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### CONTRASTS IN MUSLIM CONCORDIST THOUGHT:

How Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Maurice Bucaille Reconcile the Quran with Modern Science

According to contemporary commentator Sadiq al-Azm, the faith of Islam is “collapsing completely” under the undeniable facts of modern science (al-Azm 94). The natural response of many Muslims to scientific advancement has been to argue that there is no conflict between Islam and science, a position al-Azm terms concordism. Throughout the last few centuries, many Muslim thinkers have adopted the concordist position to reconcile their faith with the intellectual upheaval which follows scientific discovery. Two of the most notable concordists are Sayyid Ahmad Khan, an Indian Muslim reformist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Maurice Bucaille, a French physician of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Khan’s position as an internal member of the Islamic faith and a “convert” to science contrasts sharply with Bucaille’s professional scientific training and approach to Islam as a decidedly external observer. Both attempt to reach harmony between Islam and modern science through an objective, philological interpretation of the Quran which proves the text to be both scientifically valid and the authentic Word of God. In this undertaking, however, Khan and Bucaille differ considerably in their use of existing commentaries on the Quran, the degree to which the text must be interpreted literally, and the extent which scientific fact may be extracted from Quranic verse. Khan’s interpretation favors extending existing Muslim scholarship and allows an idiomatic or allegorical reading of some passages, while Bucaille strikes a radically new, exclusively literal reading which often over-zealously reads scientific content into the text. Despite methodological differences, however, both Khan and Bucaille share the ultimate concordist goal of preventing al-Azm’s predicted collapse of the Islamic faith under the challenge of modern science.

To properly understand the motivations and stylistic differences which characterize Khan and Bucaille, a brief exploration of their personal histories is in order. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan grew up in a prominent, well-educated Indian Muslim family in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout these formative years, Khan was educated in the Islamic traditions of Shah Wali Allah (Troll 7), an early 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian Muslim reformist who advocated returning to the sacred sources of Islam and the long-lost process of independent scriptural reasoning, or *ijtihad*. Interestingly, Khan's Muslim beliefs made it difficult for him to accept much of modern science in his early years, as is evident in his 1848 philosophical paper which "declares false the motion of the earth" (Troll 147). However, the traumatic events of the Indian Revolt of 1857 motivated Khan as a "loyal and liberal" subject of the British Indian Empire to encourage the adoption of Western educational and scientific practices in India (Troll 4). His "conversion" to science was complete by the time he delivered his famous "Lecture on Islam" to fellow Muslims in 1884. The belief system which he shares in this speech accepts both the major ideas of the science of his day, such as the yearly revolution of the earth around the sun, as well as the fundamental principles of Islam. His work inspired many of the Islamic modernists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Khan continues to be widely cited as an early concordist thinker.

Standing in sharp contrast to Khan's 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim roots, Maurice Bucaille was born, raised, and educated in 20<sup>th</sup> century France. Catholic by birth, Bucaille served much of his professional career as chief of the Surgical Clinic at the University of Paris. Nearing the age of fifty, Bucaille became dissatisfied with the materialism and atheism of Western culture and developed an interest in Islam. A few years later, in the early 1970s, Bucaille was able to read the Quran in its original Arabic. His views on the scientific nature of the Quran were first presented in a 1976 lecture at the French National Academy of Science entitled "Physiological and Embryological data in the Quran" (Stenberg 222). He is particularly notable in this regard for making Quranic analysis the subject of official scientific communication in the West. He later published [The Bible, The Quran,](#)

and Science, a detailed scientific reading of both scriptures which declares the Quran to be in total agreement with modern scientific knowledge. His book became widely read by Muslims across the globe and remains today a cornerstone for reconciling Islam with the discoveries of 20<sup>th</sup> century science. Despite their radically different backgrounds and approaches, Khan and Bucaille became some of the foremost concordist thinkers of their eras.

In approaching the Quranic text and evaluating its scientific accuracy and logical consistency, both Khan and Bucaille claim to employ an objective and rational methodology. As Khan explains in his “Lecture on Islam,” he wishes to address those who have doubts about the Quran by speaking as a “third person” and by reflecting on the text with an “open mind” (Khan 315,332). Without this perspective, Khan asks, how else would an individual definitively call “one religion true and the other false?” (Khan 315). Similarly, Bucaille writes in his book The Bible, The Quran, and Science that he approached his Quranic analysis “in a totally objective spirit, and without any preconceived ideas” (Bucaille). He further claims to have reserved judgment in all cases until sound evidence was available. This tendency to build theories based on purely objective evidence marks an especially scientific habit which Bucaille admired in the work of French zoologist Pierre-Paul Grasse and adapted to his own purposes (Stenberg 228). Clearly, both Bucaille and Khan favor objectivism when interpreting the Quranic text.

