How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition? – Dr. Mustansir Mir, Ph.D, Muslim

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Mustansir Mir: 00:20  It is interesting, that historically, this question never arose in Islam. It seems to me, this is a typically modern question that has arisen in the context of hostility or conflict, or however you want to put it, between Christianity and science, but no such hostility or conflict ever rose in Islamic history. So, the question itself is alien to Islamic culture. That I think is important to keep in mind. This does not mean that the question is not relevant to modern Islam, it certainly is. However, if I were to state the basic position of Islam on the subject, I might say that the relationship between Islam and science is that of complementarity. Interestingly, in the Qur’an, the same word, Arabic Ayah, English sign, is used for the verses of the Qur’an and the signs of nature. So, nature is taken to be a repository of science. Now, a sign is something that points to something else. In this case, to God. So, study of nature actually is sanctified by the Islamic religion. And so, Muslims undertook scientific activity keeping this in mind. That's why science flourished under Islam. (01:51) I think the key issue here is that the Qur'an does contain an account of human origins. However, the Qur'an does not provide or present a scientific account of human origins. The account of human origins found in the Qur’an has a basically religious or moral outlook. When it says in the Qur’an that God created Adam and commanded angels and others to bow down before Adam, that is to indicate that human beings potentially are superior to the rest of creation. There's nothing scientific about it. So, the challenge for Muslim scholars is to find out whether the scientific account of human origins is, in fact, in conflict with the Quranic account of the origin of human beings. I don't think the two are in conflict. However, Muslim scholars have not engaged with this and many other issues that arise as a result of the interaction between science and religion in a modern context. (03:15) But speaking from the point of view of the Qur'an, Islamic scripture, one can make a basic statement. And that is that the Quranic
account of human origins is offered from a broad religious and moral perspective, and that it's not intended to be a scientific account. This means that Muslim scholars have the obligation to figure out whether the two accounts are in accord with each other, whether they are in conflict with each other. At this time, I think one has to suspend judgment and not say in definitive terms, rather what's called the modern scientific account of human origins is or is not Islamic. However, one can also say here that from an Islamic standpoint, anything that is established on sound scientific grounds becomes, ipso facto, an Islamic position. (04:18) As I said earlier, there's no history of any conflict between Islam and science, and the general Muslim mindset is that there is no conflict between these two, because there’s one revelation, as some scholars have said. There's one revelation that is found in the Qur'an. Another revelation that is found in nature. As I said earlier, the same word Ayah, sign, is used for the signs of nature and for the verses of the Qur'an. So, I would say again that basically, whatever science establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt will become an Islamic position. (04:58) There is a difference, however, between Islamic position on moral issues, religious issues, dogmatic issues, and an Islamic position on scientific matters. Science changes. So, when we say that a scientific fact or truth will be an Islamically acceptable truth of fact, we mean that if a scientific theory changes with time, that new changed theory will also be an Islamic theory. So, change in science will be accompanied by changing the Islamic view also, because it’s not a question of dogma, it’s not a question of theology, science evolves, it's human knowledge. And whatever stage of human knowledge we are at, Islam will accept that and then build upon it. So, again, scientifically speaking, if this is the truth, then Islam would accept it. And if tomorrow this truth changes, then the new position will no less be an Islamic position. (06:06) Is there any interest among Muslims scholars in dealing with questions that arise in the field of science in modern times? I would say that there is certainly a concern that Muslim scholars want to answer the question whether science and religion are in conflict, but this is a concern they have taken over from Christianity. This is not a concern that has arisen from indigenous soil of Islam. That's not the case. But unfortunately, we don't have many Muslim scholars who
are equally well-grounded in Islam on the one hand, and science on the other. See, it will help if we could get together in a room scholars of Islam and scholars of science. But ideally, what would really help is if we could have the same individuals, same individuals who are equally well-versed in the tradition of Islam on the one hand, and who have some sort of an expertise in one or more fields of science, also. And there are very few individuals in the Islamic world of this type. (07:30) There are some people who can be said to be philosophers of science, but philosophy of science is not the same as science itself. Philosophy of science emerges from scientific knowledge, but I would say that this is probably better described as theology of science, rather than philosophy of science. So, much work remains to be done in this area in the future. I don't think we have definitive or even semi-definitive positions that have been offered by Muslim scholars in this area.

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