INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS AN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

by James F. Moore

Abstract. I explore the contributions of Ibrahim Moosa, a Muslim legal scholar, to a Muslim-Christian dialogue on religion and science. Moosa begins from the context of *Shari'a*, Islamic law, and not from the usual issues of the religion-science dialogue. Beginning as it does from a legal tradition, the approach suggests a perspective on science and religion that is particular to Islam and provides insight into how an authentic dialogue between Muslims and Christians would proceed—and thereby an alternative model for a religion-science dialogue.

Keywords: ethics; Islam; law; Ibrahim Moosa; *Shari'a*.

Several years ago I started a project with my father, an astrophysicist at St. Cloud State University, which aimed at creating a dialogue between religion and science through a conversation between a scientist and a theologian. That project continues, and the most significant question that has emerged thus far from my father is what to do with the measurement problem. In fact, he argues, this is the central problem for modern science on all accounts and certainly the most troubling matter facing quantum physics. To construct a dialogue requires dealing with this problem after deciding just what the problem is.

I also recall a debate that arose in an advanced seminar at the Zygon Center for Religion and Science in which Tom Gilbert, especially, claimed that the notion of uncertainty is merely a measurement problem. Contrary to some interpretations that argue that uncertainty is an aspect of quantum reality, this position places the problem with the observer and the instruments that are not capable of or designed to account for the

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actual quantum reality. Some might argue then that what we now call uncertainty will somehow be explained fully when we do have such an instrument for measurement. I do not want to take this discussion in that direction or focus attention upon this particular question, however. I want to point out that again the issue is, as with my father's assessment, seen as a measurement problem.

My concern, as a theologian, is focused on religion and how we measure what the religions have to say about any topic, including the topics that generally emerge in religion-science dialogues. In fact, we seem to have a measurement problem in assessing and giving accounts of religious views as well. How we deal with this problem will determine precisely how and which religious perspective plays into the science-and-religion dialogue. The problem in our giving religious accounts is actually at least twofold. First, we need to give religious accounts that can fully incorporate religious pluralism, not only the wide diversity of religions that have significant numbers of followers around the globe but also the pluralism that exists within every religious tradition. A second measurement problem may be more challenging and analogous to the uncertainty problem in quantum physics. Religions are also changing and complex not only and even not especially on the level of ideas but in their very reality. It is not possible to identify a single Christianity, for example, because religions are dynamic, often taking into their living reality (that is, in the world of becoming and experiencing and acting of religious people) the ambiguities produced by conflicting views, motivations, and understandings that do not sit still. Indeed, the elusiveness of religion as it is lived and insofar as it is lived by people is surely as difficult to come to terms with as the elusiveness of electrons and other particles of matter on the quantum level. But the point is that measurement and what we choose to measure religion or religiosity with will determine how we as observers/interpreters come to explain religion as a partner in a religion-science dialogue.

Briefly: The Case in Point

I was struck by this problem as I read the various essays in the important volume *God, Life, and the Cosmos: Christian and Islamic Perspectives* (2002) edited by Ted Peters, Muzaffar Iqbal and Syed Nomanul Haq.[1] In particular, I noticed the dramatic difference between essays in most of the volume and the one contributed by Ibrahim Moosa on Islamic jurisprudence (pp. 329ff.). In fact, the difference is so noteworthy that one has to ask whether there is an entirely different instrument used for understanding religion. We might think about this entire volume in light of this question. If Moosa's essay is not merely one more like contribution to Islam's role in the conversation but is rather a completely distinct way of thinking about religion, we might discover two different approaches both to interreligious conver-

sations and to the science-religion dialogue. In fact, these two dialogues when brought together reveal the limits of our understanding both of an interfaith conversation and of the role of the religions in a dialogue with the sciences.

