

Tantāwī: Western -Eastern Discoveries Embedded in Islam
Majid Daneshgar, University of Otago, New Zealand

This essay may take its place alongside S. Kamal Abdali's statement that since the 1930s, Islam became a 'system of life' and it covers all aspects of human life.¹ This point that modern science helped Muslims to fully understand Islam as a system of life or as the origin of all Western-Eastern discoveries is still under consideration. On this subject, it would be interesting to know further about Tantāwī Jawharī (1862-1940); an Egyptian sheikh who opined that Islam covers all *scientific* findings in the Orient and Occident.

Tantāwī Jawharī was born in the village of *Kafr 'Awad Allāh Hijāzī* in southeast of al-Zaqāzīq (Zagazig) in al-Sharqiyyah Province, Egypt. He graduated from al-Azhar and Dār al-Ulum (1889 to 1893).² In 1923, he started to write and publish a Qur'anic exegesis entitled *al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm al-Mushtamil 'Alā 'Ajā'ib Badā'i' al-Mukawwināt wa Gharā'ib al-Āyāt al-Bāhirāt* (Jewels in the Interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān, Containing Marvels of the Beauties of the Creation and Wonderfully Luminous Divine Signs) in 26 volumes. He provided readers with several images, maps, drawings and tables in order to elaborate the meanings of verses. Evidence suggests that he frequently asked God to enable him to complete his interpretation of the Qur'ān comprising all sciences attained by humans.

It should be pointed out that Muhammad b. Ahmad Afandī al-Iskandarānī as a physician became well-known for a short period of time when he, for example, assembled one of his main works in dealing with the Qur'ān and science entitled *al-Asrār al-Rabbāniyyah fī'l-Nabāt wa-l-Ma'ādīn wa-l-Khawās al-Hiwāniyyah* between 1881 and 1882 (Safar, 1299 AH). Later on, Tawfiq Afandī Sidqī (1881-1920) was another physician who was encouraged to support al-Iskandarānī's scholarly views. He published several essays in *al-Manār* magazine. Sidqī was interested in proving the scientific inimitability of the Qur'ān, thus, he introduced a significant level of innovation when he interpreted Q. 34: 14; he endeavored to create a connection between the Cadaveric Spasm theory and the death of Solomon. In his opinion, the Qur'ān and modern science are not incompatible.³

Apparently, scientific inimitability of the Qur'ān is at the heart of al-Iskandarānī's and Sidqī's understanding of the Qur'ān. However, Tantāwī was a fresh voice among *ulema* in general and Azharites in particular. Tantāwī would write more than thirty books and treatises -pertaining to political and social situation of Muslims-- which have been translated or reviewed by his Eastern and Western contemporaries. Some of his social concerns were collected in his exegesis of the Qur'ān as well.

¹ S. Kamal Abdali, "On Bigliardi's Islam and the Quest for Modern Science" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, vol. 3, no. 9, (2014), 55-56.

² De Jong, F. "Djawharī, Tantāwī." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Accessed 01 May 2014 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/Encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/djawhari-Tantāwī-SIM_8502> ; See also: Majid Daneshgar, "Tantāwī Jawhari," *Oxford Biography* (2015): forthcoming.

³ Muhammad Tawfiq Afandī Sidqī, "al-Qur'ān wa l 'Ilm 3: Tafsīr min al-Lughah wa l Tārīkh wa l Jughrāfiyā wa l Tibb- Mawt Sulaymān," *al-Manār* 5/11 (1908), 361-362. See also: Majid Daneshgar, "Muhammad Tawfiq Afandī Sidqī: an Unknown Interpreter of the 19th Century," *Āyeneh Pazuhish* (2014), forthcoming.

My studies suggest that sheikh Tantāwī Jawharī did not intend to affirm the scientific inimitability of the Qur’ān. Tantāwī interpreted *fiqhī* verses based on classical commentaries; he believed former thinkers explained that such verses are not more than one hundred and fifty in number. He went on to stress the *fiqhī* definition of legal verses like Q. 4:34, where he was explicit in approaching such a verse from a *legal-fiqhī* perspective but did not define it through psychological and sociological theories.

On the other hand, he spent considerable time linking hundreds of verses with scientific theories discovered by European scientists. He, indeed, desired to display that God’s book contains fabulous wonders that Muslims are careless about but Europeans care about; and non-Muslims have attempted and achieved a myriad of matters already mentioned in the Qur’ān 1300 years ago.

According to Tantāwī, there is no option to describe Qur’anic verses in dealing with natural and cosmological wonders other than by referring to modern discoveries. Thus, empirical knowledge, modern science and all Western or Eastern scientific achievements were a part of the Qur’ān that which they regretfully achieved by Europeans.

More importantly, Tantāwī believed Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was originally generated by Muslim classical thinkers. Martin Hartmann, in this regard, observes that “The fact that living beings and even the plants and minerals build chains with the ascension from the lower to the higher, is found in Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), al-Rāzī (d. 1209) and others; therefore Darwin’s doctrine would not be anything new (however, Tantāwī does not seem to know Darwin’s doctrine (theory) after all).”⁴ Tantāwī thought that science is a segment of Islam, and Muslims are the right vicegerents of God on earth, even though they tend to prolong their inactivity in the contemporary era.

In contrast to the common idea among academics that Tantāwī was the founder of scientific exegesis of the Qur’ān, it appears that he was a follower of classical interpreters who applied cosmological wonders and astronomical issues in order to prove God’s authority over the universe and used *fiqhī* discussions to explain *shar’ī* verses. Seemingly, Tantāwī had a modernized twist on the traditional Islamic view of science in the Qur’ān. He was sure to benefit from Islamic thoughts in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses but he connected his idea to current findings. I think such ideas resurrected by him are still popular and definitely worth pursuing.

Tantāwī’s works convey us a further step in comprehending his view towards science in the Qur’ān was based on (i) a traditional classification of knowledge that Muslims are ordered to behold and learn so as to know God’s authority and mercy. As per Tantāwī’s epistemological and general views, God’s creation is a mercy to human beings; (ii) Muslims’ backwardness encouraged him to ask Muslims (particularly Arabs) to wake up

⁴ Martin Hartmann, “Schaich Tantāwī Dschauhari, Ein Moderner Egyptischer Theolog und Naturfreund,” *Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Orients*, xiii, (1916): 54-82: (annotated and translated by Majid Daneshar ‘Sheikh Tantāwī Jawhari: A Modern Egyptian Theologian and Nature Friend’).

and believe that the Qur'ān contains everything that a Muslim needs to attain worldly and Hereafter felicity.⁵

Contact details: majid.daneshgar@otago.ac.nz

⁵ Majid Daneshgar, "Re-examination of Tantāwī Gawharī's Exegesis: An Approach to Science in the ur'ān," *Oriente Moderno* (May 2015), forthcoming.