Understanding and Respecting God's Word and World: Faith and Epistemology in Orthodox Religious Communities

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Introduction

First, let me begin by saying what an immense privilege it is to meet you all virtually and to take part in this second International Conference on the Quran and Science. My thanks to Professor Jalal Peykani for reaching out to me a year ago, and for making it possible for me to present this year. I regret hugely not being with you in person; for it is, surely, in interpersonal exchange, that friendships are formed, ideas tested, and spiritual understanding enlarged. My other regret is that, though my son is a nuclear fusion expert (working in a research facility south of Oxford), my own specialism is theology and comparative philosophy in the field of International Relations. Despite my ignorance, I hope very much I can supplement and enrich discussion by taking a step back to reconsider the philosophical and theological substructure of faith and scientific enquiry.

Textualism

Like many of you, I imagine, I am technically more a 'textualist' than a 'contextualist';[1] that is, I consciously (and unconsciously) read the world through a set written and unwritten 'texts', which, like stained glass, shape and colour what I see. Some of these 'texts' are an accident of birth,

[1] Cf. often associated with a formalist interpretation of the law (i.e. a judge's duty is to apply and not interpret law), philosophical and theological usage defines a text's meaning from within the text itself and not through projection or creation by the reader. As such, it is a conscious, postmodern affirmation of the inherent weight and meaning of words and texts.

background, and education, others are the fruit of tradition, reflection, and deliberate selection. Better to be this, I would argue, than a 'contextualist' who surrenders control on what they see and believe, to chance, (popular) culture and circumstance. Instead, I prefer to admit that: (a.) I do not encounter life and ideas without conscious and unconscious presuppositions, and (b.) that my mind, thoughts, and perception, are therefore to a greater or lesser extent pre-conditioned. Over time, a wise 'textualist' is increasingly self-aware in this process of pre-conditioning and judicious in the textual filters he or she chooses, admitting all the while that their selection will itself be to a degree predetermined by prior 'textual' influences. But life-shaping 'texts' of every kind there are, which have formed, and still inform, my personality, priorities, decisions and way I 'read life'. Indeed, they are the sources and resources that inform my (or our) *weltanshauung* or 'worldview'.

I say this by way of introduction, because I want to set what follows in the context of the *Book of Psalms*, or the holy text of the *Zabur* in Islamic tradition. For more than fifty years, I have read a Psalm, or part of a Psalm, in my daily, early morning, devotions. So, when I think of the interface of religion and science, particularly how God's word shapes and illuminates God's world, I read the issue through a holy text in which I find, for example, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands' (Psalm 19.1), and 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth' (Psalm 33.6), and, again, 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens' (Psalm 119.89). All window words on God's world.[2]

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So, when I look out of the windows of the delightful old barn in Dorset in southern England, where my wife and I live, I don't just see nature I see a creation, I don't just delight in natural beauty I look for a creator to thank, I don't see two worlds – one the realm of faith, the other the realm of science – I see *one* world created and sustained by *one* God.[3] I say this and recall the day, not long after my family and I moved to Virginia in the late 1980s, when my deep resistance to living in America (!) confronted the beauty of a perfect Virginian summer morning. We were camping in the Blue Ridge Mountains 100 miles southwest of Washington, DC. I got up early, crawled out of our tent, and in the quiet beauty sensed God whisper into my frustration: 'Remember, Chris, this is not America: this is part of my world.' It is a truth that has profoundly shaped my perception and international work ever since. Hence, when lecturing in China's leading Departments of Philosophy, and in many other institutions in India, North America and Europe, I am liberated to see and read that 'context' by a transnational holy 'text'. Put another way, human boundaries and institutions are, and always must be seen to be, of temporary and limited human significance.

Theme, questions and takeaways

Come back to my title and theme, '*Understanding and respecting God's word and world - Faith and epistemology in orthodox religious communities*'. In my travels and

[2] Cf. Q. 21. 31: 'Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were *a* closed-up *mass* (*ratqan*), then We clove them asunder (*fataqna*)? And We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?' Also, on the creation of the universe by God: 'And the heaven We built with *Our own* powers (*aydin*) and indeed We go on expanding it (*musi'un*).' (Q. 51.48). Also, on creation as ordered, stable, purposeful, revelational and provisional, 13.2, 3, 21.32, 34, 27.89, 31.11, 30, 35.14, 36.39, 39.6. Some find here support for concepts such as an original 'Big Bang', an expanding universe, black holes, an ultimately finite universe, etc.

