

Natural Theology as a Necessary Bridge Between Science and the Quran*

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Abstract

To establish a meaningful connection between science and the Quran, both offer distinct worldviews with foundational and derived layers. This study's central hypothesis holds that the dominant naturalistic scientific narrative and the primary Quranic narrative present not merely divergent but fundamentally opposing visions, particularly ontologically. The Quranic worldview posits God as Creator and axis of existence, with divine providence governing all things, creation, purpose, and teleology permeating life and humanity. In contrast, the prevailing scientific narrative depicts a world governed solely by natural causality, devoid of plan or purpose, as exemplified by Darwinian evolution's emphasis on contingency and blind processes. This opposition culminates in anthropology: the Quran portrays humans as teleologically created, possessing spiritual dimensions (*nafs/rūḥ*), divine vicegerency (*khilāfat Allāh*), and capacity to apprehend divine attributes, whereas scientific naturalism denies ontological distinction, reducing mind and spirit to material mechanisms. Such disparity renders bridging attempts superficial or appropriative. Two strategies emerge: reinterpreting the Quranic narrative (beyond this scope) or challenging naturalism's certainty, the approach adopted here. Natural theology offers a pivotal bridge via two functions: (1) critique, demonstrating that scientific data do not necessarily support naturalism; and (2) alternative explanation, showing evidence aligns more closely with a theistic, purposeful worldview. Natural theology thus discredits naturalistic interpretations and brings scientific discourse nearer to Quranic premises, establishing conditions for genuine synthesis.

Keywords: Natural Theology, Quran, Science, Naturalism, Teleology, Humanity, Divine Providence

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Introduction

The question of the relationship between modern science and sacred texts, the Quran in particular, stands among the most extensively debated issues in contemporary (Islamic) theology. This relationship is generally examined through two principal approaches: maximalist and minimalist. The maximalist approach, or concordism, known globally by labels such as "Bucailleism" or the "scientific miraculousness of the Quran," adopts a realist reading of Quranic language and holds that its verses contain precise allusions to and anticipations of modern scientific discoveries. This current issue aims to enhance the credibility of religion (Quran) by demonstrating its conformity with empirical science. Among the most prominent and influential figures of this approach are Maurice Bucaille, the French physician whose work generated the largest global wave of attempts to reconcile Quranic verses with modern science; Tantawi Jawhari, author of the commentary *Al-Jawahir* and one of the earliest pioneers of scientific exegesis in the Islamic world; and Zaghloul El-Naggar, a geologist and the most prominent contemporary theorist of the scientific miraculousness of the Quran in the Arab world.

In contrast, the minimalist approach posits that the extraction of empirical sciences from the Quran constitutes a methodological error and asserts that the Quran's mission is exclusively confined to moral and spiritual guidance. This perspective contends that associating the sacredness of the religious text with falsifiable scientific theories undermines the credibility of religion. Prominent figures within this movement include Ziauddin Sardar, a contemporary thinker and steadfast critic of reducing the Quran to a scientific encyclopedia; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argues that the Quran's ontological portrayal is a consequence of its historical and cultural context, rendering it distinct from its moral and spiritual message; and Fazlur Rahman Malik, a distinguished Islamic scholar who emphasizes the necessity of transcending the historical and cosmological specifics of the revelation era to comprehend the Quran's ethical and universal message.

Both approaches, however, appear to suffer from significant deficiencies in their underlying conceptions. The first approach, which seeks concordance between the Quran and modern science, suffers from a strategic error. To grasp this strategic error, one must recognize that modern science (in its dominant and institutionalized narrative) and the Quran (in an authentic reading faithful to the text) are not merely two disparate and fragmentary collections of information about the world, but rather two distinct meta-narratives with different foundational elements. A faithful reading of the Quranic text presents a vision of the world and humanity that is profoundly teleological, grounded in divine providence and continuous lordship, and possessing supra-material ontological levels. In this vision, the human being is an entity with transcendent dimensions situated at the center of a meaningful cosmic design.

Pursuing the idea of piecemeal concordance without settling accounts with the naturalistic foundations embedded within scientific data is a prime instance of the epistemological equivalent of straightening the eyebrow while blinding the eye. In more academic terms, creating local coherence between a verse and a scientific theory comes at the cost of generating structural contradiction. When an exegete or theologian accepts the data of modern science without surgically excising their naturalistic philosophical baggage and reconciles them with the Quran, they are unwittingly legitimizing a meta-narrative whose deeper layers negate teleology, the soul, and divine lordship. Such concordances may appear attractive and persuasive in the short term (straightening the eyebrow), but in the long run, by introducing hidden materialist foundations into the sanctuary of religious understanding, they hollow out the theistic worldview from within and undermine its foundations (blinding the eye).