So let me describe the difference briefly before turning to an analysis of both the essays in this book, with a focus on Moosa, and the larger question of understanding and interpreting religion. Most of the essays, and contributions by religious thinkers to the science-religion dialogue itself, are focused on the intellectual history of the religious traditions and concentrate on several key ideas within a religious intellectual history. Such is the standard theological model for thinking about religions as storehouses of ideas and beliefs built on those ideas passed from generation to generation. Those who think about these ideas and beliefs from generation to generation attempt to rethink them in the context of the current life of the religious community. This means that new ways of thinking about these ideas will constantly emerge even to the point of fashioning ways of thinking about the intellectual histories that are in striking contrast to ways that have been previously suggested as authentic interpretations of the intellectual tradition. There will be a pluralism of interpretations and a conflict between interpretations that naturally unfold as part of this approach, and the question always is on what basis we decide upon relatively adequate ways of interpreting the traditions (see Tracy 1981; 1987; Ricoeur 1976). We can assume that multiple ways of thinking can coexist with each other within this plurality and ongoing conflict, but what is assumed is that there is a tradition of ideas, most of which can generally be presumed to constitute the intellectual history, and there is a basic agreement on what stand as criteria for judging what are adequate interpretations.

Of course, we can merely assume that religious law is simply one of the areas within this intellectual tradition, and a treatment of the law in this way would follow the same pattern as the interpretation of any other component of the intellectual history. That is, it would emerge from the constellation of ideas which are the tradition, and it would be judged as authentic by the same criteria—for example, within Christianity by the basic principles that are found within sacred texts (the Christian Bible). The use of the word jurisprudence, however, suggests that law is understood in this case as part of a legal system that has a life quite distinct from the intellectual history. This is surely true of *Shari'a*, the Muslim religious law, and other similar legal systems that actually function as rules for both conduct and legal judgments within an ongoing, living community. Indeed, the *Shari'a*, and the *halacha* in Judaism, are sets of legal precedents developed as much as responses to the needs for rules within a society as they are responses to basic tenets of belief. They are separate systems and represent religious traditions separate from the intellectual history. It is also not clear that new developments in Islamic (or Jewish, for that matter)

jurisprudence occur at all using the criteria that are ordinarily applied to systems of beliefs.

Thus, we are left with a quandary. Which of these traditions actually best characterizes what we loosely mean when we identify a people as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim? In fact, we are likely to conclude that the legal tradition has more to do with what is known to be Muslim for those living within distinctly Muslim societies than is the intellectual history. Moosa's intent, I believe, is, in part, to approach science and religion in a way that fully shows this distinctive character of Muslim society (see, for example, Moosa 2002, 332, 355). And if we have two distinct ways of "measuring" what is Islam, which tool is more accurate as an instrument for measurement? If we extend this question, we must also ask whether there is such a distinction within the various forms of Christianity, especially since there is no longer a clear example of a uniformly Christian society in the same way that we could speak of Islamic jurisprudence playing a role in Iran or even the extent to which certain aspects of *halacha* play a role in Israel. For now, let me suggest that for Christians, especially in America, religion is most clearly associated with the regular patterns of worship and not so much with the intellectual histories of the various Christian denominations. This brief initial analysis will help us as we turn now to look at the essay by Moosa and link it with the other essays in the book.

MOOSA'S MODEL

Moosa's essay stands out from the others not only because of its starting point, jurisprudence, but also in terms of its argument. The conclusions drawn from his analysis are interesting in their own right: that Islamic jurists tend to use the traditional language of Islamic law and its history of interpretations to resolve debates on contemporary issues and not details of contemporary biology, for example, in the case of organ transplantation or brain death. This shows a discontinuity that must be taken into account if we actually believe that we are having a dialogue between science and religion. Still, it is the line of argumentation that shows the reader a different kind of model for thinking about issues of overlap between religion and science. The actual case studies of organ transplantation and brain death are good ways of highlighting these differences.

