

Islam & Science Workshop 2013 – Report

Quilliam, in association with the Université Interdisciplinaire de Paris, the American University of Sharjah and Muslim-Science.com, organised and hosted an international workshop entitled “Islam and Science: A Reasoned Approach” for students and young researchers, 18th-20th January 2013 at the Institute of Education, University of London, UK.

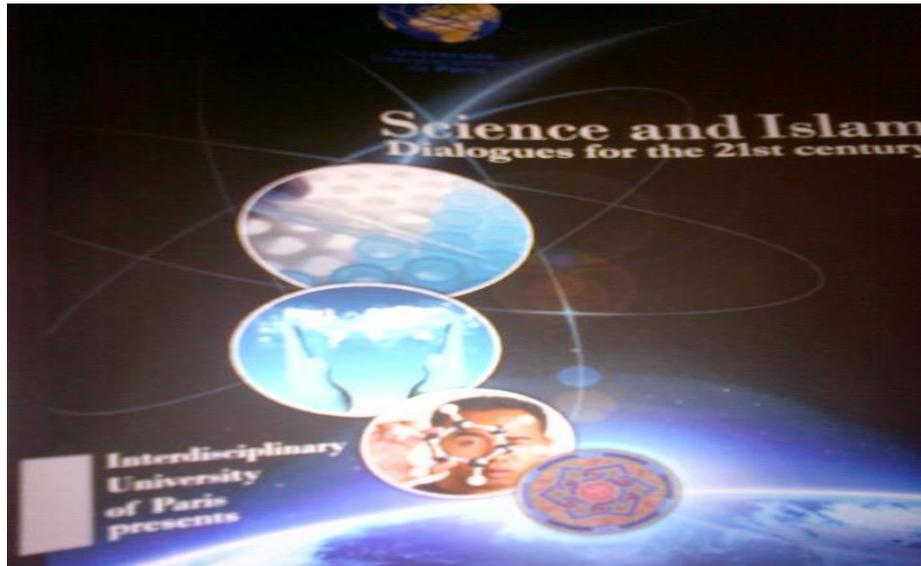
The participants consisted of 23 people selected by submission of essays on Science-Religion topics and/or their suitability as “disseminators of ideas” following on from the workshop. These 23 participants included three people from France, the USA and Egypt. There were a total of seven speakers at the workshop: three from the UK, two from France and one each from the UAE and Pakistan.

Introduction - Friday 18th January 2013



1- Workshop venue, University of London

The workshop began with a screening of the 1-hour documentary film, *Science and Islam – Dialogues for the 21st Century*, which was produced by the Université Interdisciplinaire de Paris and featuring interviews with 22 leading scientists, theologians, philosophers and thinkers about the interfaces between religion and science in general, and focusing on Islam in particular.



2- Documentary title screen

This was followed by a presentation by Ehsan Masood, author of the BBC series-accompanying book, *Islam and Science: A History*, a presentation entitled *Ibn Sina (Avicenna) – The Man Who Knew Everything*, about the life, work and influence throughout Islamic and Christian history of this early Muslim polymath. A lively discussion followed about Ibn Sina’s philosophy and methodology and the scientific rationalisation of miracles.



3- Ehsan Masood chats to participants after his presentation on Ibn Sina (Avicenna)

Saturday 19th January 2013

Prof. Jean Staune (Université Interdisciplinaire de Paris) started with presentation on *Science and Religion in the World today & New Paradigms of Science*, in which he summarised the major developments in 20th-century science such as relativity and quantum theories in physics, Godel’s theorem in mathematical epistemology, and De Duve and Conway-Morris’ ideas of direction, non-randomness, and convergence in biological evolution. He showed how these “new paradigms” have influenced the discourse in “Science and Religion”, and how this field has become a growing academic discipline in its own right with chairs at Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

This was followed by Prof. Nidhal Guessoum (American University of Sharjah), who gave a general overview of the main topic, *Islam and Science*, showing why “modern science” (particularly “methodological naturalism”) poses a challenge for traditional religious views and discussing the various contemporary Muslim responses to the challenge, ranging from Nasr’s “Sacred Science” and Sardar’s “Islamic/Ethical Science” to Salam’s “Universal Science”, ending with his own “Averroesian Harmonization.”



