

Islam on Aliens

Spahic Omer

(Summary: This article analyses the possibility of extra-terrestrial life according to the Islamic worldview. It does so against the backdrop of modernity's obsession with the subject. The article starts by describing the meaning and significance of life in Islam in general, and how knowledge about extra-terrestrials, even if they are out there, is not essential. The article then addresses the essence of the theme at hand, focusing on the following Qur'anic issues: Allah as the Lord of the worlds; Allah creates what people do not know; the worlds of the jinn and angels; the question of seven earths; and the question of dispersing creatures throughout the heavens and earth. Highlighting that man as Allah's vicegerent on earth is an honourable being, and that he, at the same time, signifies the climax of Allah's creation as well as the object of Allah's infinite creative powers, the paper concludes that neither knowledge nor ignorance about extra-terrestrial life should get the better of people. Islam is against being obsessed with something that does not justify obsession. Life is all about setting things right and about prioritizing them. The prospect of extra-terrestrial life is by no means part of religion. That is why moderately and justifiably talking about it, or ignoring it altogether - albeit within the framework of the revealed knowledge and guidance - can hardly affect one's spiritual standing. People wonder if the truth is "out there", but disregard the fact that it is, actually, "down here".)

One of the features of modern civilization is its obsession with the possibility of extra-terrestrial life, intelligent or otherwise.

According to a survey conducted in 2012 by the National Geographic Society, 36% of Americans believe UFOs exist. A further 47% said they were undecided, while only 17% gave a resounding no (ibtimes.co.uk).

The trend is well represented both in science and science fiction.

For example, space agency NASA has recently awarded a grant to a group of astronomers to search the universe for signs of alien civilizations.

While a group of scientists at the University of Nottingham suggest that there are at least 36 ongoing intelligent civilizations in our Milky Way galaxy which is estimated to have between 100 billion and 400 billion stars (forbes.com).

Astrobiology is an interdisciplinary scientific field concerned with the existence, origins, nature, distribution, future and search for extra-terrestrial life.

Those beliefs may yet evolve into an organized faith. They may eventually replace religion in many parts of the world.

Regardless, the situation is understandable.

Life as an accident

It is a scientific principle that existence in general and life on earth in particular are mere accidents. They came about as a result of a series of coincidences. People, too, are purposeless accidents.

Thus, if the life accident happened on earth, it could happen anywhere else, provided some basic conditions are available, such as right temperature and water. Scientists believe there are billions of planets that can evolve and support life.

This claim is supported by two principles: Copernican principle and mediocrity principle (Britannica).

According to the former, the earth is not in a central, nor favoured, position. It is just another, yet average, planet. There are no advantaged “observers”.

According to the second principle, there is nothing special about the earth and life on it. There is nothing special, nor privileged, about people either. Everything about the earth is inadvertent and mediocre.

This viewpoint is epitomized by the words of Stephen Hawking: “We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star.”

The position of Islam

In Islam, Almighty Allah is the Creator of life which has its physical and metaphysical dimensions. Life also has two halves: this temporary world and the everlasting afterlife.

Allah created people and communicated the truth to them through His holy messengers and His holy revelations.

People were created but to worship their Creator, that is, to live their lives according to His will and command.

In the process of doing so, people will be guided and instructed concerning many things needed for the fulfilment of their existential mission. They themselves will also be able to discover many other things that will make their lives additionally meaningful and gratifying.

This life is not everything. Accordingly, people cannot, and should not, know everything. Many things are withheld from them, some because they are unessential for people’s earthly assignments, others because they are beyond people’s capacities, and yet others because of certain reasons known only to the Creator and Sustainer of life.

People’s journey on earth is one of qualified learning and discovery. The whole thing will culminate in the situation of the Hereafter when all veils will be lifted and when people’s understanding and vision will be total and definite.

People do not need to know everything to succeed in this world. They need to pass and move on. Both supreme success and knowledge of “everything” await in the Hereafter.

Thus, central to the Islamic ethics of exploring and learning is faith, patience, contentment and pragmatism. Knowledge ought to be allied with the truth, faithfully serving it.

Knowledge about extra-terrestrial life is inessential

As far as extra-terrestrial life is concerned, Islam did not furnish us with clear-cut knowledge about it. It is neither a yes nor a no.

However, that does not mean that people should hasten into the field and try to find answers. The open-ended position of Islam is not an invitation.

Rather, that is a test. It is furthermore a proof that such knowledge is inessential. It does not bring any significant benefit as regards people's earthly purpose, nor does being ignorant about it invite any harm.

Life is too short and too valuable, so it must be spent on more immediate and more important concerns. Carelessly delving into the theme of extra-terrestrial life could be an intellectual and spiritual trap.

Still, if any aspect of extra-terrestrial life suddenly becomes integral to those immediate and critical concerns of people, dealing with it in the light of the revealed guidance and wisdom should not be a problem, but only in proportion to its instantaneous relevance and applicability.

If there is anything, Islam is fine with it. If there is nothing, Islam again is fine with. In any case, the journey of life goes on, at the end of which await Jannah (Paradise) and Jahannam (Hell). People should be able to distinguish between a highway and a sidewalk.

