread relates. Ebrahim Azadegan ([2014](#)) then offers some new criticisms of Bigliardi: (i) his reading of Mehdi Golshani is erroneous; (ii) he has overlooked the work of contemporary Iranian intellectuals who address the issue of the harmony between science and Islam; and (iii) he has not related the new generation of Muslim thinkers who discuss science and Islam to the work of analogous Christian thinkers and, it therefore seems, that the identification of a new generation of Muslim thinkers is trivial. Bigliardi ([2014d](#)) responds to each objection in

turn: (i) Mehdi Golshani is difficult to read and may even exhibit inconsistencies; (ii) research presented is by no means complete and does not seek to exclude further work; and (iii) taken in the light of Stenberg's work, the claim that there is a new generation of Muslim thinkers is not trivial.

Damian Howard (2014) agrees with Bigliardi's identification of a new generation and his appeal to Latour. He suggests that George Lindbeck's threefold categorisation of approaches to religious doctrine can give further insight into the thinking of Muslim harmonizers and can help us contrast them with Christian thinkers who discuss the relationship of science and Christianity. Howard wants to know whether Muslim thinkers will ever evolve into adopting a less literal approach to Islamic scripture.

Abdelhaq M. Hamza (2014) does not connect directly with any of the contributions mentioned so far but does touch on one relevant theme. Hamza reminds us that science is not just about empirical observation but also about interpretation. Presumably, the point is that with interpretation comes the epistemic baggage of the interpreter and that Muslim thinkers are, therefore, correct to wonder whether the epistemic baggage could be theistic rather than materialistic.

Finally, we have the contribution of Francesco Piraino (2014), who describes six differences between the traditionalism of Bruno Guiderdoni and that of Seyyed Hossain Nasr. Piraino agrees that Guiderdoni is less disdainful of modernity but disagrees with the suggestion (which he perceives in Bigliardi's (2014b) description of Guiderdoni as a "soft Traditionalist") that René Guénon is less of an inspiration for Guiderdoni than he is for Nasr.

Islam and Science: United in Encouraging Cognitive-Propositionalism

A lot of good points have been raised in this discussion and not all of them can be pursued here.¹ I agree with the sentiment that only time will tell with regard to the new generation. I also agree that invitations to reflect upon nature and to seek *scientia*, if not science, are rather clear in the Quran and in Islamic teaching more generally. Without wishing to sideline the many suggestions for further research, I intend to discuss the theme broached by Howard, specifically, the style of Muslim thought as viewed from a comparative perspective.

1 But of the points I would have liked to follow up are Bigliardi's (2014a, 174 & n. 42) observation that Muslim scientists are often multi-skilled. A number of possible reasons come to mind. Firstly, the Islamic tradition is permeated with notions of balance and not being excessive (see, e.g. Quran 5:87, 25:67, 42:17, 55:7-9, 57:25) and it could be that, at least sub-consciously, Muslim scholars hold all-round ability with high regard as opposed to deep specialism in a single field alone. This is particularly given the example of Muhammad and of the polymath scholars of Islamic history. Secondly, presumably any religiously inclined scientist will be disposed to non-scientific activities and subjects. Broader interests are not only suggested by an interest in religion, but also an interest of religion may give rise to an interest in, say, the language of scripture, religious society, and (of course!) the relation between religion and science.

I too have noticed (albeit anecdotally) a tendency for Muslims to display what Lindbeck terms “cognitive-propositionalism”, the view that, roughly, religious teachings about reality can be understood literally.² I can only speculate as to the reasons for this. Maybe it is simply because key statements in the Quran and Hadith do not come across to the reader as requiring much interpretation. After all, Islam first arose in a society not known for its intellectual sophistication and so a straightforward message would seem a prerequisite for initial success. Such clarity in message would explain why, say, neither doctrines of incarnation nor non-unitarian conceptions of God have become normative in the Islamic tradition. The tendency for Muslims to display cognitive-propositionalism may also be to do with the way Muslims have received Muhammad, understanding him primarily as a messenger of God and only secondarily as a founder of a religious movement.³ This emphasis may dispose a Muslim to accept Islamic teachings as rigid instructions rather than flexible advice. One could also list socio-economic reasons – brought about by internal disputes and external threats – for Muslims tending toward cognitive-propositionalism and shying away from critical analysis of scripture.