Despite their shared desires for objectivity, Khan and Bucaille diverge almost completely in their opinions of how literally the Quran must be interpreted. Khan, ever the religious statesman, writes that “human language is inadequate to express God’s essence” and thus allows for the possibility of metaphorical interpretation (Troll 158). Attempting to reconcile the Quranic story of the flood with modern geology, he explicitly states that “Muslim tradition can accommodate an allegorical meaning for certain expressions” (Troll 108). To compensate for man’s inability to truly comprehend the divine message of God, Khan believes that God adapted some passages of the Quran into allegory so that it was universally accessible to mankind in various stages of intellectual

development (Troll 108). In Bucaille's interpretation of the flood, however, no consideration is given to the possibility of a non-literal reading. Instead, Bucaille writes that because the Quran presents the flood as a punishment restricted to a specific group of people, does not attempt to date the event, and does not explicitly qualify its extent or duration, an objective reader could not argue with the fact that it could have actually happened (Bucaille). This interpretation fits with Bucaille's decidedly anti-mystical and exclusively scientific approach to the Quran. Thus, while Khan's religious background allows him to tolerate a range of literalness in the Quran, Bucaille's scientific approach largely restricts him to considering only the most explicit meaning of the text.

Both Khan and Bucaille make heavy use of philological argument in their reinterpretations of the Quran. However, the process by which each decides on the original meanings of ancient Arabic vocabulary differs considerably. Khan follows modernist Muslim scholarship, in the tradition of Shah Wali Allah, as he strives to ensure that his translation's language "expresses the world of imagination and thought of the Arabs of Muhammad's time" (Khan 160). We see this particularly as he reconciles the classical Islamic view of the heavens as a solid, vaulted enclosure with the knowledge of modern science. Observing the stark contradiction between modern astronomy and the idea of the "roof" of heaven expressed in several Quranic passages, such as Q. 21:32, Khan contends that the concept of a literal "roof" was in fact externally introduced to the Muslim faith by commentators influenced by Greek philosophy, which held the heavens to be a tangibly solid enclosure. Following Shah Wali Allah's example, Khan returns to the original Arabic word for heaven, *sama*, and discovers that for the Arabs of Muhammad's time the idea of heaven was a very loose one which meant nothing more than "that blue or green thing that comes to our sight" (Troll 161). He thus concludes that whenever the Quran refers to heaven as a "roof" or mentions "opening the gate of heaven" (as in Q. 25, 14) the reference is purely idiomatic and is not intended as a literal idea. Applying the modernist tradition of philological interpretation, Khan closes the issue of discrepancy between modern astronomy and the Quranic view of heavens.

In contrast, Bucaille favors his own “preferential right of interpretation” (Stenberg 265) when conducting philological analysis. He relies on his own knowledge of Arabic to execute translation of the Quran and heavily informs this process with his grasp of modern science. A significant passage in Bucaille’s analysis is Q. 51:47, which the well-known Quranic scholar Yusuf Ali translates as “With power and skill we constructed the firmament. For it is we who create the vastness of space” (Stenberg 254). Bucaille instead renders the verse as “The heaven, we have built with power. Verily, we are expanding it” (Stenberg 254). Bucaille then proceeds to argue that his version literally complies with the modern scientific fact that the universe is continually expanding, and he uses this evidence to buttress his claims that the Quran is both divine and scientifically accurate. Commenting on the radically new nature of Bucaille’s work, the academic Leif Stenberg notes in his treatise *The Islamization of Science* that Bucaille’s work contains “no references at all to any scholarly interpretations of the Quran” (Stenberg 255). Lacking cited foundations of previous scholarship, Bucaille invokes the theories of other commentators when they agree with his scientific analysis. This selectivity is evident when he uses Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Arabic word *yawm* as a “long period of time” rather than the traditional “day” to avoid the contradiction between scientific ideas on the origins of the universe and the Quranic story of “six day” creation. Because of Bucaille’s heavy reliance on this type of interpretation, Leif Stenberg faults Bucaille for reading accounts of modern science into the text, then reinterpreting words or sentences in Quranic passages to make them fit (Stenberg 258). By projecting meaning *into* the text rather than extracting it from the text, Bucaille’s philological and scientific interpretation should often be properly termed *eisegesis* (from the Greek “to lead in”) rather than *exegesis* (Stenberg 256).

