

## A Study of Cosmology and the Quran in the Traditional and Contemporary Tafseer Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Cosmology and astronomy are very important fields of modern science which have unveiled many miraculous wonders of the cosmos. Such wonders are narrated by the Quran as evidence of God's existence. The current paper is focusing cosmology and the Quran in the traditional and contemporary tafseer literature referring to all these wonders of the cosmos as signs of almighty creator. We shall discuss cosmology both as a branch of metaphysics and as a branch of scientific inquiry describing the discoveries of modern science about the cosmos in order to show that the cosmos with its great complexity and vastness is only intelligible if we consider the metaphysical aspect of the cosmos. In this connection, views of some Muslim and non-Muslim theologians, commentators and scientists would be presented to inquire the point that could the universe be understood without referring to the supernatural power. Views of scholars like Tantavi Johri, Ibni Arabi, Al-Biruni, Ibnul Qayyem, Al-Ghazali Mehdi Gulshani, Seyyed Hussain Nasr, Muzaffar Iqbal etc. are quoted on the study of cosmology.

**KEY WORDS:** cosmology, tafseer, signs, Creator, Quran, universe

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Cosmology is derived from two Greek words *kosmos* means order and harmony and *logos* means word, discourse. Cosmology is thus the science of the world inasmuch as this reflects its unique cause, Being.<sup>1</sup>

Norris S. Hetherington defines cosmology as "the science, theory or study of the universe as an orderly system and of the laws that govern it." He further adds "in particular the branch of astronomy that deals with the structure and evolution of the universe."<sup>2</sup>

According to the 'Encyclopedia of Philosophy' two main sub-groups of uses may be distinguished: those belonging to Philosophy and those to science. In its first use it is taken as a branch of metaphysics and in its second use, the term cosmology designates a science in which the joint efforts of the observational astronomer and the theoretical physicist are devoted to giving an account of the large scale universe as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

### Signs of Almighty Creator in the cosmos

The Holy Quran describes the vast universe, the heavens, the earth, the moon, the stars and the natural phenomena as signs of God. In the very first verse (*ayat*) of the Quran the word *Aalamin* is from *alam* (cosmos), derived from the same root as *alama* (mark), *alam* (sign post, banner) and *ilm* (knowledge), pointing that the cosmos is both a source of knowledge and a mark or sign of something other than itself.<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Quran uses the word signs (*aayat*) not only for its own verses (*aayat*) but for all heavenly bodies, their orderly movements, harmony and order in creation, constellations in the sky, the succession of day and night and diversity in creation and color, etc;

As the Quran is God's book displaying His Signs, similarly the whole cosmos is His book containing innumerable *aayat* (signs, proofs, and portents) for those who reflect (Al-Quran 13:3), who understand (6:98), who have intelligence (13:4), who listen (10:67), for the knowers (30:22), for the faithful (15:77), for the possessor of understanding (20:128), for possessor of true knowledge (3:190).<sup>5</sup>

There are about 1000 verses in the Holy Quran describing the wonders of creation in the cosmos (*aafaq*) and in the self (*anfus*). The famous commentator of the Quran Allama Tantavi enumerated in his Tafseer (*Jawahir fil Quran*) 750 verses of the Quran which are clearly describing the phenomena of Nature and the

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wonders of creation.<sup>6</sup>

Reference of few of those verses is given below:

*And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the living creatures that He has scattered through them (42:29).*

*And of His signs are the creation of heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors. Surely there are signs in this for the learned (30:22)*

About the vast expanse of the universe and the number of the heavens and earth, the Quran describes:

*Allah is He who created seven firmaments and of the earth a similar number. Through the midst of the them descends His command that ye may know that allah has power over all things, and Allah comprehends all things in His knowledge (65:120)<sup>7</sup>.* About the origin of the universe from Singularity, the Quran says:

*Do not unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (ratq: as one unit of creation) before we clove them asunder and We made from water every living thing, will they not then believe? (21:30)*

About making all things subservient to humans the following verses of the Quran are very clear:

*Allah is He Who created the heavens and the earth, and causes water to descend from the sky, thereby producing fruits as food for you, and makes the ships to be of service to you, that they may run upon the sea at his command, and has made of service to you the rivers; and makes the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, to be service unto you, and has made of service unto you the night and the day. And He gives you of all you ask of Him, if you would count the bounties of Allah, you cannot reckon it. Lo! Man is verily a wrong-doer, and ingrate (14:32-34).<sup>8</sup>*

