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Lesson Fourteen: The Relationship of the Qur'an to Modern Science Part I

The Qur'an deserves to be evaluated from different points of view. One topic for examination is the artistic and verbal beauty of the Qur'an and its style which is neither poetry nor prose. It does not have the characteristics of poetry, which may be thought as giving free flight to the imagination and indulging in poetic exaggeration, and equally it does not exemplify conventional prose, for it is imbued with a distinctive rhythm and melody that are the means for it to exert a powerful and unique spiritual attraction on all who make its acquaintance.

Then the intellectual and scientific content of the Qur'an also calls for examination. It is true that it is not the aim of the Noble Qur'an to uncover and expound scientific phenomena, to set forth all the natural motions and events that occur within the system of being in accordance with a specific set of laws, or to explain the properties and mode of operation of nature.

We should not expect the Qur'an to discuss, in an organized manner, the various branches of science and to analyze the topics connected with each of those branches, or to solve the various problems that are encountered in different fields of research. The ability to experiment and to conduct scientific research has been made inherent in the human being's nature, and he can obtain the knowledge and the arts he needs in his life by means of thought and reflection. He makes valuable advances through his unceasing efforts to gain control over the forces of nature. Concerns such as these are alien to a book of moral edification.

The aim pursued by the Qur'an is the training of the human being as a being conscious of his duties; it reinforces and accelerates his spiritual ascension, together with all of his qualities, toward a state of true loftiness and the dignity of which the human being is worthy.

The emergence of such a being requires a comprehensive reform of the human being, involving various changes such as the negation of false values and meaningless criteria deriving from the Age of Ignorance and the creation and fostering of a creative energetic spirit within him. The Qur'an can thus be

said to melt the spirits of human beings and pour them into a new mould, where they acquire a different, richer and more valuable form.

Although this may be said to be the principal aim of the Qur'an, it summons the human being insistently, at the very same time, to reflect and to ponder, and to acquire a realistic view of the world; it guides him on to the path of thought, of teaching and learning.

In the very first verses of the Qur'an to be revealed, we encounter praise and ennobling of the pen, of the acquisition of knowledge and of the study of nature as one of the principal sources of cognition; a profound awareness of nature may lead to the boundaries of the supranatural realm. Through the inspiration given by the Qur'an and as a result of the scientific movement launched by Islam, vital and active people blossomed into maturity, uniquely gifted with knowledge and virtue. The viewpoint of Islam on science represented a major development that prepared the way for subsequent developments.

Iqbal, the well-known Indo-Muslim thinker, says: "The birth of Islam, as I hope to be able presently to prove to your satisfaction, is the birth of inductive intellect...The constant appeal to reason and experience in the Qur'an, and the emphasis that it lays on Nature and History as sources of human knowledge, are all different aspects of the same idea of finality.

"Inner experience is only one source of human knowledge. According to the Qur'an, there are two other sources of knowledge – Nature and History; and it is in tapping these sources of knowledge that the spirit of Islam is seen at its best." [1](#)

All forms of scientific endeavor are necessarily based on respect for the intellect and for the development of the human being and on freedom of thought from all kinds of fetters. The principal advances and developments in the natural sciences are all due to these premises.

The contemporary human being is heir to the knowledge and the researches of millions of thinkers and scholars who in their investigations discovered the foundations of the various sciences, and who gained access to some of the mysteries of being by means of their intellectual originality and creativity and their untiring efforts.

In the age when the Qur'an was revealed – an age known as the Age of Ignorance – creative and innovative thought, marked by the comprehensive spirit of science, was non-existent, and no one was able to discern the mysteries of the vast, unknown universe.

When expounding the mysteries of creation, the Qur'an is clear and explicit whenever clarity and explicitness are desirable. In cases where the perception of complex truths was difficult for the people of that age, the Qur'an contents itself with making allusions, so that in the course of time as the intellects and knowledge of human beings developed and the mysteries of nature came more clearly to the fore, these matters would become more easily comprehensible.

In expounding the contents of the Qur'an, Muslim scholars have continually put forward different views, as a result both of their own researches, investigations and reflections, and of the vast spiritual richness of the Qur'an. Given this spiritual richness, it is inconceivable that such a great and infinite source of truth could have been produced by the talent and intellectual genius of the human being.

If something takes place by way of natural causation, it should be possible for people living either at the time of its first occurrence or in a later age to produce something similar. But if a phenomenon takes place outside the natural course of things, so that natural laws and criteria are suspended, people will be unable at all times to attempt its replication.

In the case of the Qur'an, we see that all conventional criteria and principles were violated; the entirety of the book represents a transcendence of all norms.

We have said that the Qur'an refers allusively to scientific truths, almost as secondary matters serving as a preliminary to the attainment of a greater and more glorious goal. We cannot, therefore, regard it as a technical work of specialization that discusses matters only from the viewpoint of science.