Conversely, the second approach, which fundamentally denies any relationship between the Quran and modern science and empties the Quran of its ontologically realist dimension, likewise appears to fall into excess from the opposite direction. Although, as noted, modern science is not merely an accumulation of discrete empirical findings, it cannot be denied that empirical findings play a fundamental and extensively pervasive role in the formation and development of science and modern scientific theories. Moreover, the Quran appears to place fundamental emphasis on the importance of observation and empirical examination of the world as a key to movement toward monotheistic theology. Therefore, categorically severing any scientific-empirical relationship between modern science and the Quran constitutes an excess from the other direction.

Thus, the fundamental question of this article is: given these considerations, how can one transcend the destructive confrontation between science and religion without falling into the abyss of superficial concordism or excessive interpretations that depart from the plain sense of the Quran? This study seeks to demonstrate that the only safe passage through this crisis lies in confrontation at the level of foundational principles and the deployment of the capacities of natural theology—a strategy that, rather than pursuing passive concordances, endeavors to break the monopoly of the naturalistic narrative over scientific data and thereby construct a robust and homogeneous bridge between objective science and the Quranic worldview.

1. A Brief Overview of the Ontological Vision of the Quran

In contrast to the naturalistic meta-narrative of modern science, the Quran presents a coherent system of ontology and anthropology in which no phenomenon is confined to the boundaries of matter and blind physical processes. A precise and detailed rereading of Quranic verses reveals that this sacred text is not a collection of scattered propositions, but rather a "systematic worldview" that stands in direct opposition to material reductionism and ontological naturalism across four fundamental axes:

1.1. The Transcendent and Immaterial Dimensions of the World and the Human Being (In Opposition to Materialism)

In Quranic ontology, the circle of existence is never coextensive with the circle of matter ('ālam al-shahāda or the natural world). The cosmos, in addition to its observable and material domain, possesses a hidden and supra-material domain ('ālam al-ghayb) that encompasses the natural world. Similarly, in Quranic anthropology, the human being is not merely a complex biological organism or an accidental product of material evolution; rather, human existence is the locus where matter and the transcendent converge.

« وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ... عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ وَهُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْخَبِيرُ »¹

This verse explicitly divides existence into two domains: "al-ghayb" (the unseen, hidden from the senses and material instruments) and "al-shahāda" (the witnessed, physical world), and declares God as encompassing both. In this vision, reducing existence to the observable world constitutes a major epistemological error.

« فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ »²

While acknowledging the material substrate of human creation, the Quran emphasizes a transcendent turning point. The "divine breath of spirit" (nafkhat al-rūḥ al-ilāhiyya) is precisely that immaterial component that endows the human being with will, consciousness, and a dignity that cannot be accounted for by the laws of physics and chemistry.

« وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا »³

This verse explicitly identifies the reality of human life "al-rūḥ" as belonging to "ālam al-amr" (the realm of abstractions and direct divine command), and considers the instruments of empirical science limited and insufficient for its complete comprehension.

1.2. The Purposefulness and Intelligent Design of the World (In Opposition to Blind Chance and Cosmic Meaninglessness)

In contrast to the dominant narrative of modern science, which views the universe as the product of material mechanisms/processes devoid of any inherent meaning or purpose, the Quranic meta-narrative emphasizes ordered structure, precise measure (qadar), and the purposefulness of each component of existence. Creation is grounded in al-ḥaqq (truth/reality), and any notion of futility, randomness, or vanity (bāṭil) is negated at its core.

¹ Al-An'ām: 73

² Al-Hijr: 29

³ Al-Isrā': 85

«إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ»¹

«وَخَلَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَقْدَرَهُ تَقْدِيرًا»²

The concepts of "qadar" and "taqdīr" in the Quran correspond to geometry, precise calculation, and the mathematical-like laws governing nature, which indicate a prior intelligent design and invalidate the hypothesis of a random universe.

«وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا بَاطِلًا ذَلِكَ ظَنُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا»³

The Quran considers the belief in cosmic meaninglessness and purposelessness (promoted today through scientific nihilism and materialist ontology) as equivalent to "kufr" (disbelief) and an erroneous assumption.

«وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَاعِبِينَ * مَا خَلَقْنَاهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ»⁴

«وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَاعِبِينَ»⁵

The negation of "la'ib" (play/frivolity) is a direct negation of purposelessness. In Quranic ontology, the universe is not the stage for a random genetic or cosmic game; rather, each phenomenon has a mission and moves toward a wise purpose.

«الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا»⁶

In this verse, the inevitable result of "reflection upon nature" (equivalent to the function of sound empirical science) is the discovery of cosmic purposefulness and the negation of vanity and meaninglessness, something that serves as a point of connection between science and religion in natural theology.

