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WHITEHEAD'S CONCEPT OF GOD: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Galip VELİU

I think it is very important to stress the great difference of looking at God from a philosophical (scientific) perspective and a religious conception of God. Philosophers and scientists have failed totally as far as scientific knowledge about God is concerned. In fact the whole history of scientific development shows that God cannot be the object of scientific inquiry. Philosophers usually try to produce God that will fit their metaphysical systems as is the case with Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Whitehead etc. But experience shows that the fate of their Gods is not different from the fate of their cosmological systems. The case with religion, on the other hand, is totally different.

Islamic conception of God

For believers the scripture contains words of God himself related to him (God). The Islamic view of the world, according to my understanding, is that this world represents God's creation, or God's work and revelation (the Qur'an) God's word. The Qur'an in this sense is a book that contains God's words in itself and it is accepted as such by an act of believe. In this sense Qur'an represents the truth for believers.

There is no difference between scientists' penetration into the depths of one or more complicated processes (actualities) and ordinary peoples' analyses (perception) of a simple process (actuality) regarding the impression that there must be some process-holder. The first case may be more illuminating regarding the process but, both of the cases have to offer nothing as far as the real nature of the process-holder is concerned or, to use Aristotle's words, its first cause. We all assume that some kind of process is going on, but the difficulty is in our inability to epistemically define our assumption of the scene behind the process. The process itself pushes as far as we even think that the existence of the process holder is necessary, as most of the philosophers thought, but we still did not create conditions to arrive at the stage of an epistemic definition of that holder. If we imagine God as the origin of the process it is just

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a philosophical assumption that there must be some kind of process holder and this offers no information about what that holder is, how it looks like, or gives no direct information about God. To accept God as the ground for concrete actuality, as Whitehead does, is not the epistemic solution of the problem of God. Moreover, God interpreted as Whitehead does, is not contradictory to the spirit of any revealed religion. On the contrary the message of religion is in the same direction. According to Whitehead, “*It is as true to say that God is permanent and the world fluent, as that the world is permanent and God is fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the world many, as that the world is one and God many. ...it is as true to say that God transcends the world, as that the world transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God*”.¹ The message of religion is very clear as far as our inability to obtain scientific reliability about the nature of God is concerned. Only God can tell the truth related to God’s nature.² This is, in my opinion, the clear message of Islam. Most of the important minds do agree with the claim that “*each actuality in the temporal world has its reception into God’s nature*”³, but this claim has no scientific value. In the case of our knowledge about God we lack the perceptual part of it, as Kant would say.⁴ Thus, in our efforts to acquire knowledge about God, the conditions for the operation of our senses are absent. Whitehead is trying to get scientific reliability, as far as the nature of God is concerned, which is impossible, not only according to Kant but, according to contemporary epistemologists as well. For contemporaries, like for Kant, scientific knowledge can be acquired only by the united cooperation of senses and understanding.⁵ The only point of difference is that, for Kant, knowledge acquiring procedure is considered as the activity of the individual scientist, for the contemporary, on the other hand, scientific conclusion, in order to acquire the status of scientific truth, must get the approval of the community of scientists of the same field. “*Scientific knowledge in any era is what the scientists actively take us such, and the scientific knowledge of one era may be rejected as error in the next. But the*

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. by, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 348.

2 Qur’an, 27/65 ; 6/59.

3 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, op. cit., 350.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. By Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 93.