[3] Cf. I do not see this as denying the distinctiveness and independence of creation, as in Quranic tradition. NB. also, the parallels are often recognized between Genesis 1 and, e.g., Q. 7.54, 'Indeed your Lord is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days, then established Himself on the Throne. He makes the day and night overlap in rapid succession. He created the sun, the moon, and the stars all subjected by His command. The creation and the command belong to Him [alone]. Blessed is Allah Lord of all worlds!'.

teaching over the years, I have encountered many 'orthodox' religious communities from a multiplicity of faith traditions; especially, of course, heirs of 'Abrahamic' faith and tradition, but others who define their identity in terms of loyalty to convictions, texts, and practices, inherited from their forebears. Such groups, in my experience, tend to fall into one of two traps: (i.) they take their earthly responsibilities so seriously they forget their true heavenly calling; or, (ii.) they take their spiritual responsibilities so seriously they forget their temporal duties; as was said of one saint, 'He was so heavenly minded, he was no earthly use!' What's the result for these communities? They either live a schizophrenic life (unsure of their identity), or they live a disconnected life (neither committed to earth *or* to heaven), or they forget that they have a dual citizenship, and double duty to heaven and earth. I'll come back to this later. For now, hold on to the potential impact of 'orthodoxy' on perception.

I am very aware my account of orthodox religious communities may provoke questions. Consider. What should we say of, and expect from, faith traditions that are explicitly orientated away from material reality, placing their emphasis on pure, heavenly, spiritual experiences. Here Buddhism and Western

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faith traditions with Platonic roots come to mind, in all of which, to a greater or lesser extent, enlightened spirituality is about shedding the encumbrance of impure materiality. Or, what of faith traditions that lean in the opposite direction, drawing little, or no, distinction between spirit and matter, heaven and earth? Here Aristotle and Thomist Catholicism, and their Chinese counterparts Confucianism and (to some degree) Daoism, come to mind. Or, what about those orthodox faith traditions that affirm a spiritual *and* a material perspective, in which heaven *and* earth have a place, but the temporal is inherently limited and imperfect, and the spiritual perfect, eternal, and comprehensive? Hinduism and Protestantism are of this kind, being world-denying in their view of life and life-affirming in what they say of heaven.

'Orthodoxy', as in these examples, may be ready with answers, but is inclined to leave us with questions. But let me suggest one takeaway from this: how a faith tradition views the nature and relationship of spirit and matter, heaven and earth, will inform how they see the relationship of science and religion.

Let me explain. If heaven and earth, spirit and matter, are perceived as *one*, there is, and can be, no conflict between scientific discovery and the dictates of faith. Why? Because they are just *two* paths to *one* goal, namely, to understand reality in its entirety. But, if heaven and earth, spirit and matter, are perceived to denote *two radically different things*, then faith can speak confidently and comprehensively without reference to science, and science may lay claim to determine reality without reference to religion. Here, we might say, an orthodox community is intellectually self-subsistent and impermeable to scientific criticism or enquiry, while scientific discoveries of any and every kind can proceed without the hindrance of faith or any kind of religious authorization. Why? They are simply, and distinctively, *two* paths to *two* quite different goals. However, where spirit and matter, heaven and earth, are perceived to *relate*, albeit *partially* or *imperfectly*, science may *or may not* be deemed a legitimate sphere for religious thought, and religious issues may *or may not* be considered by scientists in their work. Here a dialogue in either direction *may* or *may not* occur. If it does, it doesn't require, and certainly shouldn't expect intellectual or official legitimization. Why? Because the dialogue is essentially spontaneous, occasional, conditional and speculative. It is about optional exploration of two different paths to *various undetermined ends*.

To the observer or participant in these different views of the way spirit and matter, heaven and earth (and, we might say, God's word and world), relate to one another, self-recognition is key. But on what basis should we assess, or critique, comparative claims for

the relationship between spirit and matter, heaven and earth?