1.3. The Continuous Flow of Divine Providence and Lordship Beyond Natural Mechanisms (In Opposition to Deism and Physical Causal Closure)

The portrayal of God in the Quran deviates from the notion of a retired clockmaker who solely created the universe and left it to the laws of physics. While the Quran acknowledges the existence of natural causes, it underscores that God's will, governance, and lordship

¹ Al-Qamar: 49

² Al-Furqān: 2

³ Sād: 27

⁴ Al-Dukhān: 38-39

⁵ Al-Anbiyā': 16

⁶ Āl 'Imrān: 191

continuously and instantaneously permeate the fabric of existence. Consequently, the concept of "Causal Closure of Physics" loses its validity in the presence of divine will.

«اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ لَا تَأْخُذُهُ سِنَّةٌ وَلَا نَوْمٌ»^١

The attribute "al-Qayyum" refers to the One upon whom the subsistence and continuity of all existence depend at every moment. This verse negates the ontological independence of nature and physical laws.

«يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ»^٢

«قُلْ مَنْ يَرْزُقُكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ... وَمَنْ يَدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ فَسَيَقُولُونَ اللَّهُ»^٣

The concept of "tadbir" (governance) indicates God's active, continuous, and purposeful involvement in the processes of the world. From the Quranic perspective, natural mechanisms are not on equal footing with God's will; rather, they are channels through which His will is realized.

«إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُمْسِكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ أَنْ تَزُولَا وَلَئِنْ زَالَتَا إِنْ أَمْسَكَهُمَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ»^٤

«أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا إِلَى الطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَفَاتٍ وَيَقْبِضْنَ مَا يُمَسِّكُهُنَّ إِلَّا الرَّحْمَنُ»^٥

The Quran attributes phenomena such as cosmic stability or the flight of birds, which modern science explains solely through gravity or aerodynamics, directly to God's "imsak" (sustaining hold). This means that scientific laws do not replace God's lordship; rather, they describe the manner in which His lordship operates.

«يَسْأَلُهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ»^٦

This verse explicitly shows that God is at every moment engaged in action and manifesting Himself anew in existence, and that the universe is not a closed and finished system.

¹ Baqarah: 255

² al-Sajdah: 5

³ Yunus: 31

⁴ Fatir: 41

⁵ al-Mulk: 19

⁶ al-Rahman: 29

2.4. Ultimate Felicity and Spiritual Perfection as the Supreme Goal of Human Existence (In Opposition to Evolutionary Reductionism and Survival of the Fittest)

In the naturalistic approach, the ultimate goal of human behavior and life is reduced to environmental adaptation, biological survival, and genetic reproduction. However, in the Quranic grand narrative, biological life is merely an instrumental platform. The ultimate purpose of human creation is becoming, spiritual perfection, and voluntary return toward the source of absolute perfection ("liqā' Allāh" - meeting with God).

«أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ»^١

This verse elevates the purpose of life from the biological level to the transhistorical level of the hereafter, emphasizing that without considering "the return to God," human creation would be nothing but futility and absurdity.

«وَمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَهُوٌّ وَلَعِبٌ وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ»^٢

Reducing the human purpose to physical survival in the material world is invalid in Quranic logic. The Quran contrasts biological life (ḥayāt al-dunyā) with true and eternal life (al-ḥayawān), directing goal-setting toward spiritual perfection.

«يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ»^٣

The trajectory of human movement is a continuous and arduous striving (kadḥ) toward meeting with God ("liqā' Allāh"). This law of spiritual evolution stands in opposition to the idea of survival struggle for material existence.

«يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ * ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً * فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي * وَادْخُلِي جَنَّتِي»^٤

The endpoint of human perfection is reaching the tranquil soul ("al-naḥs al-muṭma'innah" - existential peace connected to the Truth) and entering the realm of divine proximity. This vision stands in complete contrast to the image of humans as genetic machines in naturalistic science.

2. Dominant Worldview Based on Modern Science

One of the fundamental obstacles to understanding the relationship between science and religion lies in conflating science as an epistemological method with science as a worldview. The dominant paradigm in modern science has moved well beyond mere methodological naturalism

¹ al-Mu'minun: 115

² (al-'Ankabut: 64)

³ al-Inshiqāq: 6

⁴ al-Fajr: 27-30

in practice, and consequently, to ontological naturalism, or at the very least, explanatory naturalism¹. Within this grand narrative, the cosmos is conceived as a closed physical system requiring no supernatural explanation whatsoever. To grasp precisely how this contrasts with the Quranic grand narrative, it is necessary to examine three foundational components inherent in the modern scientific approach to naturalism.