The initiation of a discussion in many cases is a *fatwah*, an opinion offered by a leading Islamic jurist on a particular question in the community. Of course, the *fatwah* is given as a consequence of intense intellectual reflection on the legal tradition by a number of legal scholars and not on a consideration of what are the accepted medical or biological details. But this can happen because there is an implicit "bodily cosmology" in Islam, which already gives clues about which sections of the tradition one consults regarding a question. This cosmology is usually rooted in a way of thinking about the world that is not challenged or even consulted as a way

of thinking through a problem. Thus, the practice is not like the way many Christian theologians consult biblical texts in order to begin a discussion of a current issue since the Bible is often not only a beginning point but is also a guide toward what might be the final aims of any discussion. The Bible becomes a way of opening the debate about possible reinterpretations of the biblical texts for the sake of fashioning a point of view. Often these reinterpretations are derived in part by consulting and taking account of current known scientific data. Forming a *fatwah* does not function in that way, because a particular issue is not an invitation to reinterpret the *Qur'an* but rather a guide pointing to what portions of the legal tradition apply to the debate.

The discussion about organ transplantation, therefore, takes place entirely within the confines of the various legal opinions that apply. The only actual impact of current science on this process is the reality of some new technology that presents a legal question. Actually, this process is similar to the way legal decisions are made in many Jewish circles. Thus, we can presume that the approach is more widely characteristic of religions than simply of the Islamic system of jurisprudence. If the actual details of medical technologies are not crucial to producing a legal interpretation, what is crucial? How are actual decisions made regarding what is certainly known as a problem presented by contemporary medical science?

Two criteria seem to be critical in the process. First, much depends on the presumed authority of the particular jurist. I would think that such a decision could not likely be trusted to a non-jurist and that the more prominent a jurist is the more likely that the interpretation would be widely accepted. Thus, a hierarchy of authority is critical. But this is not all. The process also requires some consonance with the legal tradition; it must fit with what has been accepted as legal opinion in the past. This model seems to be similar to the canon law tradition in the Roman church. There is, then, a conserving criterion that functions in the decision process: new opinions must conserve the essence of the accepted legal tradition.

Both of these criteria are evident in the two examples that Moosa gives, one from Pakistan and the other from Egypt, in considering the question of organ transplantation. The group in Pakistan balances the question of the good benefits with the basic principle that one should do no harm. The conclusion is that the principle of doing no harm is a higher priority. The scholars in Egypt presume that there is no precedent in Islamic law on organ transplants that would decide this issue, choosing rather to follow the basic principle of deciding on what brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The Egyptian scholars argue, then, that organ transplantation is acceptable in some cases. We can see that the decision is based in both cases on legal principles rather than on scientific information as such. Clearly, this legal process allows for quite different opinions and with that the flexibility to constantly address issues in a fresh way.

This model also functions rather strongly in any discussion about how Islam responds to modern science. The relationship is not antagonistic, but the role that the opinions of leading scientists play in actually determining what is an acceptable Islamic view would be minimized in this approach. No science can be acceptable if it is not consonant with the accepted tradition. Still, as Moosa has ably shown, the notion of tradition is somewhat slippery, not in the sense that I have presented thus far but rather as a result of this very process. It would be incorrect to assume that there is a single, unambiguous, universally accepted Muslim view on most questions, as the case examples illustrate. The tradition is a complex of various opinions all of which can play into the way that any jurist approaches a question. There is a wide sense of flexibility in the juridical tradition (as with most legal traditions) that can lead to surprising results. In this process of selecting what of the various and perhaps contradicting opinions a jurist might accept and use, we might suspect that the jurist's attitude about the issue at hand can be important, even decisive. It is unlikely, however, that this subjective element would give priority to a positive view or a negative view of science. Rather, the dominant factor remains consonance with the legal tradition.

Moosa does offer a slight revision based on a recovery of a Muslim thinker, Ghazali, which leads Moosa to assert that the legal tradition may have a discerning function (that is, do more than render judgments about particular problems but rather also provide ways of thinking about the self, body, world, society, the spirit, and so forth). This, too, is an odd insertion, since it seems to open the door to a "scientific" mentality in the legal practice, but Moosa does not make this an academic function. It is rather a social function of Islamic jurisprudence, what Moosa calls the ritual function of the law. The point is not to turn the legal considerations into an abstract academic exercise regarding philosophical questions but quite the opposite: to make sure that the legal tradition remains connected with people, the community.