While both Khan and Bucaille acknowledge the potential for error and a lack of complete knowledge in interpreting the Quran, Khan emphasizes the role of the Quranic interpreter while Bucaille interestingly calls on science to rectify the problem. Khan repeatedly makes it clear to his

audience that his interpretation is far from “infallible”, as he is not a religious scholar by training (Khan 307). He calls on the Muslim tradition of peer review to restore the authenticity of the Quran should it be challenged by science, stating that “future *ulama* [Muslim religious scholars] will render it fully correct and will help Islam” (Khan 318). Here again we see Khan maintaining an internal critique of the text which complies with Islamic tradition, as he allows future Muslims to care for the problem using well-established methods. Standing in sharp contrast to Khan’s view, Bucaille’s remedy for the incomplete compatibility of science and the Quran relies not on Muslim commentary but on science itself. Acknowledging that “there are still parts of the Quran we cannot deal with” (Stenberg 261), Bucaille remains confident that these passages will eventually become clear as mankind develops a greater scientific knowledge (Stenberg 240). In Bucaille’s view, once the right discoveries have been made, it should come easily for Muslims to understand unclear or confusing passages in the Quran. In placing the burden of achieving harmony on science rather than religion, Bucaille departs from the interpretive tradition advocated by Khan and again showcases his externality to Islamic interpretive tradition and his exclusive focus on modern science as a fundamental tool for analyzing scripture.

In summary, objectively interpreting the Quran and Islam in light of modern scientific discoveries remains a central theme in the concordist works of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Maurice Bucaille. The methods they employ to prove the Quran compatible with science, however, differ considerably. Khan adopts a framework which relies on Islamic scholarly tradition, such as the interpretive style of Shah Wali Allah, as well as rational argument and scientific knowledge. This approach allows him to conclude that many Quranic passages may be properly interpreted as allegorical or idiomatic, which then makes their meaning compliant with scientific ideas. In contrast, Bucaille’s analytical framework relies almost exclusively on modern science, and he eschews most previous Muslim scholarship on the Quran in favor of his own highly systematized interpretation. His work focuses on reading modern scientific facts into the text in a literal fashion,

except when a nontraditional reading would corroborate the scientific viewpoint. For Bucaille, “modern science appears to be *the* fundamental instrument” to analyze the Quran (Stenberg 245). Despite these differences, however, both Khan and Bucaille arrive at a similar concordist conclusion: when properly interpreted, the Quran and Islam lie in complete harmony with the ideals of modern science.

Through this conclusion, both authors ultimately hope to inspire Muslims to actively seek a new understanding of their faith and its harmony with modern knowledge. Khan encourages his fellow Muslims to look to Western science for inspiration, but he also wishes to spark a movement among Muslims toward a distinctively Islamic religious science. He terms this theological movement a modern *‘ilm al-kalam*, envisioning a contemporary extension of the similarly named approach used by the first few generations of Muslim scholars to reconcile Islamic thought with Greek philosophy. Khan insists that Muslims everywhere are obligated to not only confess the truth of Islam but to strengthen the faith through logical and scientific analysis (Khan 313). Khan’s life was devoted to inspiring his community in this regard and “restoring Islam in India to its [previous] pristine dignity and prestige” (Troll 15). While Khan urged his Muslim contemporaries to imitate Western scientific pursuits while embracing the Islamic tradition of reconciliation, Bucaille encourages Muslims to look to the prevalence of scientific endeavors in the origins of their faith and then catalyze a similar modern movement toward science. In Bucaille’s mind “science is by nature Islamic” and he hopes that his work will inspire both a renewed interest in the Muslim faith and the continued pursuit of science itself (Stenberg 264). At its core, Bucaille’s work aims to “counteract the marginalization of Islam” in contemporary society, using science itself as the driving force of the counterattack (Stenberg 263). Thus, despite their many differences in methodology, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Maurice Bucaille share a common concordist goal: to inspire objective confidence in the Islamic faith in light of scientific knowledge and thereby stem the collapse of religion in modern society which Sadiq al-Azm considers inevitable.

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