The Quran describes various signs of almighty Creator in its verses for reflection and as a result bringing humans to closer to God. In this connection, the Quran narrates the story of the prophet Abraham that how his intellect enlightened by reflection on the creation of heavenly bodies and he leapt from physical phenomena of the cosmos to its metaphysical aspect, that is God. The Quran reads: *Thus did We show Abraham the kingship and wonders (malakut) of the heavens and the earth, so that he might become a firm believer(6:75).*

Similarly the Quran Says: *We Shall show them our signs upon the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that He is the Real (41:53).*

and according to the Bible:

The Eternal said [to Moses and to us to-day] : I will make all My goodness [ the wonders of creation ] pass before .... You shall see My back [as one finds, in the wake left by a boat, evidence of the boat's passage], but my face shall not be seen (Exodus 33; 20, 23).

### **Cosmos and Nature as explained by Commentators ,Theologians and Scientists**

Various Muslim scholars , commentators and theologians of the past (and present) considered the study of nature as way of seeing the signs of God in the universe. Al-Biruni, a Muslim scientist of eleventh century stated:

When a person decides to discriminate between truth and falsehood, he has to study the universe to find out whether it is eternal or created. If somebody thinks that he does not need this kind of knowledge, he is, however in need of thinking the laws that govern our world, in part or in its entirety. This leads him to know the truth about them, and paves the way for knowing the Being Who directs and controls the universe, and for knowing His attributes. This is, in fact, the kind of truth that God enjoyed His knowledgeable servants to search for, and God spoke the truth when he said, "... *And they reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth [saying]: Our Lord you have not created this in vain [3:191]*". This verse contains what I explained in detail, and if man works according to it, he can have access to all branches of knowledge and cognition."<sup>9</sup>

The same point is made by the founders of modern science. Robert Boyle stated:

When with bold telescope I surveyed the old and newly discovered stars and planets ... when with excellent microscopes; when with the help of anatomical knives and the light of chymnical furnaces I studied the book of nature, I find myself exclaiming with the psalmist. How manifold are thy works, O God, in wisdom has made them all <sup>10</sup>. Similarly, he (Boyle) said that science is a religious task, the disclosure of the admirable workmanship which God displayed in the universe<sup>11</sup>. Newton believed the universe be speaks on all powerful Creator.<sup>12</sup> Sprat, the historians of the Royal Society, considered science a valuable aid to religion<sup>13</sup>.

This view is described well in Addison's hymn:

The spacious firmament on high,  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heavens a shining frame,  
Their great Original proclaim.  
The unwearied sun from day to day,  
Does his Creator's power display,  
And publishes to every land,  
The work of almighty hand.<sup>14</sup>

Newton was also of the view that the cosmos was created by Being incorporeal, living intelligence. The passage from Newton's *Optics* is typical.

"Whence is it that nature doth nothing in vain, and whence arises all that order and beauty which we see in the world? How came the bodies of animals to be contrived with so much art, and for what ends were their several parts? Was the eye contrived without skill in optics? .... Does it not appear from phenomena that there is a Being incorporeal, living intelligence?"<sup>15</sup>

The great Muslim mystic thinker Al-Ghazali stressed on the study of nature but he had criticized those scientists who thought that science was enough to explain everything. He explained that the laws of phenomena of Nature must be constant or there could be no such thing as science, but it is great error to mistake the slaves for the master (i.e. the physicists and the astronomers confound the laws they perceive with the law giver). Therefore, science alone is not enough to give us knowledge of God. He then proceeds to criticize atheist scientists:

"There are some who, failing to find God by observation concluded that there is no God and the world made itself or existed from everlasting. They are like a man who seeing a beautifully written letter should suppose that it had written itself without a writer, or had always existed .... it is this group too, who through ignorance of the real nature of the soul, repudiate the doctrine of a future life, in which they will be called to account for their acts. They regard themselves as no better than animals and equally perishable."<sup>16</sup>