Whether or not there is a general tendency among Muslims towards cognitive-propositionalism we could at least say that the tendency is strong among Muslims of a scientific bent. This observation leads us to another search for reasons. Having explored reasons within Islam which may dispose Muslims to cognitive-propositionalism one wonders whether there are reasons within the dominant science of today which promote cognitive-propositionalism. I believe that there are. Leaving aside speculative disciplines such as theoretical physics, most science is aimed at discovering tangible truths about physical reality through observation. Even if the truth of a matter is difficult to determine it is usually taken for granted that, in principle, there is a truth to be determined. Many scientists (theoretical physicists aside!) rarely deal with phenomena which are inherently ambiguous (such that there is, in principle, no correct way to conceive of them) and may be forgiven for having an outlook which is more inclined to cognitive-propositionalism than not. This is not to say that scientific problems are not difficult or to deny that often more than one solution to a scientific problem is proposed. Rather, it is to say that scientists envisage a world in which it is logically possible to give unequivocal answers to questions about physical reality (that is, it is possible provided that constraints on resources – such as time and money – can be overcome).

The outlook of scientists can be contrasted to the outlook of those working in the humanities where the subject of study is often ambiguous, such as a work of art or a linguistic concept. If scientists aim at reality-grounded truth, I suggest that humanities

2 See Gleave 2012 on the study of literalism in Muslim approaches to exegesis and religious law.

3 For an analysis and comparison of Muhammad and Gautama as prophets and founders of religion see Imtiyaz Yusuf 2013. For a related discussion see Dastmalchian 2014 in which, following a suggestion found in the work of John Hick, two different understandings of the Islamic narrative are explored, specifically, the “top-down” and “bottom-up” understandings. The top-down narrative begins with God and His revelation to humankind whereas the bottom-up narrative begins with the human situation and the context in which Islam arose.

scholars aim at something a little more vague, namely, plausibility. This is made all the more clear when we consider the ‘language’ of science to be maths rather than, say, English or Chinese. The use of maths involves deduction from axioms through the use of defined operators whereas the use of natural language involves such ambiguous devices as metaphor, emotion, vagueness, and homonymity. So, while scientists are trained to resolve ambiguity, scholars of the humanities are trained to wallow in it.

I am aware that my observations are not fully substantiated and are generalizing but hopefully they will at least give researchers food for thought. My observations derive from my own experience of switching from the study of science and engineering to the study of philosophy and from personal familiarity with Bucaillism. My intention has been to support Howard in his astute observation of a link between Muslim harmonizers and cognitive-propositionalism. Perhaps it is just because many Muslim harmonizers are practising scientists (Bigliardi’s new generation criteria no.1) that many of them display cognitive-propositionalism when presenting their views on the harmony between Islam and science, or perhaps it could just be down to a general Muslim inclination to cognitive-propositionalism. Moreover, I also suggest that perhaps another way to look at the issue of harmony between Islam and science is to view both as united in encouraging a cognitive-propositionalist approach to religious teaching.

No doubt, there are a number of other traits which scientists manifest in contrast to those who study society or the humanities. I would hazard a guess that, for example, scientists, tend to be politically conservative if not apolitical. It therefore seems reasonable to say that, insofar that character traits can be identified, scientists tend to show an affinity toward cognitive-propositionalism.⁴

Conclusion

This short discussion surely raises more questions than it answers. One question would be as to whether it is Islam or science which most strongly determines cognitive-propositionalism among Muslim scientists. An answer to this question might in turn help us to understand other groups which espouse religious views. What is the incidence of cognitive-propositionalism among new atheists, for example, and how important is science in determining cognitive-propositionalism in them?

This contribution has drawn upon Lindbeck’s identification of cognitive-propositionalism as one approach to religious teaching. One of the factors involved in cognitive-propositionalism was said to be the extent to which one affirms ambiguity in the world. British theologian and philosopher John Hick, discussed the issue of ambiguity and how

⁴ Having made the point that scientists are not inclined to seeing the world ambiguously and having made a point about finding character traits I can now briefly note a connection to a contemporary issue of concern. Gambetta & Hertog (2009b; 2009a; 2007) comment on the observation that scientists and engineers are over-represented among militant groups, including those which confess a Muslim identity. Of the reasons they suggest for this observed phenomenon are “mindset”.

one's view of ambiguity in the world might effect one's understanding of religion.⁵ On Lindbeck's account, Hick would espouse a cultural-linguistic view insofar that headvocates that religious statements about metaphysical matters should be understood etaphorically. Hick hypothesised that "Islam may be expected to go through essentially he same traumas as Christianity in its encounter both with modern science and with the merging ecumenical outlook; only whereas the Christian trauma has been spread over a entury or more Islam is having to adjust in a single generation to an already formed modern culture" (2004, 378).

Given that Latour has been mentioned as one offering an alternative to popular understandings of religion, Hick also seems worth mentioning. However, whether the Islamic tradition will follow the path of the Christian and Western world in facing modernity is another debate altogether (see Browsers & Kurzman 2004; Safi 2003, 15–17; 2005).

As a closing remark, I would invite Bigliardi (2014a, 175 & n.58; 2014b) to expand upon his identification of pluralism among the new generation and to clarify whether he sees this to be in tension with any cognitive-propositionalism that they may display.

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5 For a discussion on Hick's concept of "ambiguity" see Dastmalchian 2009.

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