Four epistemological propositions

In the second half of this brief paper, I want to extrapolate four epistemological propositions from the preceding for orthodox religious communities to consider as they ponder the relationship between science and religion.[4]

i. *The indivisibility of God and interconnectedness of knowledge*

Orthodox religious traditions (particularly the three Abrahamic faiths) characteristically articulate comprehensive claims for faith, life, and knowledge. The origin of this is respect for the perfection, unity, and indivisibility of God. More than this, such orthodox religious communities will admit and affirm that, though human knowledge is necessarily partial, divine wisdom and divine knowledge are as perfect and comprehensive as God himself.[5] In other words, that there is an essential, eternal, indissoluble connection between God and knowledge, so that there is no knowledge without God and no knowledge separate to, or separable from, God. This robust epistemological proposition is part and parcel of what is sometimes called the 'theistic premise'. That is, that whatever, or whoever God is, by definition and in faith, God is central to the universe of human thought, life, speech, morality and understanding. As I was once firmly reminded by the very fine former President of the Society of Christian Philosophers in the US, William Alston, philosophers are often better at recognizing and safe-guarding the full implications of the 'theistic premise' than theologians – particularly progressive ones!

Seen in this light, if, or when, faith seeks scientific understanding it does so believing scientific discoveries of any and every kind cannot, and will not, ultimately undermine God's sovereign status and comprehensive knowledge. Hence the confidence with which Psalm 19.1 states, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands', and, likewise, Psalm 33.6, declares 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth'. God's word[6] illuminates the essentially theological foundation for life, thought, and understanding. Of course, secular philosophy and rational science may not want to begin here, but orthodox religious communities can, and I would argue, must always begin here.

ii. *The co-eternity of God and truth*

Building on this first point, the second key epistemological proposition orthodox religious communities might consider, as they ponder the relationship between science and religion, is the co-eternity of God and truth.[7] Put another way, they will resist the notion that humans discover something that is not, and has not always been, known to God. As if there were knowledge not known to God, or new knowledge that humans discover.

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[4] As an exercise in comparative philosophy, there are parallels in what follows to the epistemology of the Turkish Sunni scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's (1877-1960), *Risale-i Nur Collection* (ca. 1910-1950). On this, R. Embong, 'Knowledge in the Quran and the Sunnah Leading to an Epistemology', *Qeios* (12 March 2024): https://www.qeios.com/read/DO1WI6; accessed 6 December 2024.

[5] Cf. as in the Islamic concept of *Tawhid*, classic statements of the indivisibility of God include the dynamic notion of 'making one' or 'asserting oneness'.

[6] Classically enshrined in the Islamic 'Be!' of God's authoritative creative act.

[7] *Pace* Islam's naming of God in the Quran as *al-Haqq*, the 'truth' (also, 'right' and 'reality'), which is transferred by direct extension into the truth of the Quran and moral expectation of truthfulness among the faithful.

Seen in this light, what we call 'scientific discoveries' are more aptly named 'divine disclosures' or 'revealed truths'. To secular philosophy and atheist empiricism, this may sound demeaning of human endeavour or be dismissed as a crude quest for theological dominance. Better, perhaps, to see it as a theo-logical consequence of a robust re-statement of the 'theistic premise' and an entirely justified (and long overdue) push back against modernity's presumptuous claim for the hegemony of science. What's more, the subordinate and imperfect nature of all human activity in Abrahamic faith traditions, validates criticism of human hubris (and its claims to 'discovery') and a cautious approach to scientific and intellectual experiment (lest they disrespect in any way God's glory, sanctity, creation and comprehensive claim to all that is ultimately good and true); as Psalm 119.89 proclaims, 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.'

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iii. *The sanctity of God and all God creates*

My last two epistemological propositions are allied to, if not deduced from the first two. Hence, my third relates to *the sanctity of God and all God creates*. Even in orthodox religious traditions that draw a clear distinction between spirit and matter, heaven and earth, there is often some sense of a transference of characteristics and qualities from God to his world, and especially to the zenith of his creation, humanity.[8] Hence, the world – be it product of natural evolution or direct divine creation – in all its organic and inorganic forms, possesses by transference some inherent value. But let's be clear, though, this value is *contingent* on God and *not inherent* to the world, lest the world be idolized or deified (as happens too often today in eco-centric philosophies and their theological counterparts). Rather, as Psalm 8 famously charts, there is a legitimate return journey that orthodox faith may take from wonder at God's creation to wonder at humanity back to glorifying God the creator.[9] Hence, the Psalm begins, 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!', and then continues in verses 3-5,

> *When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, which you have set in place, what is man (or humanity) that you are mindful of him (and her), the son of man (humanity) that you care for him (and her)? You made him/them a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him/them with glory and honour.*

Here, the inherent status and value of humanity are clear, *and* God's role in establishing them.