Islam is against being obsessed with something that does not warrant obsession. Just as it is against neglecting something that demands fascination and passion. Life is all about setting things right and about prioritizing them.

The prospect of extra-terrestrial life is by no means part of religion. That is why moderately and justifiably talking about it, or ignoring it altogether, can hardly affect one's spiritual status.

Nonetheless, the subject cannot be entirely dismissed owing to the following considerations.

First: the Lord of the worlds

Allah is the "Lord of the worlds" (al-Fatihah, 2), which entails limitless probabilities and could mean anything.

It is normally said that the "worlds" imply mankind, angels, the jinn and all that exists. But only Allah knows what He has created, and still does.

He as the active Creator does what He wants and is not answerable to anybody: "He is not questioned about what He does, but they will be questioned" (al-Anbiya', 23).

Second: Allah creates what people do not know

Allah says that He creates that which "you do not know" (al-Nahl, 8). This, too, contains infinite possibilities, theoretically at least.

It can be about this world or the Hereafter, about the earth or the heavens, or about the physical or the spiritual realm of existence. The subject is indefinite.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, we must believe whatever the Qur'an and the Prophet's authentic Sunnah say, without unnecessarily pushing to know further. If knowing something is critical, the revelation would have enlightened us more about it.

We cannot consult too much science either, as science is still in the dark with reference to most of its fundamental astrobiological and astrophysical subjects. That can only increase doubt and uncertainty.

We likewise must believe that complete knowledge and power over all things belong to Allah alone. Man knows only that which Allah wants him to know.

As angels declared on behalf of all creation: "Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise" (al-Baqarah, 32).

Third: the jinn and angels

Both the earth and heavens are home to the multitudes of the jinn and angels, affirming the intimate and even reciprocal relationship between physics and metaphysics.

The Prophet (pbuh) for instance said: "Verily I see what you do not see and I hear what you do not hear. The heaven is creaking and it should creak, for there is no space in it the width of four fingers but there is an angel there, prostrating to Allah. By Allah, if you knew what I know, you would laugh little and weep much, and you would never enjoy women in your beds, and you would go out in the streets, beseeching Allah" (al-Tirmidhi).

Meteors (shooting stars) are used for stoning the jinn who eavesdrop on the transmission of Allah's commands from one group of angels to another throughout the expanses of the seven heavens (al-Saffat, 6-10).

Fourth: seven earths

Allah says that as He created seven heavens, He created seven earths as well (al-Talaq, 12). This is supported by several authentic *hadiths* of the Prophet (pbuh).

The predominant view of the commentators of the Qur'an is that there are seven earths in layers, one above the other, and between each two earths there is a distance like that between heaven and earth.

A weaker opinion is that the seven earths are in layers, one above the other, albeit with no gap between them.

Yet the weakest view is that seven earths mean seven continents (regions or zones) (Ibn Kathir).

Commenting on a *hadith* wherein there is a reference to seven earths, Ibn Kathir says: "Those who explained this *hadith* to mean the seven continents have brought an implausible explanation that contradicts the letter of the Qur'an and the *hadith* without having proof."

However, all scholars advise against dwelling extensively on the issue of seven earths, in that it has been mentioned only once in the Qur'an and rather indirectly in a few authentic *hadiths*.

The only reliable source for this particular knowledge is the revelation. Unquestionably, there must be a profound wisdom behind not revealing more.

If there were any grand benefits for mankind in disclosing more knowledge about this, Allah would certainly have given more.

An example of excessive interpretation is this account, which is sometimes ascribed to Abdullah b. 'Abbas: "Seven earths: in every earth is a prophet like your Prophet, an Adam like your Adam, a Nuh like your Nuh, an Ibrahim like your Ibrahim, and an 'Isa like your 'Isa."

Fifth: dispersing creatures throughout the heavens and earth

Allah says: "And of his signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and what He has dispersed throughout them of creatures. And He, for gathering them when He wills, is competent" (al-Shura, 29).

The key word in the verse is "creatures" (*dabbah*).

To some commentators of the Qur'an, *dabbah* exclusively means physical living and crawling creatures (animals). They then interpret the verse in such a way that although the heavens and earth are mentioned, only the earth, as a way of linguistic particularization, is intended for *dabbah*.

It is common in many languages to relate a thing to a group, although that thing is applicable only to a member, or some members, of the group.

The verse would then be understood to the effect that solely through the earth – including its atmosphere – Allah dispersed creatures (physical living forms).

However, a great many scholars reckon that *dabbah* implies all living and moving beings - physical or otherwise - including mankind, angels and the jinn.

This understanding does not confine any particular living form to any of the earth or the seven heavens. Tentatively, they can be found anywhere.

As al-Razi concluded: "It is not far-fetched to say that Allah might have created in the heavens such types of creatures (animals) as move or walk (live and behave) like mankind on the earth."

Man as an honourable being and the climax of Allah's creation

The Qur'an is explicit that man was created as Allah's vicegerent (viceroy) on earth. He represented the climax of Allah's act of creation. That is why man was created last, after each of the seven heavens and the earth had been fashioned.

