

READY - Religious Education and Diversity
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Teaching Creation in Islamic Religious Education

Interview with Hakan Turan / Staatliches Seminar für Didaktik und Lehrerbildung (Gymnasien) Stuttgart

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I. Creation

“What is the concept of creation in Islam? We know very little about it.”

When we are talking about creation in Islam we should first have a look at what is written in the Koran about it. There are many passages in the surahs (chapters), where creation is described for example as follows in surah 59, verse 24

"He is Allah, the creator, the evolver, the bestower of forms. To Him belong the most beautiful names. Whatever is in the heavens and earth is exalting him. And he is the Exalted in Might and the Wise."

The most beautiful names of God - this is the key concept for us, because God can be known by his names which are manifest in nature. This is a very essential idea in Islam. So when we look in nature, we see manifestations of the names of God. For example: God is the Merciful, God is the Wise. And his mercy and his wisdom find their reflection in space and time.

But these names of God are beautiful names, so nature is beautiful, because these names are manifest there. But the names of God are also manifest in our souls.

So the names of God are a link between ourselves, nature and God. So the names are an important key to think about God and to think about the diversity of nature.

Because besides other aspects, the names also stand for diversity in nature while their source lies in God. So their whole is also a symbol of the unity of God. When all names are brought together as unity, also including the contrary seeming ones, you receive the universal and comprehensive name Allah.

So the unity of god shows itself also as a unity of nature.

In these manifestations of the names of God in the universe man has a special role, because he has self-awareness. He knows what he is thinking or doing. And he has the potential to evolve spiritually and ethically by reflecting on God and living ethically and conscious of Him.

"This idea of image of God we have in the Bible, too. Is it the same idea?"

In some points it is comparable, but nature is not divine. It is a reflection of divine names. The names are something between God and what we perceive. Nevertheless the names make God near to us, they make it possible for us to find a way to God, in every position, in every place, in every situation in the world.

"There is more distance between God and man?"

I think it is so.

Regarding especially the role of man, let's have a look at another surah in the Koran, surah 55: *"(Allah), the Most Gracious! It is He, who has taught the coran. He has created man, he*

has taught him speech." (55:1-3). And speech makes the names of God accessible, as an important part of speech.

"The sun and the moon (follow courses) exactly computed." (55:4). So the mathematical structure of the world is also a manifestation of the names of God.

"And the herbs and trees both (alike) prostration in adoration." (55:5) So all creation worships God in its own language. Nature prostrates to God and is going to "sajda" in a symbolic way by evolving according to a harmonic pattern. It reflects the names of God and makes the world look diverse like a flowing river reflects the sunrays in a number of ways.

II. Evolution

"Hearing this and trying to understand this some people have problems relating this type and narrative of creation to the theory of evolution which is common in natural sciences. How do you deal with this in Islam?"

This is a very complex question. Let's begin with the basics of evolution, with natural laws. What are natural laws? When we have a look at Islamic tradition, we find many thinkers and theologians who interpreted natural laws in a non naturalistic manner.

I would like to give one example from the 10th and 11th century a.d. Most of the theologians of this time thought of nature as consisting of atoms, of indivisible and non visible particles. These atoms are abstract, they have no empirical properties by themselves. It is God who creates their properties in every moment. In every moment the properties of all atoms in the world are created anew by God. And the properties of all our atoms they exist for only one very short moment and then they disappear. And then God creates the next state of these properties. For example, when an apple falls down at the beginning it is in a height of two meters. In the next moment it is a little lower, and this state is created anew by god. So there is no autonomous nature. Nature is not independent from God. This is an early concept of "creatio continua" in Islam. In every moment everything is renewed by God by direct creation. God is here the primary cause. And in this concept there are no secondary causes so there is no independent nature in an also creating position. There is only God and he is acting in nature and he is following a way that we call laws in nature. These theologians call this customs of God.

So God creates the universe, but he doesn't create it chaotically or arbitrarily. There is a structure that we call laws of nature. But in a metaphysical sense these would be customs of God. And God's names are manifest in nature by this order. And this order belongs directly to him.

In this concept laws of nature do not compete with God, they are God's way of acting. There is nothing to compete with. So God doesn't intervene in the world, because there is nothing to intervene in because the world is God's continuous creation anyway.

This was the first point. Let us summarise: Natural laws can theologically be interpreted as customs of God. So natural laws are no danger for faith.

The next point is how to deal with evolution. In the Islamic world there are due to many reasons still many objections against evolutionary theories. One reason for this is that

evolution is often seen as an argument for atheism because atheists used the theory of evolution in this sense against religion, also in the Islamic world. So Darwinian evolution remained as something not compatible with faith.

