

Natural Theology and the Qur'an

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Natural theology is reading the book of nature, not the book of revelation, for knowledge of God.¹ Natural theology, as a category employed by practitioners, originated within the history of Christianity, as passages from the New Testament

has been given as 685/1286 or 692/1293,¹¹ but recent scholarship argues for 715

scholars did not understand al-Ījī to be offering them any sort of compromise.²³ They implied that there was no purpose to evocations of the natural world in *ḥikm* texts if there was no positive agenda for the accurate, rationalist study of nature. The present article attempts to expand our knowledge of this discussion of natural theology and how a different perspective on the value of arguments in the vein of natural theology existed in works of *ḥikm*. General works on natural theology, when they do turn to Islam, tend to confine themselves to *ḥikm*, and then only to certain *ḥikm* *ḥikm*.²⁴

This paper focuses on the work of Naṣr al-Dīn al-Bayḥāwī, and compares and contrasts comments that he made about the natural world in his *ḥikm*.

The second reason why al-Bay āwī is interesting is that both al-Bay āwī and al-Ījī were associated with the Ilkhā

Actually, although observations alone would not be sufficient evidence for a ninth orb,⁴³ once one posits a ninth orb responsible for the daily motion, observations would – that this ninth orb encompasses all others because all celestial bodies move with the daily motion. Al-I fahānī, unfortunately, had no comment.

Al-Bay āwī’s discussion of the orbs included other criticisms of the astronomers’ presuppositions and conclusions that did spark a debate. For instance, al-Bay āwī wrote: ‘One might say (ā – ?–

imparted to that material. This suggests al-Bay āwī's willingness to consider something other than the *ḥikmī*'s position that the orbs were made up of uniform atoms that differed only in the accidents that God imparted.

Al-I fahānī's own position illustrates that there were scholars whose systems did not depend on the uniformity of celestial matter. He wrote: 'As for specifying the celestial bodies through their specific forms, it might be argued that it is because every celestial sphere would have matter differing in quiddity from the matter of another ... As for celestial bodies, every one of them would be specified by a particular quality because its matter receives only that quality.'⁵⁰ Thus, the immediate question was whether the differences were due to a form inherently connected to the

Not surprisingly, al-Bay ḥawī understood outstanding events of the past as disruptions of custom (عُتِبَ الْأَمْرُ بِالْعَادَةِ) so as to argue that there was no other way to understand events such as the political successes of the early Muslims except as a result of God's will.

Any circle passing through the north and south poles of the heavens would be perpendicular to the celestial equator. Al-Bay āwī argued that since the heavens did not inherently have an apex and nadir, their existence was an indication of God's wisdom and superiority over all who might oppose God.⁶⁹ Al-Rāzī had made a similar point when he noted that the designation of certain points as the poles, from among 804t7ipf(the)-5

which had the inclination to fall could also receive its opposite'.⁷⁸ Since the heavens do not fall, and since God created a stationary earth, we have another case where the findings of science match, and therefore communicate, the determinations of God's wisdom.

Al-Bay āwī's comments on Q. 55:7, (سَمَاءٌ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّحْكُومَةٍ تَرِيحُ فِيهَا السَّيِّدَاتُ الْمَكِينَاتُ) made a general point that creation could be a source for insight into the rationale⁷⁹ behind God's actions. Al-Bay āwī explained, first, that the heavens were the starting point and revealer of God's judgements (سَمَاءٌ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّحْكُومَةٍ تَرِيحُ فِيهَا السَّيِّدَاتُ الْمَكِينَاتُ).⁸⁰ God's setting the balance meant that God bestowed on each person was what each deserved (سَمَاءٌ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّحْكُومَةٍ تَرِيحُ فِيهَا السَّيِّدَاتُ الْمَكِينَاتُ). God also ordered the affairs of the world (سَمَاءٌ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّحْكُومَةٍ تَرِيحُ فِيهَا السَّيِّدَاتُ الْمَكِينَاتُ) and regulated the system of duties and obligations (سَمَاءٌ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّحْكُومَةٍ تَرِيحُ فِيهَا السَّيِّدَاتُ الْمَكِينَاتُ).⁸¹ Though al-Bay āwī did

original *fiṭ* – who were most able to grasp the import of God’s signs in nature. Those of uncorrupted intellect (*ā* – *c* – – *ā* | – *ḥ*) were those best suited to going beyond recognising that nature was a manifestation of God’s wisdom to comprehending the manifestations of God’s wisdom in nature. Gutas has found that *fiṭ* – – *ī* – could be very close to *ḥ* – (either ‘conjecture’ or ‘intuition’), suggesting that philosophers and scientists thought that some intellects were better suited than others to grasping the workings of nature.⁹⁶ Al-Bay āwī justified his interpretation by adducing a *ḥ* – *ī* in which Mu ammad said, ‘Woe to he who read it and did not contemplate it.’⁹⁷ Al-Bay āwī’s own comments referred back to the signs mentioned in *ū* – – – – – , so he must have been thinking of a way for certain people to conceive of or perceive these things without being led astray by their imagination and sense perception. *ā* – – – *ī*’s amenability to arguments in the vein of natural theology came from its acceptance of astronomy’s non-demonstrative arguments and conclusions as a starting point for reading the book of nature.