He also considered man as microcosm (and the world as macrocosm) and was of the opinion that those who wish to attain greater knowledge of God should study the cosmos, just as close study of the niceties and shades of language in a great poem reveals to us more and more of the genius of its author.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, according to the great theologian Ibn-al-Qayyim:

"He (God) did lay down for His creatures various landmarks, and erected for them compelling signs and made clear for them the most evident of pointers, so that those who are destined to perish should perish by clear proof of his sovereignty, and those who survive should survive by clear evidence."<sup>18</sup>

The great mystic Sheikh Ibn-al-Arabi was of the opinion that the cosmos and the self are the two realities within which the Real Self-disclosure may be witnessed. According to Sheikh Ibn-al-Arabi : everything in cosmos is created by His word, so everything is the messenger of God. The cosmos all of it, is a book inscribed [52:2] since it is an orderly arrangements, parts of which have been joined to other parts.<sup>19</sup>

Among the contemporary Muslim thinkers and Scholars, Seyyed Hossain Nasr wrote much about Islamic spirituality and cosmology. The summary of his thoughts is given below:

"The spiritual significance of nature in Islam cannot be understood fully without considering the Islamic cosmological sciences which reveal the imprint of the one upon the manifold and relate the world of multiplicity to its unique origin. Islamic cosmology acts as bridge between metaphysical teachings of the Quranic Revelation and the particular sciences and provides the frame work whereby particular branches of knowledge can be sacralized and integrated into the supreme knowledge of the *Shahadah* [of God]. The spiritual significance of all Islamic cosmology is to provide knowledge of the cosmos so as to transform the cosmic reality from opacity to transparency, from a veil to the means of unveiling the Divine Reality, which the cosmos veils and unveils by its very nature. The goal to provide a map of the cosmic labyrinth so as to enable man to escape from the prison of limitative existence. The goal is to reveal Unity (*al-tawahid*) as reflected in the world of multiplicity [There is ultimately but one Being, one Reality, all else consisting of reflections of the Divine Names and Qualities upon the mirror of non-existence."<sup>20</sup>

Since all levels of cosmic existence belong to God, all creatures also praise Him with their very existence. The Quran says, "*The seven heavens and the earth and all that they contain praise Him*

*(as each thing is a theophany (tajalli) of Divine names and qualities) nor is there anything that does not celebrate His praise though ye understand not their praise. (Al-Quran,*

In an interview with Dr. Muzaaffar Iqbal, S.H. Nasr spoke about the modern cosmology:

Modern cosmology is an extrapolation of terrestrial Physics, based on the thesis that all laws of Physics that we have situated on the earth apply to the whole cosmos. Beside the fact that this is an extrapolation and we really do not know, it excludes any factor which can not be measured on an instrument. And therefore it is bound within the measurable world of classical physics, as well of modern physics and quantum mechanics, whereas the cosmological doctrines of Islam or any other traditional religion, are based on a total vision of reality, a reality not only of God, but also what we call the angelic or nonmaterial levels of reality which are not at all, in any way, affected by whatever we may discover about physical aspects of the cosmos .... Cosmology means the science of the cosmos and the cosmos is not limited to its material or measurable or visible aspects. These are the parts of the cosmos, but not the whole of the cosmos.<sup>21</sup>

### **Modern Cosmology and Astronomy unveiled Big Signs in the Cosmos**

The discoveries of modern cosmology and astronomy have unveiled the immense universe, in which our solar system is just a small peck. Our Milky way galaxy contains about 100 billion stars, the sun is one of them; the diameter of that galaxy is 600 quadrillion miles- yes, 600,000,000,000,000 miles! It takes light 100,000 years to cross it.<sup>22</sup> But this awesome Milky Way galaxy is just a tiny part of the whole universe. Until the 1920s that seemed to be the only galaxy. But later on, due to further advancement in modern astronomy, it became evident that more galaxies are present in the universe, more than 100 billion galaxies, each with, on average, a 100 billion stars like our sun. In all these galaxies, there are perhaps as many planets as stars,  $10^{11} \times 10^{11} = 10^{22}$ , ten billion trillion.<sup>23</sup> Most of these galaxies are too far to be seen with naked eye, and a powerful telescope is required to observe them. However, three galaxies can be seen between the constellations of the Cassiopeia Pegasus in the northern sky. It is about 20 billion billion ( $20 \times 10^{18}$ ) kilometers from the earth. This galaxy is bigger than our Milky way and consists of 150, 0000 millions (150 billion stars). The two galaxies visible in the southern sky are the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds.. The milky Way, the Andromeda, the Magellanic Clouds and 16 other galaxies form a group called the Local group.<sup>24</sup>