2.1. The Self-Sufficiency of the Natural World

The grand narrative of modern science has, over the course of its historical development, transcended a purely methodological stance (methodological naturalism) and evolved into a sweeping ontological claim. In this dominant paradigm, the cosmos is depicted as a completely closed, self-referential, and self-sufficient reality, one that requires minimal recourse to an external efficient cause or transcendent Creator in order to account for its origin, continuation, and evolution.

The historical roots of this idea of ontological self-sufficiency in modern science may perhaps be traced, symbolically, to the works of Pierre-Simon Laplace, the eminent mathematician and physicist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through formulating celestial mechanics, he set out to explain the stability of the solar system and the motion of the planets solely based on physical laws, dispensing with any appeal to divine intervention, governance, or providence. This paradigm shift found its most eloquent articulation in a famous historical exchange between him and Napoleon Bonaparte. When Napoleon asked why his monumental treatise on the celestial system made no mention of God, Laplace replied, "I had no need of that hypothesis"². This forthright answer marks a watershed moment in the history of science—a point at which mechanistic explanations supplanted divine agency and the physical universe was formally reconceived as a fully automatic, closed, and self-contained system.

Among the most explicit and widely cited manifestos of this outlook is the one articulated by Carl Sagan. Rejecting any immaterial dimension altogether, he reduces existence to matter alone, declaring that the universe encompasses “everything that is, ever was, or ever will be”³. Along the same line, theoretical physicists have endeavored to dispense entirely with the

¹ It should be noted that establishing a logical distinction between methodological naturalism and ontological naturalism—in the sense that science's commitment to methodological naturalism does not necessarily and logically entail ontological naturalism—while correct in its own right, has not precluded two things. First, that despite this logical gap, the prevailing view of the leading global scientific community is committed not only to methodological naturalism but also to ontological naturalism. Second, that one can argue (not deductively but abductively) that the best metaphysics/ontology consistent with the best available scientific theories is a naturalistic ontology.

² Roger Hahn, *Pierre Simon Laplace, 1749–1827: A Determined Scientist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 172.

³ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4

necessity for a first cause by appealing to the fundamental laws of physics. Stephen Hawking replaces the concept of a Creator with the laws of quantum mechanics and gravitation, asserting that the existence of laws such as gravity implies that the universe can create itself from nothing and necessitates no appeal to God¹. Lawrence Krauss employs this idea in an even more assertive manner, contending that modern physics has resolved the problem of creation ex nihilo. From his perspective, the laws of quantum mechanics render the spontaneous emergence of the universe from nothing feasible, thereby rendering the notion of a Creator redundant². Alexander Vilenkin describes the mechanism of this emergence as quantum tunneling from nothing, emphasizing that the process occurs spontaneously³. This self-sufficiency extends to the very essence of reality itself. Sean Carroll asserts that the natural world comprises everything there is, operating independently of any external intervention⁴. Max Tegmark, on the other hand, proposes his mathematical universe hypothesis, asserting that our external physical reality is itself a mathematical structure among many others, without the need for a creator or designer.⁵

2.2. Denial of Teleology

The second fundamental component of the dominant paradigm in modern science is the rejection of teleology and the repudiation of any pre-established plan or purpose governing the cosmos. Within this intellectual framework, the universe is not conceived as unfolding according to a divine blueprint or cosmic telos, but rather as arising entirely from blind physical laws and material chance. This rejection of teleology manifests across two principal domains, cosmological and biological, and has been articulated by some of the most prominent figures in contemporary science.

At the cosmological level, theoretical physicists and cosmologists assert that the physical universe lacks a vocation or ultimate goal or meaning, and that humanity is merely a by-product within an immense and indifferent cosmos. Perhaps the most celebrated formulation comes from Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in physics. In *The First Three Minutes*, after tracing the evolutionary history of the cosmos, Weinberg states unequivocally that the more the universe appears intelligible, the more it appears pointless. He concludes that there is nothing in the laws

¹ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 180

² Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 173

³ Alexander Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 182

⁴ Sean Carroll, *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself* (New York: Dutton, 2016), 20

⁵ Max Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 326

of nature to suggest that the world was created for humanity¹. Similarly, the theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss argues in *A Universe from Nothing* that we are merely insignificant cosmic accidents in a universe that proceeds on its blind course regardless of our existence, and which lacks any purpose for our existence or for the cosmos as a whole².