5 See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, (New York: Verso, 1988); Alparslan Acikgenc, *Scientific Thought and its Burdens* (Istanbul: Fatih University Press, 2000); Robert Audi, *Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

*rejection of previously accepted claims will itself be made on the basis of the currently accepted views, which are themselves fallible”.*⁶

Contemporary epistemology refutes the classical conception of knowledge as that which is based on some indubitable foundations. According to the contemporary conception of scientific knowledge, “*stability of knowledge can no longer be guaranteed.*”⁷ For, as Feyerabend rightly points out: “*There is always the possibility that new forms of thought will arrange matters in a different way and will lead to a transformation even of the most immediate impressions we receive from the world.*”⁸

Interpretations, ideas, views, in general, are the product of critical thinking and these all in essence represent science, they may be counted as valid for one generation and as not valid for another one. Thus, science and scientific thought may be abandoned as old and not valid. The case with religion is different. Whitehead’s proposal that “*religion has to face change in the same spirit as does science*”⁹ is contradictory to the spirit of religion. Religious text contains God’s words and God’s words according to the same text are valid for all times. In fact its words represent eternal truth as said by God. A God whose words may not be valid for some time is a God that lacks perfection which, according to religious teaching, is contradictory to God’s nature.¹⁰ In the case of the appearance of new views in science we refer to this case as the triumph of science, according to Whitehead,¹¹ which is true, but the same thing is with the case of our understanding of religion. When we have new claims concerning religious matters this does not represent a defeat of religion or religious thinkers, as Whitehead claims¹², but another scientific interpretation, or new knowledge, as far as our understanding of religious text is concerned. This in essence is again the triumph of science, as in the case of the appearance of a new scientific understanding regarding natural phenomena we say, to use Whitehead’s words, “*...another step of scientific insight has been gained*”.¹³ New views and interpretations of religion represent new knowledge as far as God’s words are

6 See Harold Brown, *Perception, Theory and Commitment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 151.

7 Paul Feyerabend, *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2:71.

8 Paul Feyerabend, *Philosophical Papers*, p.72.

9 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1953), p. 188.

10 Qur’an, 59/22; 35/38; 20/110; 26/220.

11 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 188

12 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 188.

13 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 188

concerned. But to make modification in religious text itself is the same as to make modifications in the construction of universe. This procedure of making modifications in the structure of nature and the original text of the scripture belongs to God only but, as far as interpretations of both of them are concerned, modifications are necessary and lead always to more knowledge about the realities of God's work and God's words.

The Qur'an represents the empirical ground of our knowledge about God. In this sense Qur'an contains information related directly to the nature of God.¹⁴ Qur'anic words about God represent truth concerning God, but our understanding (interpretation) of Qur'anic words is knowledge about God, which may always be subject to change.

Qur'an also points to the inability of human being to acquire true knowledge related to God without the help of revelation,¹⁵ a position that cannot be falsified, at least, on scientific ground. This is the primordial reason of Qur'an's reference to itself as a mercy of God toward humans.¹⁶ It gives them the truth that it is impossible, for them, to obtain with pure human effort.

Whitehead's conception of God

It is an interesting case that, when we read the great minds and their claims about some topic that is of our interest, we read them with the hope that we will be illuminated regarding the topic. Sometimes our hopes become reality, but sometimes we realize that we cannot find what we want. We may be confronted with such situations in every field of scientific enquiry and whatever the topic. But there is one topic with which this is always the case: the topic of God. Whenever we try to enrich our knowledge about God, in the scientific sense, we realize that failure is our destiny.

When he was asked about God, Aristotle pointed to metaphysics. Metaphysica in essence means the territory that lays beyond nature and metaphysics as a science deals with that territory. It is interesting the case that physica as a construction pushes us to assume the territory of metaphysica, but gives no sign of its essential nature. "*Metaphysica*" as a domain remains still unattached in a scientific sense. Aristotle thought that he solved this problem with his "unmoved mover", Whitehead with his God as the principle of concretion. Almost all philosophical and so called scientific solutions related to God do not explain more than ordinary logical assumption that there must be some holder of the order of the universe.