Other Approaches

Of course, Moosa could be interested in promoting a more metaphysical foundation for juridical decisions, and Islam has a rich history of this kind of activity, as evidenced by other essays in this volume—for example Ahmed Dallal (Peters, Iqbal, and Haq 2002, 197ff.) or Mehdi Golshani (pp. 223ff.). Golshani offers a systematic examination of an Islamic view of cosmology accounting for current scientific views. His essay does follow the pattern that is commonly found in the science-religion dialogue and shows that Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, can draw from a rich philosophical tradition that enables thinkers to develop new positions with regard to new knowledge. Indeed, Islam seems to encourage such ongoing revision

of views with this type of analysis of the tradition. Golshani's essay complements Moosa's legal approach by offering a philosophical analysis as yet another component of the rich Muslim intellectual tradition. However, if we presumed that Moosa was doing this kind of reflection, Moosa's essay would seem closer to the way that religion-science dialogues have been shaped in the past, with an effort to make current science seem consistent with the historical religious tradition. This does not seem to be Moosa's point even as he wonders about a more scientifically literate approach to decisions. He does not indicate that he hopes that jurists would accept the authority of a scientific view of reality as a part of making religious judgments or even understanding those judgments, even though he can use such views to understand what the questions are and how they need to be addressed.

The problem may be that Moosa's aim or focus is not what has often consumed the science-religion dialogue in many places. That is, Moosa is interested in quite another set of issues, which I contend arises from the fact that he is considering another dimension of religion altogether, quite distinct from the realm of beliefs and abstract discussions of those beliefs. Indeed, he is not approaching Islam as other discussions of critical social issues often do in Protestant or even more broadly Christian circles. Moosa is attempting to understand the logic of the religious law which fits into the religious world in a different way than do beliefs or even efforts to understand how beliefs help individuals draw conclusions about ethical issues such as genetic engineering or cloning.

Bruce Lincoln (2003, 5ff.) argues that the complexity of religions requires a complex definition that defies efforts to create simplistic and, thus, monolithic understandings of what are very complex phenomena. He defines religion heuristically, using four categories that may not be fully compatible with each other principally because of the way each fits as a component of religions. The first of those components is a discourse that forms a worldview and needs to be reinterpreted in each new era. Second, religions are also sets of practices that "produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects" (Lincoln 2003, 6) which are linked to the religious discourse but are not necessarily dependent on the worldview that the religious discourse constructs. Third, there are institutions that regulate these practices and may not do so on the basis of the same interests as those who interpret the religious discourse or who attempt to make sense of the religious worldview. Fourth, there is the community, composed of individuals who collectively and individually construct their own identities in connection to both the discourse and the practices.

Two factors emerge rather obviously from this definition. First, each of these components is linked to the others, but the various ways that conclusions are drawn—that is, what exactly it means to religious practitioners (Christian or Jewish or Muslim)—often are dictated by different criteria

that emphasize the importance of particular portions of the complex traditions that may not be so clearly central for other aspects of what a religion is and does. Thus, what might work as an approach to thinking about worldview may actually be completely unacceptable when determining religious practice or understanding how religious institutions function and for what reasons. Even more, it is likely that an effort to apply metaphysical thinking to institutional decision making would not work at all in many cases. The path often seen as the religion-science dialogue would be an intrusion of no particular help to the process of constructing practical decisions and individual living identities.

Second, and more directly connected with my analysis, any religion is likely to change its look dramatically when the focus shifts from one component to another and another component is taken to be the central defining element of the religion. Religion and its relation to the sciences will be seen in ways often incompatible with other views because one component rather than another is taken to be of central importance in understanding what it means to be religious. All of this depends on what is used to "measure" the religion.

Now, both of these points seem to be critical to Moosa's analysis, because he is not only taking a novel (to us, not to him) approach to the religion-science dialogue, but he is traveling a distinct path in understanding what is critical for religious self-understanding. Above all, any effort to suggest that the problematic features of Islamic jurisprudence could be resolved by making jurists more scientifically literate and increasing the authoritative role of science in making legal judgments would blind us to the fact that Moosa is suggesting that, for many if not most Muslims, the practical dimension linked with the religious institutions is central for defining Islam. By not accounting for this apparent but subtle point, any of us might fail to measure his arguments clearly, mistaking the point for just another version of problems the dialogue has often dealt with in the past.