At the biological level, Darwinian theory and the modern synthesis of evolution have dismantled the last vestiges of teleological explanation concerning life. According to this account, the complexity and diversity of living organisms are not the result of intelligent design, but rather the consequence of blind natural selection and random genetic mutation. Jacques Monod, a Nobel laureate in physiology and medicine, asserts in *Chance and Necessity* that humanity must finally recognize that, in the vast indifference of the cosmos, it stands alone, and its existence stems solely from sheer contingency.³ Richard Dawkins, a prominent evolutionary biologist, takes this reductive perspective to its extreme in *River Out of Eden*, asserting that the universe we observe possesses precisely the characteristics one would anticipate if there were no design, no goodness, no evil, or any sacred source underlying anything—only blind, relentless indifference⁴. Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and biologist at Harvard, likewise regards the emergence of consciousness and humanity as a wholly contingent and unpredictable event in the history of life; had the timeline of life been rewound from its inception, the probability of its re-evolution would have been virtually negligible⁵.

Consequently, within its predominant paradigm, modern science dismisses any teleological interpretation of the universe and humanity as a cognitive error, a relic of pre-scientific thought, and consolidates an image of the cosmos as a machine-like entity devoid of inherent meaning and utterly indifferent to the fate of humankind.

2.3. A Purely Materialist View of the Human Bein

The introduction of materialist perspectives into scientific anthropology in the twentieth century was accompanied by a profound paradigmatic shift, from Cartesian dualism and belief in an immaterial soul toward entirely physical and mechanistic explanations. This historical trajectory reflects modern science's attempt to situate the human being within the framework of the

¹ Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 154

² Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 170

³ Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 180

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 319

material laws of the universe, beginning with behaviorist psychology and gradually evolving into reductionist physicalist and neuroscientific approaches.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, behaviorist psychology delivered the first fundamental blow to the concept of an immaterial mind and internal consciousness. John B. Watson, with the publication of his seminal article "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It"¹, completely rejected introspection and concepts such as consciousness and mind, reducing psychology to the science of studying material and observable behaviors. Watson argued that to be scientific, all reference to hidden domains of the soul must be abandoned, and the human being should be studied solely as a material organism responding to physical environmental stimuli.

This material reductionism reached its zenith with B. F. Skinner's radical behaviorism. In his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*², Skinner characterized fundamental human concepts such as free will, internal agency, and dignity as prescientific illusions. He explicitly declared that the autonomous human being, or any immaterial agent within us, does not exist, and that all complex human behaviors, including language and morality, are nothing but the product of environmental determinism and a history of physical conditioning.

Despite behaviorism's dominance in the first half of the twentieth century, its neglect of internal processes eventually led to its replacement by physicalist approaches in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, analytic thinkers and philosophers such as U. T. Place³ and J. J. C. Smart⁴ proposed the identity theory of mind and brain, arguing that mental states such as pain, thought, or joy are nothing other than physical states of the brain and nervous system. Smart emphasized in his writings that scientific understanding of human nature cannot accept that the human being is anything more than physical mechanisms; therefore, the domain of mind must also be fully integrated into physics and chemistry.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, with advances in computer science and artificial intelligence, this materialist outlook merged with the computational theory of mind. Thinkers such as Alan Turing⁵ and later pioneers of cognitive science, such as Allen Newell and Herbert Simon⁶, reduced the human mind to software and the brain to the hardware of a material

¹ John B. Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," *Psychological Review* 20, no. 2 (1913): 158–177

² B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

³ U. T. Place, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" *British Journal of Psychology* 47, no. 1 (1956): 44–50.

⁴ J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 2 (1959): 141–156.

⁵ Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 (1950): 433–460.

⁶ Allen Newell and Herbert A. Simon, "Computer Science as Empirical Inquiry: Symbols and Search," *Communications of the ACM* 19, no. 3 (1976): 113–126.

machine. In this approach, human thought was defined merely as the formal processing of physical symbols in the brain.

The materialist view of the human being not only reduces the transcendent dimension to physicochemical processes but also empties existential purpose of meaning. Francis Crick (co-discoverer of the structure of DNA), in opposition to any transcendent anthropology, claims: "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules".¹ Under this framework, as Edward O. Wilson also emphasizes, even the highest spiritual manifestations, such as morality and religion, are merely useful illusions for evolution, ultimately serving to enhance reproduction². Finally, Steven Pinker, relying on the logic of natural selection, altogether denies transcendent teleology for the human being, reducing the purpose of human existence and the complexities of the mind to the determinism of biological replication: "The ultimate goal that the mind was designed to attain is maximizing the number of copies of the genes that created it"³.

