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Reason and Revelation

Development of objective criteria to evaluate the authenticity of revelation

My proposition in a nutshell is the following:

It is important for mankind to answer the "Big Questions".

Human intellect and science cannot answer these by bottom-up thinking, because most of these lie outside the reach of the intellect and the methods and reach of science.

To answer these questions, one needs outside help, from the designer and builder of the system itself i.e. top-down knowledge direct from the Creator. The question arises: how do we know there is such a Designer/Creator? The answer is, of course we do not and cannot know, except if the Designer/Creator has thought it fit to answer that for us.

So our search boils down to seeing if such an answer exists. If so, where and how can we find the answer and determine its authenticity. This calls for a SETI-like search based on reason and evidence.

Revelation has claimed to be from just such a Designer/Creator. But there are umpteen claimants of revelation. Which of these, if any, is genuine and authentic?

Science has given us rational tests for practically everything from gold, diamonds, gravity to neutrinos. Why can we not devise tests for evaluating the authenticity of claimed revelations?

Just such an effort has been made by this author for a start, which has been published in the September 2008 issue of the journal Zygon which is reproduced here for the reader's convenience.

You are invited, even urged, to study the proposed criteria and suggest ways of improving them. This cannot be a one-person show; a

cooperative effort from keen minds of all faiths, or for that matter of no faith, is needed to establish objective tests and yardsticks to answer this most basic of questions, which alone can allow us to answer whether or not there is a Creator and where can we find that guidance to answer our "Big Questions".

Development of objective criteria to evaluate the authenticity of revelation

by Tariq Mustafa

Abstract. Science has been dazzlingly successful in explaining nature. Scientific advances also have led to certain undesirable, though unintended, side effects, one of which is alienation from the spiritual. Revelation comes from the Divine. But what is the status of authenticity of a particular piece claimed to be revelation? What is its historical validity and current state of preservation? This essay proposes to develop a list of rational criteria, in consultation with all stakeholders, for addressing the subject. The aim is to bring objectivity into this discourse by placing it more on the turf of reason rather than basing it on considerations of faith and prior allegiance.

Keywords: authentic revelation; Creator; evaluative framework; falsifiable statements; logical criteria; rational evidence; reason; revelation; SETI project; unfavorable side effects of science.

Many modern humans, because of the scintillating successes of science, have fallen into the trap of thinking that scientific method is all-powerful. However, they find themselves lost in many ways. I argue that alongside the powerful scientific method, which uses humankind's intellectual capabilities, there is another valid source of knowledge: knowledge through divine revelation. These two sources, rather than conflicting, as some believe, positively reinforce, supplement, and complement each other. But this is so only if the revelation under consideration is authentic revelation from the Creator of the Universe, in pristine and unspoiled original condition, without any admixture of human thought.

With so many claims to revelation floating about, how is one to pick out authentic revelation from the rest? To answer this question in this age of reason, we must use a rational yardstick. Using both reason and revelation can give humans the guidance and information we need to save us from the pitfalls of earlier brilliant civilizations and bring out the potential that can usher in a golden age of living at peace with ourselves, our fellow beings, and our environment.

Just as there are physical laws governing the working of the universe, there are moral laws governing human activities that are far more important for the well-being of humans and society. Both sources, on reflection, lead to an evolutionary outlook regarding the development of humankind from inanimate to animate matter culminating in a unique being. The distinguishing feature of evolution appears to be increasing degrees of freedom, and this will not end with death. The essence of human personality, that is, the soul, freed from the constraints of the material body, will continue its onward march. Only by harnessing the intellect within the overall framework of divine revelation can humankind develop its potential and meet the increasing challenges of tomorrow to ensure the survival and full growth of the human civilization.