4- Prof. Nidhal Guessoum presents on "Islam & Science"

Yasmin Khan (former curator at both the Science Museum and the British Library) spoke on *The 1001 Inventions Exhibition at the Science Museum, London: Engaging the Public in a Multicultural History of Science*, a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges of commissioning the most successful touring exhibition in the history of the Science Museum, with a screening of the exhibition’s central 15-minute film, *1001 Inventions and The Library of Secrets*, starring Sir Ben Kingsley as Al-Jazari.



5- Yasmin Khan, curator of the "1001 Inventions" exhibition, London

Dr. Athar Osama (of Muslim-Science.com) complemented the day’s philosophical, theological, historical, civilisational and public-outreach themes with a sobering presentation on *Science Policy in the Muslim World Today: Challenges and Prospects*, focusing on governmental public policy and investment in science education and research and an analysis of the funding and work of COMSTECH, the OIC’s arm for science and technology.

Sunday 20th January 2013

Dr. Jean Staune gave a fascinating presentation on the *Theories of Evolution*. The philosopher of science showed multiple lines of evidence that evolution is an indisputable fact, but one that should not be confused with Darwinism. Based on the research of leading palaeontologists such as Conway-Morris and on the work of Nobel laureate De Duve and others, Staune insisted that the current Darwinian theory of evolution is incompatible at best, and presented ideas implying that evolution is a process leading, sooner or later, to beings like us with a consciousness of their own existence and the ability to seek God.

This was followed by a joint presentation on *Islam and the Theory/Fact of Evolution* by Prof. Nidhal Guessoum and Dr. Usama Hasan (Quilliam). The presentations included theological and scriptural arguments supporting evolution as well as a history of evolutionary ideas within Muslim civilisation since the 9th century CE from Al-Jahiz and the Brethren of Purity through to Rumi and Ibn Khaldun, a history recognised by a number of historians, Muslim and non-Muslim ones. Also covered was the acceptance of biological evolution by 19th/20th-century Muslim theologians such as Husain al-Jisr (nicknamed “the Ash’ari of our times” by Afghani), and ‘Abd al-Sabur Shahin, a well-known scholar of Al-Azhar. Current Muslim resistance to scientific facts was illustrated with historical precedents of misreading the Qur’an to make inflexible but erroneous assertions about scientific matters, such as Ibn Kathir and Shanqiti’s insistence that the earth was created before the heavens, Suyuti’s insistence that the earth is flat and Ibn Taymiyyah’s assertion that cattle (sheep, goats, cows and camels) were created in heaven (which would imply that modern-day followers of Ibn Taymiyyah who insist that humans were created in heaven and descended from there must also believe the same about those four species of mammals).

The sessions by Staune, Guessoum and Hasan illustrated well the irony that whilst modern biology, built on evolution, has succeeded in mapping the entire human genome as well as the DNA of thousands of other species, and new fields emerge such as astrobiology and the origin-of-life research looking at deep-sea volcanoes, many Muslims (and Christians) continue to debate whether or not evolution (including that of humans) is a fact, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence.

Dr. Bruno Abdelhaq Guiderdoni (Director of the Lyon Observatory) gave a fascinating presentation on *Islam & Cosmology: Yesterday and Today*, based on the mind-boggling discoveries of modern astronomy, including the existence of exo-planets in earth-like habitable orbits around stars other than the sun. In his lecture, Dr. Guiderdoni stressed the need to read the “Book of Nature” along with the “Book of God” and to maintain the inseparability of science and ethics. The discussion included topics such as the possibility of a multiverse and the question of extra-terrestrial intelligence and life-forms.

Dr. Guiderdoni’s emphasis on ethics led nicely to the session by Dr. Usama Hasan on *Islam, Science and Ethics*, in which he presented the theory of *Maqasid al-Sharia* (The Universal, Higher Objectives of Islamic Law) as an Islamic framework for ethics suitable for “Universal Science.” The framework is based on the Islamic principles of justice as minimum, compassion as maximum, promoting benefit and avoiding harm. The theory was illustrated with reference to ethical questions around family planning, abortion and organ transplants.

The workshop concluded with an open and long discussion session involving all participants, further exploring the ideas presented at the workshop and possible next steps to take the exciting conversations forward.



6- Panel (L-R): Guessoum, Staune, Khan, Osama, Hasan



7- Group photo; Bruno Guiderdoni is at the centre of the image