3. The Need for Natural Theology

3.1. The Need for Active Engagement with Scientific Naturalism

In response to the increasing prevalence of naturalistic perspectives in contemporary science, theistic traditions have adopted two primary approaches: active engagement and passive accommodation. While active engagement is predicated on a fundamental critique of naturalistic explanations and a rational, positive defense of evidence supporting theism, other contemporary believers have opted for the path of passive accommodation. The defining characteristic of this viewpoint is that rather than critically examining the assertions and advancing explanations of materialists, it solely seeks to accommodate the preservation of faith. This endeavor to preserve faith does not entail challenging the philosophical underpinnings of the opposing perspective, but rather solely by demonstrating the logical compatibility between the principle of theism and naturalistic explanations.

For instance, in cosmology, when confronted with multiverse theory, often invoked to evade acceptance of divine fine-tuning, the passive approach, rather than critiquing the foundations of this theory, asserts that the existence of countless universes is also logically compatible with God's creative agency. For example, physicist and cosmologist Don Page⁴, explicitly rejecting

¹ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 3

² Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2

³ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 43

⁴ Don N. Page, "Does God So Love the Multiverse?" in *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, vol. 1, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 380–395.

the necessity of fine-tuning arguments and intelligent design, suggests that the multiverse might simply be a more elegant and expansive mechanism for divine creation. Similarly, philosopher of religion Klaas Kraay¹, proposing the idea of a “theistic multiverse,” argues that a perfect God would logically create all possible worthwhile universes, thereby making the multiverse theory entirely compatible with theism without requiring a teleological defense.

In biology as well, thinkers such as Kenneth Miller in *Finding Darwin's God*² and Francis Collins in *The Language of God*³ have developed the theistic evolution approach. Instead of critiquing the Darwinian view that perceives life as the product of blind chance, they endeavor to demonstrate that Darwinian evolution, with all its implications, can simply be regarded as God's method of creation and is compatible with religion. In anthropology too, theologians such as Nancey Murphy⁴, by proposing the idea of non-reductive physicalism, have attempted to reconcile a completely physicalist, soul-less account of the human being with religious texts.

In addition to this passive, minimalist concordist approach, there exists an even more problematic stance that completely retreats from the domain of rationality and epistemology. This fideistic approach asserts that there is fundamentally no need to demonstrate logical compatibility between science and religion, as religion does not inherently pertain to the cognitive realm or the objective realities of the world. The most prominent articulation of this view is Stephen Jay Gould's theory of non-overlapping magisteria, or NOMA⁵. Beyond Gould, Rudolf Bultmann's project of “demythologization”⁶ argued that the cosmology and physical descriptions within sacred texts are merely a mythological shell devoid of scientific value, asserting that the message of religion is exclusively an internal, existential encounter. Furthermore, in the philosophy of religion, Neo-Wittgensteinian thinkers such as D. Z. Phillips⁷ reduced religion to an autonomous “language game,” emphasizing that religious propositions fundamentally make no empirical or cosmological claims. In this perspective, science is responsible for explaining the realities of the world, while religion's domain is confined to the heart, inner feelings, and moral and spiritual functions. Drawing inspiration from the theological tradition of Schleiermacher, who reduced religion to a feeling of absolute dependence, this segment of believers accepts that religion has no meaningful propositions about the cosmos,

¹ Klaas J. Kraay, "Theism, Possible Worlds, and the Multiverse," *Philosophical Studies* 147, no. 3 (2010): 355–368.

² Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between Religion and Evolution* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999).

³ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁴ Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989).

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. S. M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), first published 1941.

⁷ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

life, or the structure of the human being, and therefore poses no conflict with scientific naturalism.

However, from a critical perspective, these approaches are by no means acceptable or sufficient for establishing a rational and robust belief. Ceding the domain of ontology to naturalists and taking refuge in the margins of emotion or forced compatibilities ultimately leads to the emptying of religion of its cognitive and truthful claims. Beyond the inadequacy of passive and fideistic approaches in establishing rational belief, the fundamental point is that the epistemological foundations of the Quran stand in complete opposition to these retreats and are fully aligned with humanity's innate and rational demands. The Quranic approach not only rejects the expulsion of religion from the cognitive domain but also explicitly advocates positive rationalism, invites critical thinking, and relies on objective evidence for establishing theism.

As a first step, the Quran fundamentally rejects blind and passive fideism. Faith, within Quranic epistemology, is not a leap in the dark or a purely subjective emotional state; rather, it is a call grounded in awareness and deep insight: "Say: This is my way; I call to God with clear perception"¹. Within this epistemological framework, the suspension of reason and blind conformity to ancestral tradition are sharply criticized,² and the failure to reason is identified as a cause of human degradation, placing those who abandon it among the worst of creatures³, and as a source of defilement and punishment: "And He places impurity upon those who do not reason"⁴. Rather than calling for unconditional acceptance, the Quran consistently demands proof and rational demonstration: "Say: Produce your evidence, if you are truthful"⁵. It defines the people of understanding as those who listen to diverse viewpoints and, through rational evaluation, follow the best of them: "Those who listen to speech and follow the best of it those are the ones God has guided, and those are people of understanding".⁶