Implications for Multifaith Dialogue

That different religious people can view the religion-science dialogue in very different ways because it is a measurement problem is an important discovery that may help us not pass each other like ships in the night. But this discovery also adds a valuable ingredient to multifaith dialogue. It may be that different religions emphasize different components of what is the complex religious web, thus creating very different religious points of view. But such dialogue functions as a process, which is itself evolutionary. The contact between different traditions creates the possibility for a kind of cross-fertilization that enables each of us to see that what is being said by our dialogue partners has critical meaning for our own religious understanding. We see what we have not seen before and in ways we have not seen before. The dialogue may change us so that we cannot even see as we

did before, at least not in the same way. But this cannot happen unless we are prepared to hear with openness and not with the idea of fitting a viewpoint into the way we have grown accustomed to thinking.

An Afterthought

As I reflect on the direction of a science-religion dialogue that takes the religions seriously, it seems that the way of thinking about religion that is so regularly in keeping with Islam is much more in line with the more broadly examined perspectives of the various religions. That Protestant Christianity focuses attention centrally upon beliefs and the need to maintain a coherent belief system seems rather odd compared with the more pronounced emphasis on ethics and religion as lived values found in many religious traditions. The text *The Quantum and the Lotus*, which takes on a dialogue between a former biologist turned Buddhist monk and a Thai Buddhist become astrophysicist, makes it clear that this focus on ethics is precisely the rationale for engaging a conversation with the sciences (Ricard and Thuan 2001, 267ff.). Indeed, Buddhism appears to view the whole matter as a journey toward full recognition that human wholeness and right living is true enlightenment and that the study of the sciences is and can be only a pathway toward relinquishing the notion that truth can be found by observing appearances in the world.

This view is not the same as that presumed in the approach we see in the Moosa essay by any means, but the point is clear. Religions engage the sciences in most of the religious traditions as a road back to ethics and a life lived in harmony with religious principles. This means that those of us who follow the standard model for developing a religion-and-science dialogue, which has been influenced by the views of mostly Protestant Christian thinkers, are challenged to rethink how we do things by this alternative model which we see in Moosa's essay. Indeed, even when we observe how Jewish thinkers have contributed to the larger religion-science dialogue, for example Norbert Samuelson (1994; 2002), we find the same tendency. For Samuelson, the point of a dialogue with science is finally to uncover a uniquely Jewish position, and this is embedded in Jewish tradition. In fact, for Samuelson, the findings of cosmology, relevant as they are for views of space and time, add nothing to a notion of the good (1994, 261). Furthermore, Samuelson is not fully convinced that for a Jewish perspective cosmology is of any great advantage over earlier philosophies such as that of Plato. His concern seems also to be that the whole discussion is turned back to ethics.

We must be careful in our assessment, of course. All of these religious thinkers are quite able to engage in a philosophical conversation about religious beliefs and worldview, which is so often the way the science-religion dialogue is structured. Indeed, the essays contributed by other Muslim scholars in *God, Life, and the Cosmos* do quite well in taking up what

have been standard concerns for the dialogue (even though we notice quickly that the aim is to draw centrally on the leading Muslim thinkers of the tradition and not so much on contemporary Muslim thought). This engagement, however, masks a reality that can be missed. We might not see in this capacity to regard the questions of worldview as central that the interest of these thinkers remains how any such abstract thinking can lead us closer to living life by the will of Allah. The question may actually be, Just how capable are those who have regularly thought of the dialogue between science and religion along the lines of the work of Protestant thinkers to change course and consider religion and science in such a way that makes the agenda of religious living the aim of doing science? If we can do that, I think that a real and invigorating multifaith dialogue awaits us.

NOTE

1. The essays in this volume represent a dialogue that took place at a conference in Islamabad, Pakistan, 6–9 November 2000, sponsored by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Berkeley, California.

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