14 Qur'an, 59/22.

15 Qur'an, 93/3-5.

16 Qur'an, 27/86.

Whitehead is aware of our inability to grasp the reality of the metaphysics of the process. He conceives every event or actual occasion as a part of the process in the sense that “*Each individual activity is nothing but the mode in which the general activity is individualized by the imposed conditions*”.¹⁷ This general activity, according to Whitehead, “*is a general metaphysical character which underlies all occasions, in a particular mode for each occasion*”. And “*There is nothing with which to compare it: it is Spinoza’s one infinite substance. Its attributes are its character of individualization into a multiplicity of modes, and the realm of eternal objects which are variously synthesized in these modes. Thus eternal possibility and modal differentiation into individual multiplicity are attributes of the one substance*”.¹⁸ But Spinoza’s infinite substance has no difference from Aristotle’s “*unmoved mover*” in the epistemic sense. Both have no cognitive value in the scientific sense. Whitehead is right in his stand that there is nothing in the nature of proof as far as religious claims of God are concerned¹⁹, because what he means with proof is scientific proof. However, we must not forget that, Qur’anic truth for a believer is more than scientific truth. It is a claim in which believers do not doubt at all. In science and philosophy we need proof because we look suspiciously at them. We are aware of the nature of scientific claims, which are human results. But when we deal with revelation we are dealing with a different kind of reality. A reality whose nature does not need any logical or rational way for the requirement of proof because, whatever proof we give about it, we are aware that, our proofs can only be scientific in essence. Scientific verification cannot play the role of the authority that legitimizes the validity of religious claims. Moreover, scientific proofs are always to be checked by other scientific proofs and this continues into the infinite, so that, we will never be sure of them. The fact that religious claims are revealed facts, is enough for the believer’s undoubtful stand towards its truthfulness. However, the aim of science is not to obtain reliable solutions that will be available forever. In fact the greatest tragedy to humanity is brought by the classical consideration of scientific conclusions as infallible and scientific truth as universal and the only reliable truth. “*The attempt to enforce a universal truth (a universal way of finding truth) has led to disasters in the social domain and to empty formalisms combined with never-to-be fulfilled promises in the natural sciences.*”²⁰ Scientific reliability does not consist of our run towards some

17 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 177.

18 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 177.

19 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 343.

20 Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, (New York: Verso 1987), p. 61.

indubitable foundations on which we will fully trust, on the contrary, scientific reliability means a suspicious approach towards every solution. Scientific reliability is mainly constituted of individual's reliability to themselves, which is the necessary constituent of critical approach. The critical approach towards a solution is the only path that makes possible our participation in the knowledge yielding procedure. In fact the suspicious approach is the only necessary constituent of critical behavior. The only reason why science deserves to be trusted, if it can be said that it deserves any trust, is because of its untrustable approach towards scientific claims. Our untrustable approach reflects our confidence in ourselves so that we can play our part in the process of our strive towards the better in knowledge. The main purpose of educators should be to raise human beings with confidence in themselves. If we brainwash our children with a baseless representations of science, as a ready-made packaged conclusion, to be known and obeyed accordingly, the result will be a passive generation that will consider obedience a success. Our advancement towards a better way of knowing cannot be done with the guides and dictas of dead people. Of course we will know what was previously said about the matter but this knowing will be done with the purpose of judging, not with the purpose of obeying. The present knowledge is not an object for obedience it waits to be reshaped, restated or reworked. These are the activities that give scientific knowledge its fresh character. The authors and patrons of knowledge are generations (participants), they play and have to play with knowledge, everything they can, in order to achieve the better. Knowledge is not our master, we are the masters of knowledge.