As a second step, a particularly significant dimension of this affirmative orientation is its reliance on rational arguments and both external and internal evidence. Unlike naturalistic approaches, which conceive of nature as a self-sufficient mechanism devoid of purpose, the Quran regards the entire cosmos and the phenomenon of life as replete with signs (āyāt) that are comprehensible and amenable to rational argumentation for those who reflect: "We will show

¹ Yūsuf, 12:108

² al-Baqara, 2:170

³ al-Anfāl, 8:22

⁴ Yūnus, 10:100

⁵ al-Naml, 27:64

⁶ al-Zumar, 39:18

them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth".¹

The Quran repeatedly invites humanity to purposeful and rational inquiry into the flawless structure of the heavens, the earth, and natural phenomena. Verses that draw attention to the remarkable order and harmony in the creation of the heavens², and to phenomena such as the alternation of night and day, the sending down of rain, and the reviving of the earth³, provide precisely the framework for teleological arguments and for the case of fine-tuning against blind material chance. Likewise, the invitation to careful observation of the origination of living beings, the raising of the sky, and the formation of the human embryo⁴ demonstrates that, from a Quranic perspective, rigorous natural inquiry is not only compatible with theism but is itself the clearest rational path toward inferring the existence of a wise Creator.

Accordingly, ceding the domain of explaining nature to materialists and retreating to the comfortable refuge of mere emotion stands in direct contradiction to the spirit that pervades the divine verses. The Quranic approach demands that believers, drawing upon the very empirical evidence present in the physical and biological world (the external and internal signs, *āyāt al-āfāq wa-al-anfus*), engage actively and affirmatively in constructing transcendence-oriented explanations, and challenge reductionist and naturalistic claims on both rational and scientific grounds.

3.2. Natural Theology: Advancing an Active Engagement

The first step in this approach is the critical examination and exposure of the deficiencies and explanatory gaps within the naturalistic metanarrative. By engaging rigorously with various scientific disciplines, natural theology demonstrates that the exclusive reduction of phenomena to blind material processes fails to provide ultimate and comprehensive explanations for issues such as cosmic origins and fine-tuning, the emergence of life and biological complexity, and the problems of consciousness, free will, morality and rationality in philosophical anthropology. At this stage, ontological naturalism is challenged not as a definitive scientific discovery, but as a philosophical and metaphysical presupposition that lacks the necessary explanatory adequacy.

The second step is the provision of an affirmative and argumentative defense of transcendence and theism grounded in natural evidence. At this stage, natural theology employs methods such as inference to the best explanation, arguing that the acceptance of a cosmic

¹ Fuṣilat, 41:53

² al-Mulk, 67:3–4

³ al-Baqara, 2:164; Āl ‘Imrān, 3:190–191

⁴ al-Ghāshiya, 88:17–20; al-Ḥajj, 22:5

intelligence and wise Creator constitutes the most rational and coherent explanation for the existence of structure, teleology, and rationality woven into the fabric of the physical world.

The key point and fundamental distinction of natural theology from other approaches, such as the theology of nature lies precisely in this active epistemic stance. In the theology of nature approach, the findings and naturalistic explanations of the empirical sciences are often accepted as foundational assumptions, and the theologian's effort is merely directed at showing that religious beliefs do not conflict with these scientific theories and that a compatibilist reading of them can be offered. Natural theology, however, does not settle for this reduced coexistence and epistemic retreat. This approach actively defends the epistemological and ontological standing of theistic explanations against purely materialist ones, and claims that a theological reading of nature is far more rational, coherent, and comprehensive than a materialist reading.

This active, argumentative, and critical approach is precisely the path that not only responds to humanity's innate and rational demand for reasoned belief but also fully accords with Quranic logic. As explained in previous discussions, the Quran continuously calls rational beings to affirmative and demonstrative inference from the objective phenomena of the world (the external and internal signs, *āyāt al-āfāq wa-al-anfus*). Within this intellectual framework, the monotheistic worldview is not a marginal belief retreating into the gaps of science, but the sole comprehensive explanation for understanding the reality of existence. Accordingly, the revival of natural theology through engagement with contemporary scientific literature constitutes a necessary and foundational step toward fulfilling this Quranic mission in an era dominated by naturalism.