The Qur'an refers to certain aspects of the life of the human being, the earth, the heavens and the plants, but it would be entirely wrong to imagine that it does so with the intention of elucidating the natural sciences or resolving dubious points connected with them. The purpose of the Qur'an is rather to expound truths that are relevant to the spiritual life of the human being and the exaltation of his being and conducive to his attaining a life of true happiness.

Furthermore, when expounding scientific truths which might be couched in a different terminology in every age, the Qur'an does not make use of technical terms. For although scientific truths and the laws governing all phenomena enjoy stability and immutability, and although they have always existed and always will exist, it is possible that scientific terminology might change from one age to the next and appear in a totally different form from before.

Discussions in the Qur'an concerning the world of creation relate to a series of truths and principles that are not situated in the sensory realm. The human being can grasp these matters only by recourse to particular scientific instruments.

Dr. Bucaille, the French scientist, writes as follows: "A crucial fact is that the Qur'an, while inviting us to cultivate science, itself contains many observations on natural phenomena and includes explanatory details which are seen to be in total agreement with modern scientific data. There is no equal to this in the Judeo-Christian Revelation.

"These scientific considerations, which are very specific to the Qur'an, greatly surprised me at first. Up until then, I had not thought it possible for one to find so many statements in a text compiled more than thirteen centuries ago referring to extremely diverse subjects and all of them totally in keeping with modern scientific knowledge...A thorough linguistic knowledge is not in itself sufficient to understand

these verses from the Qur'an.

What is needed along with this is a highly diversified knowledge of science. A study such as the present one embraces many disciplines and is in that sense encyclopedic. As the questions raised are discussed, the variety of scientific knowledge essential to the understanding of certain verses of the Qur'an will become clear.

"The Qur'an does not aim at explaining certain laws governing the Universe, however; it has an absolutely basic religious objective. The descriptions of Divine Omnipotence are what principally incite the human being to reflect on the works of Creation. They are accompanied by references to facts accessible to human observation or to laws defined by God who presides over the organization of the universe both in the sciences of nature.

"One part of these assertions is easily understood, but the meaning of the other can only be grasped if one has the essential scientific knowledge it requires...

"The hypothesis advanced by those who see Muhammad as the author of the Qur'an is quite untenable. How could a man, from being illiterate, become the most important author, in terms of literary merit, in the whole of Arabic literature? How could he then pronounce truths of a scientific nature that no other human being could possibly have developed at the time, and all this without once making the slightest error in his pronouncements on the subject?

"The ideas in this study are developed from a purely scientific point of view. They lead to the conclusion that it is inconceivable for a human being living in the seventh century AD to have made statements in the Qur'an on a great variety of subjects that do not belong to his period and for them to be in keeping with what was to be known only centuries later. For me, there can be no human explanation to the Qur'an." [2](#)

Let us briefly examine a few examples of this kind of topic. One, the best-known theory concerning the emergence of the solar system is the hypothesis of Laplace, some of whose views were later refuted by certain scientists as a result of further research.

Although there are other views concerning the factors that caused the emergence of the solar system, all scientific circles in the world today are agreed that the planets were originally composed of a mass of sodium gas: first the heavens and the earth were joined together as a single entity and then they separated from each other.

Centuries ago, the Qur'an alluded to this scientific theory. It says, when describing the creation of the heavens:

"Then God turned to the creation of the heavens (the planets), when they were but a smoky substance." (41:11)

"Do the unbelievers not see that the heavens and the earth were joined together before We separated them, and that We brought all living things into existence from water? Why do they still not believe in God?" (21:30)

The well-known scientist Gamof says: "As we know, the sun came into being out of cumulative gases, and the sun then emitted a series of gases from itself that came into being after the separation from it of the planets. How did this burning mass of planetary matter come into being and what forces were involved in its origination? Who assembled the materials needed for their construction?

"These are questions which confront us with respect to the moon as well as every other planet in the solar system; they form the basis of all cosmological theories and are riddles that have preoccupied astronomers for centuries." [3](#)

James, an English scientist, writes: "Millions of centuries ago, a planet was passing in the vicinity of the sun and created an awesome tidal effect, so that matter separated from the sun in the shape of a long cigarette. Then this matter was divided: the weightier portion of the cigarette became the great planets, and the lighter portions brought the lesser planets into being." [4](#)

The words used by the Qur'an in the verse quoted above, attributing the origin of the heavens to smoke (= gas), indicates the profundity with which this Divine book treats matters. All scientists are of the opinion that sodium is a gas mixed with ferrous materials, and the word smoke/gas may be taken to include both gas and iron. The word 'smoke' is, then, the most scientific expression that might be employed in the context.