It is also discovered by the astronomers that the 100 billion galaxies are not distributed uniformly in the sky but in groups and clusters. The cosmos is organized to form very large bubbles having dimension of about 15 million light- years [The dimensions of the cosmos are so large that familiar units of distance such as meters or miles are insufficient, so distance is measured with the speed of light. In one second a beam of light travels 186,000 miles, nearly 300,000 kilometers. In eight minutes it will travel from sun to the earth. We can say the sun is eight light minutes away. In a year light travels ten trillion kilometers, about six trillion miles. That unit of length – the distance light travels in a year – is called a light year]<sup>25</sup>. They are called cosmic bubbles because interiorly they look virtually empty with apparently no visible matter or galaxies. The galaxies appear to present at the walls of the bubbles. One of the most important aspect of the study is the discovery of Great Wall (as called by the Geller and Huchra), this is a sheet of galaxies nearly 200 million light years wide, 500 million long and nearly 15 million light years thick. Although it appears a single structure but according to some scientists it may be made up of the walls of adjacent bubbles. Geller remarked: “Because it runs off the edge of our survey, we do not know how big it really is.”<sup>26</sup>

The survey also elaborates the observation of four strips of sky. Although science is rather tired to see the edge of the universe and to see the seven skies as mentioned in the Quran at many places, but the four strips of the skies may be different skies as mentioned in the Quran. Evidence show that the present expanding universe arose 15--20 billion years ago from a singularity. There are many questions which cannot be answered by science alone: Why that Big Bang took place at the specific moment? What was the force responsible for that? What was there before and what was outside the universe? The most complex Big Bang implies more than just a source of vast energy. Intelligent and foresight are vital because the rate of expansion seems very finely tuned ....

### **How the Cosmos began to Exist without a Creator?**

Many scientists are uncomfortable with the idea that the universe was created by some higher intelligence; speculate that by some mechanism it created itself out of nothing. This means a kind of creation without a creator.

This kind of discussion often refers to a purely physical issue, that our world originated as a fluctuation of the quantum vacuum, a process that can be explained according to the laws of physics. In this case, it is completely clear that quantum vacuum cannot be equated with the notion of “nothingness”<sup>27</sup> (also the vacuum is far from an absolute vacuum. Certain laws and fields as background must be assumed).<sup>28</sup>

Actually the origin of universe as a vacuum fluctuation was first proposed by Edward Tyron in 1973 to circumvent the notion of beginning (from the initial singularity). Similarly the steady state theory by Bondi, Gold and Hoyle and the model of the oscillating universe proposed by de Sitter, Tolman and Dicke were also of such attempts to explain the universe without a creator. Another explanation was given by J. Hartle and Stephen Hawking, by applying quantum mechanical principles to the Big Bang and making use of the concept of imaginary time, attempted to show that space-time is finite but has no boundary. Thus by negating the creation in time, they attempted to make God’s existence superfluous. Hawking says that:

“So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a Creator. But, if the universe is really self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end; it would simply be what then for a Creator?”<sup>29</sup>

According to the eminent physicist and theologian Mehdi Golshani

These attempts leave some questions unanswered. Where do the laws of physics come from? Why is there a universe in which such laws apply? Why are these laws comprehensible to us? Furthermore, the assumption of no beginning in time does not make the universe self-explanatory and independence of God.<sup>30</sup>

Paul Davies states:

The fact that the universe might have no origin in time does not explain its existence, or why it has the form it has. Certainly it does not explain why nature possesses the relevant fields (such as the creation field) and physical principles that establish the steady state condition.<sup>31</sup>

Mariana Artigas is giving the explanation of creation and existence as:

Our world began as quantum bubble --- The original quantum fluctuation could have been the result of a divine creation, but it is impossible to prove by means of physics alone, for it could also have been the result of prior physical states.