3.3. Natural Theology as a Prolegomenon to Revealed Theology

Despite emphasizing the necessity and efficacy of natural theology in confronting the grand narrative of modern science, the epistemological boundaries of this approach must be carefully delineated. Adopting natural theology never entails accepting "rational self-sufficiency" or reducing one's reliance to the limited evidence of empirical and natural inquiry as sufficient for comprehending all ultimate truths of existence. In other words, natural theology neither should nor can be regarded as a substitute or replacement for revealed theology. Rather, within a coherent and hierarchically ordered epistemological framework, natural theology plays the role of a preparatory prolegomenon and a rational argumentative foundation for inviting reason toward the domain of revealed theology.

Within this framework, the objections and criticisms raised by certain textualist or fideist approaches which equate appeal to common reason and natural evidence with a diminishment of the sacred and a degradation of theology's elevated status lack methodological justification. Such critiques fail to recognize that natural theology is, in the first instance, a methodologically

rigorous response to an authentically primordial need and an a priori question within human rationality: "Why should one turn to theology at all?" To answer this foundational question, one cannot appeal in advance to intra-religious propositions; rather, one must draw upon shared epistemological premises.

Accordingly, natural theology grounded in a Quranic reading never claims absolute epistemic completeness or comprehensive self-sufficiency. The primary mission of this approach is to demonstrate that the very same "common shared reason" and the systematic analysis of "objective natural evidence" possess the capacity to serve as a reliable and well-founded path for establishing the existential poverty of the material world and the profound need of the cosmos and humanity for a divine explanatory ground. This rational path does not terminate at its own conclusion; rather, in its developmental trajectory, it converges with and integrates into the transcendent contributions of revealed theology. The outcome of this synergy is the construction of a comprehensive theological system in which "reason and natural evidence" constitute the point of departure, and "revelation" represents the point of perfection and the ultimate horizon of anthropological and ontological knowledge.

Concluding Remarks: A New Articulation of the Relationship Between Science and the Quran in Light of Natural Theology

The exploration of the relationship between modern science and sacred texts, particularly the Quran, in contemporary thought has frequently been entrapped within two reductionist and extremist approaches. On one side of this spectrum, a group of religious believers, relying on the presupposition of the Quran's absolute epistemic comprehensiveness but lacking a deep understanding of the philosophical aspects of modern science, have gravitated toward hasty concordist approaches. This trend, disregarding the provisional and falsifiable nature of scientific theories, attempts to impose and reconcile the shifting achievements of empirical sciences with Quranic verses in order to thereby prove the veracity of the sacred text.

On the other side of this spectrum stand those thinkers and believers who, cognizant of the naturalistic dimensions of modern science and aware of the profound gap between Quranic ontology and the dominant worldview arising from modern science, have succumbed to a kind of epistemic retreat. This group, under the influence of modern science's unchallenged hegemony, has sought a solution to this apparent conflict through abandoning the realist implications of the Quranic text. By resorting to purely metaphorical, allegorical, and extreme hermeneutic reinterpretations, they endeavor to insulate the religious domain from confrontation with scientific propositions and to reduce the Quran's role to non-cognitive spheres.

Nevertheless, critical evaluation reveals that both approaches suffer from a fundamental epistemic error. While one cannot deny the emergence of a paradigmatic rupture between the

contemporary scientific worldview and Quranic ontology, reducing this rupture to an intrinsic conflict between science and religion constitutes a grave mistake. The overwhelming and determinative portion of this gap stems not from the definitive empirical findings of the sciences, but rather from the dominance and hegemony of the metaphysical presuppositions of ontological and methodological naturalism over modern science presuppositions that are themselves philosophically and rationally highly vulnerable and subject to critique.

Consequently, rigorous academic logic necessitates that before capitulating to epistemic passivity and accepting non-realist interpretations of revelatory sources, the naturalistic underpinnings of contemporary science must undergo meticulous critical scrutiny and analysis. In this intellectual endeavor, natural theology serves as the frontline of this critical and constructive engagement. The approach grounded in natural theology, through the application of philosophical rationality and the analysis of scientific evidence, demonstrates that naturalistic exclusivism in the ultimate explanation of existence lacks logical sufficiency. Conversely, and in alignment with the Quran's repeated emphases on the necessity of rational reflection upon cosmic (external) and human (internal) signs, abundant and robust evidence supports teleology, transcendentalism, and theistic ontology in the natural realm evidence that reductionist materialist frameworks are incapable of eliminating, begging the question against, or invalidating.

Ultimately, one can argue that natural theology constitutes an indispensable pillar and foundational component in the correct, critical, and realist articulation of the relationship between science and the Quran in the present age. The revival of this epistemic domain not only prevents descent into the pitfalls of concordist and interpretive reductionism but also, through the deconstruction of naturalistic hegemony, provides the groundwork for the emergence of a dynamic, fruitful, and bidirectional discourse and interaction between the contributions of modern science and the Quranic worldview an interaction that will enrich the epistemic content of both domains.

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