Thus the Qur'an unveils one of the great mysteries of nature: the separation of the planets from a huge object and then their separation from each other. Since at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, the general level of knowledge and science was extremely low, does this not constitute a proof of the heavenly nature of the Qur'an?

Does not the exposition of these matters by the Qur'an, in a manner conforming to quite recent discoveries made by astronomers, prove that the voice speaking in the Qur'an belongs to one who is acquainted with all the mysteries and truths of existence?

Dr. Bucaille makes the following open admission: "At the earliest time it can provide us with, modern science has every reason to maintain that the Universe was formed of a gaseous mass principally composed of hydrogen and a certain amount of helium that was slowly rotating.

This nebula subsequently split up into multiple fragments with very large dimensions and masses, so large indeed, that specialists in astrophysics are able to estimate their mass from 1 to 100 billion times the present mass of the Sun (the latter represents a mass that is over 300,000 times that of the Earth). These figures give an idea of the large size of the fragments of primary gaseous mass that were to give birth to the galaxies.

"It must be noted, however, that the formation of the heavenly bodies and the Earth, as explained in verses 9 to 12, surah 41....required two phases. If we take the Sun and its sub-product, the Earth as an example (the only one accessible to us), science informs us that their formation occurred by a process of condensation of the primary nebula and then their separation. This is exactly what the Qur'an expresses very clearly when it refers to the processes that produced a fusion and subsequent separation starting from a celestial 'smoke'. Hence there is complete correspondence between the facts of the Qur'an and the facts of science.

"Such statements in the Qur'an concerning the Creation, which appeared nearly fourteen centuries ago, obviously do not lend themselves to a human explanation." [5](#)

Two, one of the most subtle problems in science concerns the expansion of the universe, its tendency constantly to extend its boundaries. This was something completely unknown to the human being until the last century. This mystery is, however, mentioned by the Qur'an in the following terms, which again bear witness to its remarkable profundity when discussing such matters:

"We created the heavens with Our strength and power, and constantly expand them." (51:47)

This verse speaks in categorical terms of the expansion of the universe, its constellations and galaxies, although not more than a century has passed since the discovery of the expansion of the universe.

The well-known scholar Baresht writes as follows: "Astronomers gradually became aware that certain regular motions were underway in the most distant galaxies that were barely visible to their telescopes. Those distant galaxies appear to be moving away both from the solar system and from each other.

"The regular flight of these galaxies, the closest of which is five hundred light-years away from us, is completely different from the placid motion of attraction exerted by bodies close to us. Those distant motions may have an effect on the curvature of the universe. The universe is not, then, in a state of immobility and balance; it is more like a soap bubble or a bellows in its constant expansion." [6](#)

Another scholar, John Pfeffer, writes as follows: "The universe is expanding. Wherever we look, we see the galaxies becoming more distant from each other; the distance between them is constantly growing. The most distant galaxies are becoming ever more removed from us, at the greatest conceivable speed. For example, while you have been reading this sentence, some of the galaxies will have become 250,000 miles farther removed from the earth.

"The parts of the universe are becoming farther removed from each other. It is as if a bullet had exploded in the air, the galaxies corresponding to the particles of the bullet as they hasten farther and farther apart. The theory of the big bang is based on precisely such a comparison.

"According to this theory, there was a time when all the matter in the universe was gathered together into a single dense mass. It was a substance suspended in space, with a volume hundreds of times greater

than the sun, and resembled a bomb ready to explode. Then, about ten billion years ago, the explosion took place with a blinding flash, and the huge ball of matter became scattered in space. Its components are still being scattered forth in every direction, in a process of unceasing expansion – gases, rays, galaxies." [7](#)

The Glorious Qur'an draws people's attention to the splendor inherent in the ordering of the universe and the complexity of its creation, and it reminds them that the signs of the Creator's workmanship are so numerous in the universe that if the human being reflects aright he will inevitably come to believe in the eternal power of God, the source of all being. Then he will bow humbly before His magnificence.

We read in Surah al-Imran: "Certainly in the creation of the heavens and earth and in the alternation of night and day, there are clear signs for the intelligent, those who at all times make remembrance of God and constantly reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth and say:

***"Oh Creator! You have not created this expanse of splendor and magnificence in vain; You are pure and transcendent, so preserve us through Your favor from the torment of the fire."*(3: 191)**

[1.](#) Iqbal, op. cit., pp. 101–102.

[2.](#) Bucaille, op. cit., pages 115–116, 119, 121–122, 125.

[3.](#) Sarguzasht-i Zamin, page 43

[4.](#) Nujum-i bi-tiliskup, page 83

[5.](#) Bucaille, op. cit., pp. 143–144, 147, 150.

[6.](#) Jahan va Einstein, p. 112.

[7.](#) Az kahkashan ta insan, p. 47.

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