Moreover, Allah created man (Adam) in His own image, as taught by the Prophet (pbuh) (Muslim).

Man's physical and spiritual being embodies the meaning, purpose and creativity of the entire universe. He is a microcosm, reflecting the macrocosm.

Allah also made all that had been created in the heavens and on the earth subservient and serviceable to man.

The Qur'an says: "Do you not see that Allah has made subject to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth and amply bestowed upon you His favours, (both) apparent and unapparent? But of the people is he who disputes about Allah without knowledge or guidance or an enlightening Book (from Him)" (Luqman, 20).

The end of the verse is emphatic that the essence of these things can be obtained only by means of the revealed knowledge. In no way can man take hold of it on his own. Such is not within the purview of reason.

The Qur'an furthermore reveals that man was greatly honoured and favoured over most of the creation: "And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with (definite) preference" (al-Isra', 70).

As a sign of that honour, angels were asked to bow down and prostrate to Adam, the father of mankind (al-Baqarah, 34).

Similarly, Satan admitted to Allah that He had favoured man (Adam) over himself. That was the main reason why Satan rebelled and vowed to destroy Adam and his progeny.

Hence, dishonouring and debasing man became Satan's *raison d'être*. In Satan's book, there is no manner of destruction of man that is more rewarding than that.

All these factors show that it is extremely unlikely that there are intelligent alien beings and alien civilizations out there, which could rival the purpose and legacy of mankind.

To likewise have any mankind-like creatures anywhere else other than on the earth is implausible in equal measure, for Allah clearly stated that He was going to create (His) vicegerent on the earth (al-Baqarah, 30).

The definite article "the" before "earth" denoted the current planet earth, about which all listeners – then and now - were familiar with (and Almighty Allah knows best).

In general, the creation of the heavens and earth has been associated with the creation of mankind, and their existence has been rendered subservient to the existence of man.

What is more, the breakdown and eventual destruction of the heavens and earth will be connected with the end of mankind and its earthly charge.

And finally, the heavens and earth will be re-created on the Day of Judgment in order to accommodate the resurrection of people, their judgment and their eternal abode.

The Qur'an informs: "On the day when the earth shall be changed into a different earth, and the heavens (as well), and they shall come forth before Allah, the One, the Supreme" (Ibrahim, 48).

Respect, confusion and scientific arrogance

As expansive and complex as the heavens and earth are, they are the context of mankind's existence. They are replete with signs which man is invited to explore, and with which - together with the signs of the revelation - he is to direct as well as enrich his life.

Unlike non-believers, believers do not explore the universe so as to look for the truth. As truth-holders, they do so in order to widen their understanding of the existential reality and to enhance their performances and experiences as the servants of Allah.

In the case of believers, the more and deeper they venture, the more signs they discover and read. Consequently, the richer and better people they become, and the heavens and earth become an inexhaustible repository of meaning, import and beauty.

Their mantra is: “Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly (in vain); exalted are You (above such a thing); then protect us from the punishment of the Fire” (Alu ‘Imran, 191).

In the case of non-believers, on the other hand, the more and deeper they venture, the more perplexed and more confused they become. The more they discover and learn, the less they know, and consequently, the hollower and more pessimistic they turn out to be.

The heavens and earth become an inexhaustible repository of worthlessness and curse. In the end, such starts breeding nothing but arrogance, which quickly spirals out of control. No thing or idea is held intrinsically sacred or pure in the process.

The condition causes science and education to function as if they are two dreadful whips in the hands of Satan – and his associates. They become main sources of misguidance and falsehood.

There is no other way to comprehend the rationale behind all those insulting dogmas relating to humanity, earth and life, which have been engendered in the name of science, progress and civilization. Otherwise, how else can someone claim that life is an accident, that people are a breed of monkeys, that life is purposeless, that pleasure-seeking is the highest good, that the earth is trivial in terms of consequence, etc.?

Non-scientific forms of ignorance – and arrogance - do not produce these affronts. People generally tend to respect the advances of the inborn human nature and values. It is only when extraordinary scientific strides are made that people lose at once their way, their head and themselves.

Non-believers are obsessed with extra-terrestrial life – and with the possibility of conquering it - because they need to run away from themselves and try other options. The truth is perhaps “out there”.

Also, so much material and immaterial damage have they caused to the earth that life on it is not sustainable in the long run. Everything has been desacralized and rendered meaningless and ugly.

Other alternatives should be explored so that people’s irresponsible behavioural models could continue *ad infinitum*. Positively, nobody cares about the earth – or the heavens. All people care about is their greed and their selfish interests.

Believers know that the earth is their only home, which necessitates the patterns of responsible thought and action. The heavens are neighbourhoods. If there are neighbours out there, and whoever they might be, it is good to get to know them if possible. If not, the circumstance changes nothing.

Neither knowledge nor ignorance about extra-terrestrial life should get the better of people. Terrestrial life must go on and terrestrial wellbeing must be sustained first and foremost. Every moment is a step closer either to Jannah (Paradise) or Jahannam (Hell).

People's ultimate destinies do not depend on extra-terrestrial life or on aliens. Their destinies are in their own hands and in their own terrestrial midst.

The truth is down here.