Here is a 'window word', I suggest, through which orthodox Abrahamic faiths may view both the natural and human sciences. Here is encouragement to honour faithful enquiry that recognizes the innate value and excellence, gifts, and qualities, that testify to humanity's contingent nature as a glorious divine creation. Here, too, is discouragement of every form of interpretation and experimentation that discredit, de-humanize, or demean, 'the son of man', who is by God 'made a little lower than the angels'. Hereby, too, unaccountable genetic or social engineering, organ harvesting, and a Marxistic reduction of humans to units of labour, are theologically proscribed.

iv. *The coinherence of divine and human speech*

My last epistemological proposition is again allied to, if not derived from, the first two; namely, *the coinherence of divine and human speech*. In addition to the transference of inherent qualities and value from God as creator to humanity and all creation, most orthodox religious communities extend divine

[8] On Islam and the pre-eminent. Unmediated, creation of humanity (with four aspects, viz. physical, spiritual, natural [*fitrah*] and light), see Z. Shakir, 'The Human in the Qur'an', *Renovatio* (5 June 2018): https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-human-in-the-quran; accessed 6 December 2024.
[9] Cf. Q. 2. 157, '... to God we belong and to Him shall we return'.

activity to the inspiration of sacred texts and the formation and functioning of human speech.[10] However the 'inspiration' of holy texts is defined or explained, these texts are honoured witnesses, as the Psalms testify, to the mysterious impact of Almighty God on the mind, soul, memory, and will, of individuals and communities. So, praise and blessing, confession, questioning and cursing, issue from the mind of God through the mouth of man. More than this, the act of human communication, through audible speech and intelligible touch and sense, is a response to expressible and inexpressible realities that the divine mind has mediated, and still mediates, to his creation. In short, without God, human communication evaporates in the cacophony of Babel and the bitterness of war.

There are two important consequences of this coinherence of divine and human speech. First, human speech is boundaried by divine orders and ordering, so it cannot say anything it likes. Lies and defamation, criticism and calculation, are scrutable by God's truth and justice. Second, human speech is empowered by its divine origin and author to speak confidently of all God is and does.[11] As illustrated by our appeal to the Psalms and reaffirmation of the 'theistic premise', orthodox faith can – indeed, must – inhabit the words, works, and world of God without shame, duplicity, or embarrassment. Seen in this light, scientific discourse is also both accountable and legitimate. But *not* as an independent human activity; rather, as a discipline in search of its true vocation as a worthy expression of contingent being, in search of truths about realities God, the creator, has determined.

Orthodox religious epistemology is, then as all this suggests, *always* morally potent and to be seen as *theologically accountable*.

Conclusion

I hope this brief philosophical-theological survey of epistemological issues relating to science and religion creates an appropriate setting for your subsequent discussions. I leave you with three personal takeaways. First, the legitimacy of theological reflection and commentary on scientific enquiry; indeed, its role in inspiring and in monitoring it. Second, the illegitimacy – if not the damage and potential danger – of scientific enquiry *without* accountability to a clear philosophical, theological, and thence moral, frame of reference. Third, the potential discussion of science and religion has to unite and stimulate orthodox religious communities in resistance to proud secular claims for the hegemony of science, and to the dehumanizing anthropologies that all too often follows from it. The Psalms are there to encourage us, 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens' (Psalm 119.89). Or, as the Quran declares, 'The creation and the command belong to Him [alone]. Blessed is Allah – Lord of all worlds!' (Q. 7. 54).

[10] For an interesting commentary on divine-human communication in the Quran, M. Z. Ibrahim, 'Models of Communication in the Qur'an: Divine Human Interaction', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22.1 (2005): 70-95.

[11] Historic debates within (NB. to some scholars, also between) Christianity on the propriety of 'apologetics' (the rational defense of belief/s) and Islam over the character, status and validity of *kalam* (also, *Ilm al-kala* and *ilm al-lahut*) frequently involve discussion of the legitimacy of human rational reflection on the fundamentals of faith.