Science, in positivistic sense, becomes our master that dictates us how to act and compels us to become its obedient slaves. Positivistic interpretation of scientific truth as objective and based on independent facts gave scientific knowledge the status of absolute truth. Thus, science as interpreted by positivists, loses its characteristics of being a science, it looks more like a religion. Moreover, for some decade science replaced religion in Europe. A well number of people behaved with science as believers do with revealed truth. "*The emotional energy we had once invested in religion as an absolute source of authority was uncritically transferred to science, which then became our guarantor of truth.*"²¹ For those who consider science this way, religion also has to be subject to scientific criteria, i.e. objective and independent facts. Thus science, in the positivistic sense, was an invented religion, a religion that will serve as objective standard for testing all religions, and scientists its prophets. What seems

21 Vine Deloria Jr, *Evolution Creationism and Other Modern Myths* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing 2002), p. 36.

strange in this issue is the fact that even though we all accept that science is a human activity, i.e. it is the achievement of the subject, or subjects, we still try to defend the existence of objective scientific criteria. Science is a human activity and consequently whatever affects the scientists will have an effect on science. Science is what the subjects decide it to be and the criteria that will test the decision are other subjects, not already existing objective criteria. So how can an activity called science, which is the work of the subjects, serve as a criterion for the validity of revealed truth. The absence of objective standards does not mean that doing science is worthless; on the contrary, it strengthens participation as the only criteria for scientific advancement. As Feyerabend rightly points out “*an absence of objective standards does not mean less work; it means that scientists have to check all ingredients of their trade and not only those which philosophers and establishment scientists regard characteristically scientific*”.²² In fact “*...the choice of science over other forms of life is not a scientific choice*”.²³

Whitehead expresses clearly his inability to grasp the nature of God claiming that “*no reason can be given for the nature of God*”²⁴, but being not satisfied with the situation he continues, “*because that nature is the ground for rationality*”.²⁵ We all assume God as the ground for rationality but also realize that this has no epistemic value. This is where the trouble lies. The trouble starts when we try to know the nature of that ground. This is the beginning-point of our problem. Whenever we find ourselves confronted with a situation in which we are not able to solve a problem in the scientific sense, we try to escape from the situation with ambiguous words or, differently expressed, we try to satisfy ourselves with metaphysical speculations. This is what Whitehead does when he defines God as the ground for rationality. This in essence means nothing more than our dissatisfaction with the situation. It is clear that Whitehead’s expectation from science is not different from the positivists. Whitehead has great hopes that one day science will solve the problem of religion in roots. In this context Whitehead reminds us that “*the great point to be kept in mind is that normally an advance in science will show that statements of various religious beliefs require some sort of modification. It may be that they have to be expanded or explained, or indeed entirely restated*.”²⁶ No one knows what will

22 Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (New York: Verso 1987), p. 284.

23 Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, p. 31.

24 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and The Modern World*, p. 178.

25 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and The Modern World*, p. 178.

26 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and The Modern World*, p. 189.

happen with our scientific claims in the future, but one thing is clear that, it is up to the coming generations to decide about their validity. We cannot claim that we may attain conclusive proofs in science because the future is a part of today's knowledge, yet, it seems to me that, change will remain the only essential characteristic of science. "*There is no need...to modify religious thinking about the world to conform to the latest scientific findings. Especially, we should not tie our religious insights to a worldview that is in constant change and reformulation*"²⁷. Whether advancement in science represents the growth of our knowledge, or the growth of our ignorance, as far as reality is concerned, remains an open question. "*Every solution to a problem opens the way to a still deeper problem*"²⁸. Any scientific solution of a problem does not represent a solution in essence, it is just the addition of one more interpretation to the chain of unknown number of, essentially fallible, interpretations that the problem may face. "*We are always know-nothings and always trying to find our way with our hands or our feet or our ears or our eyes, with any sense organs we have, which we use actively to make sure of the reality around us.*"²⁹ Whitehead and his contemporaries' expectations of science were totally different from the epistemologists of today. The widespread creed among the contemporary epistemologists, regarding scientific knowledge, strongly refutes Whitehead's view of science. The truth we poses is just a scientific truth and the essential character of scientific truth is its being subject to change. The nature of scientific truth is such that it can never make us sure of reality because "*there is no certain knowledge*"³⁰. How can science with such a nature play the role of the authority that decides whether revealed reality is trustworthy or not. Both nature and revelation, are two givens for believers and, according to the scripture, the giver of both of them is God. The book of nature and the book of scripture are subject to our analyses and observations. Observation and analyses, in essence, represent our entrance into relationship with both of them. "*When we speak of the picture of nature in the exact science of our age we do not mean a picture of nature so much as a picture of our relationship with nature*"³¹. Also "*We have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning*"³². The establishment of this relationship, as we said, is

27 Vine Doloria Jr, *Evolution Creationism and Other Modern Myths*, p. 65.

28 Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving* (New York: Routledge 1999), p. 161.