But this conflict is not necessary. Because ontological naturalism isn't a necessary part of the theory of evolution, Evolution can also be thought together with many other metaphysics than monistic naturalism. But I think this possibility of interpreting evolution in different ways is not yet very well understood or even known in the Islamic world.

I would like to give again an example from history. It is interesting that in the 19th century there were western historians as John William Draper. He is the author of a book called "The History of the Conflict between Religion and Science." In this book he wrote that Christian theologians already long before Darwin and Lamarck rejected evolution theory, which they regarded as "Muhammadan evolution theory". This is very interesting. So for a very long time evolution theory was known as a "Muhammadan theory", whatever that means.

Looking deeper we find indeed many scholars, and they were Muslim believing scholars, who thought of creation as process of evolution. Ibn Khaldun from the 14 century for example. He wrote something very interesting in his work "Muqaddima". I quote from Franz Rosenthal's translation:

*"The higher stage of man is reached from the world of monkeys, in which both sagacity and perception are found, but which has not reached the stage of actual reflection and thinking. At this point we come to the first stage of man. This is as far as our (physical) observation extends."*¹

This is one of the most precise descriptions in Islamic history of an evolutionary creation. This was not the mainstream in Islamic history, but there are many other authors with similar thoughts. Many Muslims nowadays don't know this, but in the western world it is also less known. But we have these theistic concepts of evolution.

Of course this is not exactly Darwinian evolution theory, but it has very important similarities for our discussion nowadays. Because it shows that the idea of evolutionary emergence of species was regarded as compatible with creation by many Islamic scholars. So creation and evolution can be regarded as compatible nowadays, too. But of course Darwinian evolution theory requires a very systematic investigation to recognize which further conclusions and perspectives arise from it for Islamic theology. And we stand at the beginning of such investigations now.

And a third point concerning evolution: Many Muslims think that evolution contradicts the texts of Islam, verses of the Koran and other texts like the Hadithes, that speak about the direct creation of Adam, the first man. But when we have a deeper look into the Koran, we see that it gives very few details of the creation of Adam.

¹ The passage before this quotation is also interesting: "One should then take a look at the world of creation. It started out from the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals. The last stage of minerals is connected with the first stage of plants, such as herbs and seedless plants. The last stage of plants, such as palms and vines, is connected with the first stage of animals, such as snails and shellfish which have only the power of touch. The word 'connection' with regard to these created things means that the last stage of each group is fully prepared to become the first stage of the newest group. The animal world then widens, its species become numerous, and, in a gradual process of creation, it finally leads to man, who is able to think and reflect."

So the Islamic scholars states many centuries ago that the Koranic verses about creation are ambiguous. They can be interpreted in many ways. There is no definitive interpretation of it. So if they are ambiguous, it is not wise to take an old interpretation from the scholars of the first centuries of Islam and claim that this is exactly the Koranic intention with these verses. Besides of this ambiguity there is also the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation. So many scholars accepted for verses like the ones about creation an interpretation beyond the first literal meaning. I would like to give an example for this from the 11th century, from the Islamic scholar al-Ghazali (d. 1111 AD). He stated: If there should be ever a contradiction between the literal meaning of a primary text of Islam like the Koran and reliable scientific knowledge, then the religious text has to be interpreted metaphorically. This means, that there is no need to regard the literal meaning of a verse about creation as its only possible meaning, because there is ambiguity anyway.

So there is principally no obstacle to such a broad interpretation of certain verses about creation. With it the theological message remains conserved, the physical or biological details are usually not essential for it.

But in this concept it is important to interpret all evolutionary processes as a part of the customs of God. This would be my interpretation. This is the way God creates life and also the way he created us. We declared this way of creating as evolution.

But as the basic idea we can state the following: The natural laws or the customs of God, they are simple, they are beautiful, they are very fruitful, because most phenomena we know can be described by these elementary laws. It seems like God likes these customs and this kind of creation. So this would be my interpretation.

III. Creation in Islamic Religious Education

“Now looking at school business, teaching children let's say at age ten, fifteen or eighteen. How would you try to explain it to them? Because they would have physics and biology. They might be more important subjects for them than religious education. How would bring all this together for them?”

I think at an early stage it is very important to show them that nature or rather creation is beautiful, and that nature can not only be regarded as an object of natural sciences but it is also something to hear, something to see and something to smell. It is important to make these experiences with nature and to see that there is beauty in nature and beauty in creation.

In a Hadith it is stated that God is beautiful and that he loves beauty. So why not connecting creation with beauty, with a manifestation of beauty? I think these perspectives are essential. And it is important to see that we ourselves are a part of creation. We are also created.