Scientific successes and unintended consequences

Development of the scientific method along with advances in technology over the last three centuries, coupled with the symbiosis of science and technology during the twentieth century, have changed our world. From a steady, slowly changing system the world has entered a new phase in which rapid change is the order of the day, and those societies that have failed to climb on the bandwagon have been left behind or marginalized. Science and technology with their dazzling successes have given humankind not only a fascinating, deeper, and much better understanding of the universe and all material things but also unprecedented control over the environment. Humans have learned to move faster, fly farther, exploit the environment, produce more food, communicate globally, and reach for the moon and the

planets and even beyond. Simultaneously, advances in medicine and health sciences along with increased supply of food have resulted in a sharp rise in population that still continues, despite all the Malthusian warnings, and in the opinion of some the population has already crossed the point of an optimum size for our planet.

These successes have had three unintentional consequences—much like the "miracle" drugs and antibiotics that today are recognized to have undesirable side effects that until fairly recently were not obvious. Two ill effects of science are generally accepted and recognized, but the third is increasingly controversial and needs to be addressed more seriously.

The first concerns the deteriorating quality of our environment. When world population levels were low and humankind's scientific and technological capabilities were limited, any damage that the activities of humans could levy on Earth, wittingly or unwittingly, could be easily repaired by the self-healing and -preserving actions and cycles of "Gaia," mother Earth.

However, with the exponential increase in population and our far greater technological capabilities, the world's ecological system can easily be destabilized beyond the point of no return. Humankind can end up doing irreparable damage to our environment, spelling doom for our progeny.

The second has to do with the stresses and strains arising out of inequities and inequalities, such as those between the haves and the have-nots, leading to the creation of steep differences in economic development around the world. In natural systems, such disparities and gradients are taken care of by periodic earthquakes and storms that relieve the pressure and stress concentrations. In human societies, this role has been played by revolutions and wars, which are becoming increasingly costly with the presence of weapons of mass destruction. The fantastic increase in human capabilities in the areas of travel, communication, trade, and commerce has not been matched by equivalent developments in political, social, and cultural institutions.

The result has been increasing tension at the societal level and strife at the international level, giving rise to new terrorist phenomena such as aerial hijackings and suicide bombings that the world community is still trying to understand, subdue, and control—without marked success or optimism.

The third, more controversial but arguably more pernicious, consequence of scientific developments has included a move away from traditional moral values, increases in materialism and atheism, and alienation from the spiritual. These have come about more from historical causes and not because developments in science necessarily led to them. Let me emphasize that blame for these effects cannot be laid at the door of science or the scientific method, which by itself is a powerful and desirable tool but is considered to be of neutral moral value. Rather, it was our failure as humans to use this knowledge properly that allowed these consequences to develop.

Physical, biological, and sociological sciences

Reason, working through the methodology of modern science, has banished a lot of superstitious and incorrect beliefs. The place of science is assured. It has had stunning successes in explaining the mysteries of the physical world. In the areas of mathematics and physics, its dominance is complete. In biological sciences such as biology and physiology it is not quite that confident, however, and in social sciences such as psychology and sociology it is on an even less sure footing. This difference most likely results from the fact that biological and sociological fields do not allow experimental conditions to be easily isolated from extraneous effects and ambient factors to be controlled, which is required for scientific experimentation. There is also the question of time. Controlled experiments in these areas, even if they were possible, would take a long time, particularly in sociology where it could take a generation or longer, to yield findings. Science has not yet developed—and it is not certain that it ever can—satisfactory tools and techniques to handle such experiments. Moreover, there is the distinct possibility that some such experiments

in the field of sociology could go out of control and cause unnecessary misery extending well beyond the participants, even causing widespread suffering. This actually happened not so long ago in the case of Adolf Hitler's Aryan-superiority claim. Excesses of the French Revolution could be cited as another example of such tragedies where good intentions ran amok.

And yet these are the very areas of knowledge that are of central concern to humankind. Relationships among peoples, nations, and the international community, as well as economic and gender issues, are what are in most need of addressing. With the increase in population and more and more powerful and invasive technologies, safeguarding our environment and assuring survival of the human race, or at least avoiding a serious breakdown of civilization as we know it, has become imperative.