29 Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, p. 53

30 Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, p. 54.

31 Werner Heisenberg, *The Physicist's Conception of Nature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co 1955), pp. 28-9.

32 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1958), p. 58

possible only through our senses and understanding (reason). We are unique as humans but individuals as senses and understanding. As individuals, although we have similarities, we all have some differences from each other. There are no two identical individuals. Thus these two books, the book of nature and the book of scripture, are subject to the observation and analyses of different capacities. The two books in essence may mean different things for different capacities and these different things constitute our knowledge of them. Our knowledge is again subject to the analyses and observations of other subjects which makes possible the continuation of knowledge yielding procedure. Thus only in this way can knowledge take the transfinite (immortal) status as Royce would claim. Scientific knowledge, in its essence, represents the reflection of individuals (generations) relationship with nature and scripture, this makes impossible the attainment of final solutions in science “*there are great solutions but a final solution does not exist. All our solutions are fallible*”.³³ Final solutions in science would mean the end of the process of interpretation which is possible only with the end of the existence of the subjects. The transfinite status of knowledge is guaranteed by the continuation of the existence of the subjects i.e. generations.

We all live with hopes that one day we will grasp reality but, history of scientific development shows that generations are dying without having clear knowledge of it. When we just look at the process of change that scientific truth has faced and is facing, this sometimes, makes us think that whether hopes for knowing reality is the only reality we poses. “*Our situation is always that of a black man looking in a black cellar for a black hat that may or may not be there. That is our situation- quite seriously.*”³⁴ Desire to know is the only thing that remains constant within generations. Desire to know and self-reliance that we can know are, it seems to me, the only two human properties necessary for our progress in science. No one of us admits that any of previous human generations had a true knowledge of reality but we still hope that science one day may reach it. Human beings are trying to understand reality, in the scientific sense, from time immemorial. All knowledge we poses, if we can say that we poses anything, is the reflection of generations hopes for knowing reality.

Religion, on the other hand, is a different authority, an authority that never talks with hopes, but with full confidence in itself and it is telling reality as it is and, with centuries, stands among us without changing even a word from its claims. However, till now, we can neither be satisfied nor get rid of religion in a scientific sense. Islamic position regarding science is encouraging. Islam prai-

33 Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, p. 161.

34 Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, p. 53.

ses progress in knowledge with whatever purpose, it only forbids the misuse of it. Even with the purpose of falsifying it (the scripture) scientifically, progress in science is praiseworthy, from Islamic perspective. It seems to me that even if further progress in science will lead to our knowledge of the weakness of science it still leads to knowledge. Progress in knowledge, even with the purpose of falsifying the scripture, is encouraged by revelation. Science, as it is clear from the history of its development, is more successful in falsifying itself than in grasping reality. But even in order to assure ourselves about the inability of science to know reality, in a scientific sense, we still need progress in science. Thus, in any case, we cannot escape making progress in science if we want to be aware of our position towards reality. It is not important whether science leads to our knowledge of reality or to our knowledge of its inability to know reality, both of the cases, in essence represent progress in knowledge. Thus in both of the cases we learn something. Our scientific awareness of our ignorance of reality is nothing else but knowledge. I am afraid that, as far as the reality of God is concerned, this will be always the case, i.e., we will always be confronted with our knowledge of our ignorance of him in scientific sense. Sir Isaac Newton's words on the topic still retain their validity. *"As a blind man has no idea of colors, so have we no idea of the manner by which the all wise God perceives and understands all things. He is utterly void of all body and bodily figure, and can therefore neither be seen nor heard nor touched; nor ought he to be worshipped under the representation of any corporeal thing. We have ideas of his attributes, but what the real substance of anything is we know not."*³⁵

