Science and the Quran: A Philosophical Review

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Recently, the Muslim Students Association hosted a talk by Mines Physics PhD student Abdulaziz Alaswad entitled, “From the Atom to the Galaxy; Quran and Science”. During the talk, Alaswad interpreted a number of passages in the Quran as clear evidence that the author of the Quran had knowledge of contemporary (i.e., 20th and 21st century) science. This fact, he claims, is proof that God authored the Quran. There is no doubt that Alaswad is a well-spoken scientist with a special talent for explaining complicated subjects (e.g., cosmology, atomic physics) in a way that the non-specialist can understand. There is also no doubt that Alaswad has a sincere belief in a higher power. Here, I do not wish to take issue either with his scientific knowledge or his faith; I have a sincere respect for both. Rather, I would like to analyze the arguments that he presented for the claim that the author of the Quran had knowledge of contemporary science (call this claim C).

All of Alaswad’s evidence for claim C was presented in the following way: first, Alaswad explained a bit of a contemporary scientific theory; then, he presented a passage from the Quran that he believed to be overwhelming evidence that the author of the Quran knew the claims of the scientific theory just presented. So, for example, Alaswad presented a brief summary of the Big Bang Theory—the theory that, at some time in the past, the universe occupied an infinitesimally small, infinitely dense point. Then he presented the following passage from the Quran: “The heavens and the earth were joined together, and we clove them asunder” (21:30). He holds that this passage is strong evidence for claim C. I believe that this example is representative of the argument structure of the entire talk.

On my view, this connection does not constitute good evidence for C. There are a number of reasons that support my view, many of which have to do with the vagueness of this passage. Granting for the moment, as Alaswad believes, that the Quran is the perfect word of God\(^1\), we are still faced with the question on how we should interpret these words. This passage in particular allows for at least two interpretations (and in reality, many more but we’ll consider two), neither of which seem better than any other. For example, it is not clear at all what is meant by the claim that “the heavens and the earth were joined together.” Does the word ‘heaven’ refer to the several levels of the afterlife that most Muslims believe exist? If so, then it should be apparent that this passage has nothing to do with modern science since the Big Bang Theory does not posit the existence of this kind of heaven. But, perhaps ‘heaven’ refers what we call ‘the heavenly bodies’—the moon, the planets, the stars, etc. This interpretation might lend some support for claim C, but with a bit of inspection, we see that it doesn’t lend much. ‘Being joined together’ is certainly not equivalent to ‘being infinitely dense’; it is hard to see how we can interpret this passage as at all matching the level of precision of the Big Bang Theory. The Big Bang Theory makes claims about temperature, the nature of space, time, and matter; none of these things are addressed in the Quran passage (or anywhere

\(^1\)I am granting this claim—that the Quran is the perfect word of God—for the sake of argument. Full disclosure: the degree to which I believe that this claim is true is very low.
else in the Quran, to the best of my knowledge) with any precision. Such precision is necessary in order to make the connection between science and the Quran. Otherwise, the connection is much like the purported connection between astrological events and social interactions: dubious at best.

One might object here that I’m being too demanding. Perhaps what is important about the Quran—and what is important about many religious texts—is that it displays the mysterious nature of God. Rather than speaking directly, and with precision, God is mysterious and unknowable. I’m sympathetic to this view. But, if we accept that God’s writings are mysterious, then it doesn’t seem reasonable to expect that the word of God be understood scientifically. Science is meant to be clear, unambiguous, and devoid of mystery. It values not believing over believing falsely. Thus, I think that the best we can hope for is that the Quran is consistent with contemporary science. But that is a very different claim than the one made by Alaswad.

The Quran may be the word of God but we, as finite beings, are left with the monumental task of interpreting His (unfortunately ambiguous) word. In many cases, there aren’t any good reasons to believe that one interpretation is better than the other. But, without a relatively unambiguous interpretation of a religious text, it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to make a link between that text and a scientific theory. As someone not at all opposed to religious thinking, it is hard for me to understand the appeal of making such connections (which, to be fair, are made by apologists of many religions, including Christianity). There are consistent positions that allow science and religion to coexist without sacrificing intellectual rigor.

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2 To be clear, I am not judging which kind of discourse is superior; rather, I am merely arguing that, on an important level, the goals of each type of discourse are very different.