Interestingly, it is this very realm of human development that falls within the preserve of revelation.

Revelation

Revelation has lost ground in recent years in face of the onslaught of science and through human interference, exploitation, lack of preservation, and tampering of revelation by those with vested interests. The traditional methodology of revelation is guidance and the transmission of messages through an inspired chosen messenger. It is a top-down process that calls for belief in the existence of a Creator.

Throughout history there have been many cases of claimed revelation. Some of the better-known ones are:

- The Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu scriptures
- Zend Avesta and Dasatir of the Zoroastrians
- The Torah of the Jews
- The Bible of Christianity
- Al Qur'an of Islam
- Guru Granth of the Sikhs

- Book of Mormon, of the Latter-day Saints
- "Revealed Text" of the Baha'is

Scientific knowledge and revelation

All scientific knowledge, by its own definition, is relative. It keeps growing continuously with new discoveries and new ideas. Revelation, coming from the All-Knowing Creator in order to serve its avowed purpose, by definition has to provide absolute guidance and not be relative or questionable. This is a red flag, of course, for skeptics who are not prepared to accept anything in human affairs as absolute.

It may seem surprising, but here the atheists are right, and I fully agree with the contention of the skeptics. Nothing originating from human endeavors, be it science or philosophy, a practical system of government, or an ideology, including a religion, can ever be perfect or claim to be based on absolute values. No human effort, however good or widely accepted, can be termed perfect or absolute. It will perforce remain relative. It will always be open to question and subject to revision and improvement. The point to note is that authentic revelation, as defined in this essay, is not of human origin. It is top-down guidance claiming to originate from the superintelligent Designer, Creator, and Sustainer of the Universe including humankind. Now, who could know the nature of humans and their role and place in the universe better than the Creator? (We will address the concerns of those who doubt or deny the existence of the Creator shortly. At this stage of the discussion, it is requested that they go along for the purpose of following the line of reasoning being pursued.) For those who accept the Creator, surely there can be no other logical position, especially if it were to be found that the Creator says precisely that in revelation. Indeed, in the Qur'an, God states: "This Divine writ—let there be no doubt about it—is a guidance for all the God-conscious" (Al Qur'an 2:2, translated by Muhammad Asad). At another place in the Qur'an God proclaims, "Step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high the Divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there still remains [of earlier revelations] for it is He who has bestowed from on

high the Torah and the Injil (Gospel) aforetime, as a guidance unto mankind, and it is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which to discern the true from the false" (Al Qur'an, 3:3–4).

Revelation and the creator

How do we know that the Creator exists and that the so-called revelation is from the Creator? These are the million-dollar questions that lie at the heart of the problem and that I aim to answer here. Clearly, a satisfactory answer for the skeptics cannot come from the vantage point of faith. The answer has to be based on rational evidence and sound arguments that can stand the scrutiny of objective examination—similar, for example, to the efforts being made by NASA in their Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project. We can follow the methodology of science to help us with this search by laying down strict criteria for evaluation of even such a seemingly preposterous claim. It should be possible for us as rational beings to formulate such criteria.

I propose to answer the above questions by reversing their order—establishing criteria that can help us evaluate the authenticity of revelation and thus establish its origin leading to the existence of the Creator. Although we have no way of directly confirming the existence of a Creator on the basis of reasoning alone, we do have access to the self-proclaimed owner's manual of divine revelation. Using our reason, we certainly can hope to, at least in principle, test and verify the claims and content of such revelation. If it turns out that it is in fact something unique and beyond the capabilities and reach of human beings, we should be willing, as reasonable people, to accept this as sufficient evidence of the existence of the Creator.

Only God, as the Designer, Builder, and Maintainer of the Universe and of humankind, can truly know God's creation. Thus, knowledge emanating from God by definition will be like the instructions given in an owner's manual that we all recognize are ignored at our own peril. Reason is rightly unwilling to give absolute status to an idea or

instruction emanating from any human source, however high and mighty it may seem, but it cannot logically deny that status to something emanating from the Creator and Designer, because none else can know the system better.