The history of scientific thought shows that, we cannot avoid the assumption of another reality, behind the empirical actuality. This reality is a human problem from time immemorial, and it is bothering us more than anything else. Our inability to acquire scientific assurance about it makes us, either to deny the existence of unscientific reality, or pushes us to return to other sources for our satisfaction. The first possibility is always disturbing in essence, because of two reasons. Firstly, its denial cannot be done on scientific ground and, secondly, even if it could be done on scientific ground, it could not be considered a real satisfaction, because, as we just stated, nature of scientific reality. The second possibility, the return to other sources for satisfaction, is a domain where science can play, neither negative nor positive role because, the other sources, claim to be above science, finding satisfaction in them is a matter of personal, not a scientific, choice. Since it is not a matter of scientific choice it cannot be

35 Sir Isaac Newton, *Principia*, trans. by Andrew Motte, ed. By Florian Cajori (Berkeley: University of California Press 1962), pp. 545-6.

subject to our scientific analysis.

It is well known that the world surrounding us “*was once a world full of Gods; it then became a drab material world and it will, hopefully, change further into a more peaceful world where matter and life, thought and feelings, innovation and tradition collaborate for the benefit of all.*”³⁶

Abstract

Whitehead’s Conception of God: An Islamic Perspective

As it is clear from the title the paper aims at an analysis of Whitehead’s concept of God from an Islamic perspective. Dissatisfied with religious claims about God Whitehead is trying to attempt to come-out with a scientific solution of the problem of God. Although my presuppositions, before starting to work on the theme, were that I will face serious contradictions regarding the two positions, as far as God is concerned, I realized that Whitehead’s position is not as much unislamic as it is unscientific in essence. This is the essential problem that we discuss in this paper. In fact the paper argues that Whitehead, as most of his predecessors (philosophers), ends up with metaphysical speculations as far as the concept of God is concerned. The paper also shows that the unscientific character of Whitehead’s position strengthens Islamic view of the inability of humans to acquire true knowledge of God with pure human effort.

Key Words: Whitehead, theology, concept of God, Islamic concept of God, process

Özet

Whitehead’in Tanrı Anlayışı: İslami Perspektif

Bu çalışma temel olarak Whitehead’in Tanrı anlayışını İslam düşüncesi açısından bir değerlendirmektir. Whitehead kendi zamanına kadar felsefede ileri sürülen Tanrı anlayışları kendisini tatmin etmediği için bilimsel açıdan yeni bir anlayış geliştirmeye çalışmıştır. Bu çalışmaya başlamadan kazanmış olduğum kendi ön kabullerim bazı önemli çelişkilere beni düşüreceğini bildiğim halde bana ilginç gelmesi açısından Whitehead’in tanrı anlayışının bilimsel olmadığı kadar aksine pek fazla gayr-i İslami de olmadığını gördüm. Temelde bu makalemde ele aldığım konu budur. Aslında görüleceği gibi Whitehead de kendinden önceki filozoflar gibi bu hususta metafizik spekülasyonlara girmek zorunda kalmıştır. Onun için çalışmamız Whitehead’in bilimselliğe nasıl ters düştüğünü bu çalışmamız göstermeye çalışacaktır. Ancak asıl mesele de buaradadır: Çünkü

36 Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, p. 89.

Whitehead'in bu durumu İslami görüşü desteklemektedir ki bu da Allah'ın zati hakkında akıl yoluyla bilgi edilemeyeceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Whitehead, teoloji, ilahiyat, Tanrı kavramı, İslami Allah anlayışı, süreç

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