And the Koran states for example in surah 6, vers 38: *“There is not an animal on the earth, nor a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are communities like you.”* So there are many comparable aspects between the living beings including man.

“I read about bees in the Koran ...”

Yes. The Coran states that there are communities in nature and animals form communities as we do. And we are all finite and mortal beings. There are men, animals and plants coming

alive while others grow old and die. So the manifestations of the names of god change and alternate all the time, but the circulation goes on.

Then it should be shown to the students that the main discussion is not whether the theory of evolution is true or not. We need a much wider perspective than this narrow one.

Apart from that it doesn't seem reasonable to me, if the religious education teacher tries to convince students who have a problem with the theory of evolution at any cost that evolution is real. The students have to recognize it by themselves. It is rather the biology teacher, who should teach the students the arguments for the evolutionary theory.

But the religious education teacher should show that it is possible to make the belief in creation compatible with approaches in the natural sciences as for example the theory of evolution. And in the upper secondary school students of course they need to deal with evolution and the different approaches and the conflict potential. Because making Darwinian evolution theory and creation by God compatible is not as problem-free as I maybe implied before. There is a problem of coincidence for example. What do the coincidences assumed by Darwinian evolution theory theologically mean? Are there goals in nature, and if so, are those goals assumed by classical theologies necessarily observable and provable ones? Or are they part of metaphysics and simply compatible with observation without further scientific demonstrability?

These are complex questions which should be discussed at a later stage. It is important to show that natural science is not the same as ontological naturalism and that there are many other alternatives to naturalism and we have to search for them. But it is the student's decision if they find one of these ideas good or bad, right or wrong.

And I think it is necessary that the religious studies teachers know something about science, maybe not very much, but he should know for example some of the ideas that I introduced here, or generally spoken that it is possible to make different perspectives compatible with each other, and that the religious teaching is in its origin much wider than the things that we maybe learned as children or anywhere.

"This complementary approach saying both are possible and both are true, in what age do you think is it possible for children?"

I think it is as soon possible as one understands what science is and this is in a later stage the case. But it is possible to show very early that God is not only active when a miracle happens. This is a problematic view that one should avoid already at a very early stage. God does not only act in miracles. Miracles are regarded as possible in Islam and there are passages in the Koran about miracles shown by prophets. The theologians who adopted the atomic view of the world, they tried to show that God has customs in creation but he can also break his habit and create something that we call miracle, if he wants to.

But for us it is important to focus on the non-miracles in the world, because the customized events and things as this glass of water for example, those are something very special. Our individual existence is something very special. It is not so significant how exactly water arised or what exactly our natural origin is. But the fact that we are now here, although we were not here thirty or forty years ago for example.

This is something which should be cleared up very early, so that it becomes understandable that God is acting everywhere, even when there is no miracle, because there is also structure and beauty in nature everywhere. You can smell it, you can hear it. I think this should be discussed and experienced very early, before the scientific discussion is added to this later.

IV. Creation as a topic of dialogue between Christians and Muslims

"Thinking about some kind of conference we could be having for RE teachers of Catholic, Protestant and Muslim religious education, what would you say could be topics for a dialogue between Christians and Muslims on creation, what could be interesting?"

It is surely interesting to show how Christians deal for example with evolution. Because the Christian discussion about evolution is more complex and proceeded as it is actually in the Muslim world. I find this very interesting. But also concepts of nature, what concepts of nature are there in Islam? What concepts of nature are there in Christianity? I think we can learn very much from each other, because in history it has been like this, that Muslims, Christians, Jews and non-religious philosophers learned much from each other. In Islamic history there are many great ideas, which can today be of interest, also for Christians for example.

On the other hand there are of course many ideas, concepts and models in Christian history for example about making creation and evolution compatible with each other which can be of interest for Muslims. To give an example: Most Muslims never heard of Teilhard de Chardin.

Another topic for a dialogue could be the following: I think focusing on nature and creation makes man happier and more peaceful. And it draws our attention to something not political. This is important. There are some non-political things, which are reachable for everyone from every religion. Talking about this would be very interesting, because both sides have a comparable fascination for nature.

In the psalms of David in the bible for example, I found many things that I know from Islamic literature. There are many parallels concerning the perspective on God's acting in nature and his majesty, which is also present in nature. There are many aspects which can only be seen when the aspect of creation is focused upon. But I think it is not very fruitful to focus on details of the history of creation, on the details of the book Genesis for example. This is of course a very interesting topic, but then we would again start to compare and talk about differences. I think it is much more interesting to talk about what is not very different from each other. We both look into nature, we both see a tree, we both have an impression of the wide universe and this is something we should talk more about.