Revelation: criteria for evaluation

Let us try to lay down strict and demanding criteria in consultation with all stakeholders, both believers and atheists (who are again asked to bear with this line of reasoning for the present). If it turns out that the agreed-upon criteria are not met by any of the proclaimed revelations, the atheist point of view will stand vindicated. In the other case, they should be willing to review their position (as recently happened, at least partially, in the case of atheism's guru, Antony Flew[1]). The important requirement is to maintain objectivity and intellectual honesty in conducting this exercise. Let the results of the study show what the reality is.

With this aim in mind, I make an initial attempt here to draft the outline of such criteria. I present it to thoughtful people of all persuasions to try to make some progress in the spirit of a truly objective inquiry. Readers are asked to review the draft criteria and give their comments and suggestions for tightening and improving them, keeping in mind the objectives outlined above. Whatever preconceived points of view we may hold should not be allowed to impinge on objectivity in this exercise. Extremism should be avoided, and the exercise should not be turned into a polemical, partisan, or merely academic one for its own sake or to promote preconceived notions. There is too much at stake.

My suggested evaluation criteria are as follows:

1. The revelation should be in a clear, intelligible, and understandable language, having some exceptional literary and other qualities—worthy of its sublime source, befitting the Creator. It must carry the stamp of the superintelligent Creator and be demonstrably so.

2. It should be consistent and free of any contradictions.

3. It should have depth of meaning so that it can simultaneously cater to the needs of both farmer and philosopher.

4. Its appeal must be based on rational grounds and must not call for blind faith.

5. It should retain its form, original language, and text to maintain its veracity for future generations and be attributable to the Divine.

6. It should carry convincing evidence of its divine, not human, origin and content.

7. It should contain information, or pointers, that can be verified or falsified, for example signs, predictions, or comments about the universe we live in and about the nature of humankind.

8. It should contain guidance, information, laws, and/or instructions that help humankind with its individual and community existence, assist and guide its development, and protect it from unnecessary strife.

9. Determine whether it contains any evidence of a fundamental and genuine code similar to the one, for example, being searched for by NASA specialists in their SETI project.

10. It should contain meaningful, useful, and convincing information about the existence and attributes of the Creator, about afterlife (whether there is one or not), and relationship of humans with their Creator.

11. The character, conduct, and behavior of the bearer of the message should display the impeccable standards befitting the lofty status of such a messenger.

12. It should clarify the role and status of other claimants existing before it was revealed, and correct and rectify their significant errors and/or distortions.

13. There should be a built-in mechanism of renewal, replacement, or preservation of the revelation to retain continuity and authority. The

essential contents of the guidance should reach all peoples and be valid for all times.

14. It should focus on the welfare of humanity and identify desirable pathways in the march of humankind toward genuine progress with guiding signposts.

15. Ultimately, as recipients of divine guidance, humankind should be able to ask: What influence did the revelation have on humankind in general, and how has it stood the test of time?

Once such criteria have been broadly developed in consultation with the scientific and religious communities of different hues, the next stage of the exercise would be to use the list in judging the extent to which any claimed revelation meets the standard. Anyone would be free to conduct such an exercise and place the results for discussion and debate before acknowledged peers, as is the custom in sciences, for study and verification/falsification. This way, an agreed-upon framework would have been developed to move toward answering the question of whether there is a Creator and divine guidance and, if so, where such revelation can be found. In the end, it is such guidance that is needed to help humanity in its quest for progress, internal and external development, and peaceful coexistence.

Note

1. Interview of Professor Antony Flew with Liberty University's Gary Habermas in a 2004 Summit at New York University, reported in a DVD made by ScienceFindsGod.com. The complexity discovered in the structure of DNA led Flew to acknowledge that such a complex structure could not have been the product of chance and natural selection alone, as maintained by evolutionists, but pointed the way to the existence of a superintelligent being.