Science alone cannot prove the existence of divine creation. Indeed, from the scientific point of view we can always suppose that some state of universe elementary as it may be was the result of other preceding states. The arguments that can lead us to admit the existence of a divine creation are rather metaphysical and religious. In the thirteen century Thomas Aquinas argued that by using rational argument, we can prove that the world is created insofar as it requires divine action at its foundation, but at the same time we can not prove by rational argument that the world has had origin in time.<sup>32</sup>

William Lane Craig has argued that, on the basis of Scientific Cosmology, we could conclude that the universe began to exist:

To recapitulate: since an actual infinite cannot exist and an infinite temporal regress of events is an infinite, we can be sure that an infinite temporal regress of events can exist, that is to say, the temporal regress of events finite. Therefore, since the temporal regress of events is finite, the universe began to exist.<sup>33</sup>

The great mystery and enigma of existence can only be understood if considered some Supernatural Power because many events in creation are outside science.

St. Anselm rightly said:

“I do not seek understanding in order to believe. Rather I believe in order to understand.”<sup>34</sup>

Allan Sandage is also right in saying:

“Scientists who say that “we do not need to invoke a higher power “simply mandate away any possible explanation outside the exceedingly narrow precepts of reductionist science. Of course, *ib initio* creation itself is, by any definition of the boundaries of science, supernatural. To put all the onus of creation on an unknown creator is seen by atheists as the height of absurdity; but for others, the alternative of believing that the universe created itself is more absurd.”<sup>35</sup>

There may be three ways of trying to explain how such a big harmonious universe came into being:

1. Either it was made, or created or caused by nothing at all.
2. or it is created itself
3. or it has a creator, cause or maker outside itself

The first and second explanations are obviously impossible. It is inconceivable for something that has a beginning in time to come out of or be made of nothing at all. It is also inconceivable that it should bring itself into being. The universe (and all living things in it) therefore could not have been created itself nor did it come about by chance as we observed in the preceding pages the complexity of the universe. The conclusion then is clear. The universe and all living things owe their existence to a Creator or a Maker outside the universe. Dr Muzaffar Iqbal aptly puts the point as:

Islam shares its cosmos with the other two monotheistic religions (Christianity and Judaism) by saying that God is the originator of everything that exists. In Islam, this creative act of God, through a simple command, Kun (Be), became the subject matter of Islamic cosmogony. Since all things exist through and because of God, their ontological dependence on the creator simultaneously ennobles them by raising their status from mere being things to signs (Ayat) of a transcendent Real (Al Haqq), who nevertheless remain beyond them. This cosmos is made up of both physical as well as non physical beings according to a grand scheme, conceived and executed by the creator. The ultimate destination of this created cosmos is a secret that God shares with none. However the Quran insists that humans discover the modalities through which nature works.<sup>36</sup>

It draws attention to the regularities, beneficence and design of various observable natural processes through concrete examples drawn from the world of nature. These processes fall in the domain of various scientific disciplines such as astronomy, physics, mathematics, geology and botany. But when studied in their proper metaphysical context, these processes become means to gain knowledge of that which lies behind the laws that govern them. This Quranic invitation to reflect on these natural processes is repeated with such urgency that the spatiotemporal plane which contains the word of nature seems to form the very background of the Quranic universe.<sup>37</sup>

This fact, besides all religious teachings, also authenticated and endorsed by eminent scholars of the past and of the current eras as we discussed in this paper.

Klaus Dose a German scientist observed: "At present all discussions on Principal theories and experiments in the field either end in stalemate or in a confession of ignorance".<sup>38</sup>

Another scientist after observing complexity of nature says:

...All this demands a planner and a sustainer of infinite intelligence. The simplest man-made mechanism requires a planner and a maker. How a mechanism ten thousand times more evolved and intricate can be conceived as self-constructed and self developed, is completely beyond me."<sup>39</sup>

At this point I am compelled to quote the words of the Arabic desert nomad about the almighty creator, which are although much simpler, but much profound and adequate for this occasion. He said:

*"That Camel droppings point to existence of a camel. Footprints on the sand tell of a traveler. The heavens with all its (billions and trillions) of stars, the earth with its mountains and valleys and the seas with all its waves (and other diverse living creatures in it) – don't they point to the Maker, all-Powering, Knowing, Wise and Caring".*<sup>40</sup>

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