A key axis of the debate over astronomy’s non-demonstrative methods was about the reality of mental existents; al-Bay āwī expressed his concerns, in *T* – *ā* – *c* – – *ā* , over how the existence of mental existents was demonstrated. He reported that the philosophers (*ḥ* – *ā*) classified existence as either external (*ā* – *ḥ*) or mental (*ī*), whereas the *ṣ* – – *ū* classified existence into that which had no predecessor (*ā* – *ā* – – *ṣ* – *ū*) and into that which did.⁹⁸ Al-Bay āwī commented that he would not accept something’s mental existence without a proof.⁹⁹ Al-I fahānī explained: ‘If it were said: how is it possible to doubt something’s mental existence, while that thing is being conceived (*c* – – – *ṣ* – – *ṣ*), as conceiving it consists of its being in the mind, one would respond that while conceiving something consists of its existence in the mind, the conception of that thing is not that thing itself, but is instead added to that thing. Thus it is possible for us to doubt its mental existence, while a conception of it is being formed, and it is possible to deny something’s mental existence while acknowledging that it is being conceived of.’¹⁰⁰ Along those lines, al-Bay āwī denied that the Platonic forms were eternally (thus necessarily) existent.¹⁰¹

Al-Bay āwī’s predecessor Na īr al-Dīn al- ūsī wrote a brief treatise on a mode of existence known as – – – (‘the thing in itself’). This was a mode of existence that did not arise in *T* – *ā* – *c* – – *ā* (or in al-Ījī’s – *ā*), but was clearly important as a foundation for arguments made in the vein of natural theology.¹⁰² In that treatise, al- ūsī argued that mathematical ideas could have a real existence

It did not exist by having a position because it could not be described through the categories nor could it be attained through sense perception. The $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ could exist on its own without a connection to any other existent. One could come to a conclusion about the diagonal of a quadrilateral without comparison to any material quadrilateral. The $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ was not God because the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ entailed multiplicity, while God did not, nor was the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ equivalent to the forms because the forms existed through something else ($\text{ā} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$), while the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ did not.¹⁰⁵ Al-ūsī concluded that the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ was the universal intellect ($\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$), which he identified with the Qur'an's references to $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ and $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$.¹⁰⁶ Al-ūsī's argument about the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ meant that the source of astronomy's mathematical constructs was God and that something that existed in the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ was true even if its existence could not be established through deduction. Though I have not found al-Bay āwī discussing the concept of $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ in the $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$, accepting it as a mode of existence would certainly make arguments in the vein of natural theology, particularly those founded on astronomy's mathematical constructs, more authoritative.

Al-Bay āwī's position in $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$, that some theories of astronomy were not only not demonstrable but also possibly wrong, stemmed from the underlying position that mental existence without a corresponding external existent was impossible. Nevertheless, al-Bay āwī did hold, in $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$, that study of the natural world, including the heavens, could enhance one's appreciation of God's wisdom. Such study would be all the more worthwhile the more one had confidence in the findings of science. Al-Bay āwī's $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ ($\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$ $\text{ḥ} \text{ḥ} \text{ḥ}$) shows us that there was another discourse about the use of disciplines such as astronomy in religious texts, for fields such as astronomy could give greater insight into God's creation than they could.

in the vein of natural theology, or al-Bay āwī has said that while one cannot exclude the possibility of God creating everything in an instant, there are advantages to thinking about God’s involvement in the cosmos in a less occasionalist way.¹⁰⁸ At any rate, both conclusions favoured arguments in the vein of natural theology.

NOTES

1 See Matthew Barker, *De Deo et Mundi* (London: Printed for Nathaniel Ranew, 1674; accessed through <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>), B2v. These duties should be contrasted to those that are known only through revelation (Barker, *De Deo et Mundi*, A5r). Barker wrote: ‘By Natural Theology, that all may understand, I mean that knowledge of God, and our duty to Him, which the Light of Nature may lead Man up to, and which is *connatural* with his Soul. The Image of God upon Man in his first Creation, consisted in Knowledge as well as Holiness and the knowledge Adam had of his Creator, was partly by the Character of his Being being engraven upon his Soul, which is by some stiled [*verbum εμφορον*], an implanted Word, and partly by what the large power of his intellectual Faculty might gather from the Works of Creation; by both which he was led to God as his ultimate end.’ In support, Barker cited Romans 1:20. The Gifford Lectures (www.giffordlectures.org) in Scotland attest to the continuing currency of natural theology.

2 Romans 1:20 (NRSV) reads: ‘Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and

8 Anver Emon, 'Natural Law and Natural Rights in Islamic Law', *Journal of Law and Religion* 20 (2004–5), pp. 351–95, at p. 361.

9 The principle of moderation could be better understood from a study of nature. See Robert Morrison, *The Principles of the Islamic Law* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 71. The mean could not be determined without any assistance from revelation though. Rather, studying nature communicated the rationality of the *ḥikm*. Cf., too, al-Rāzī's comment on Q. 2:22 (*al-āiḥ* 31), 2nd edn (32 vols in 16, Beirut: Dār I yā³ al-Turāth al-^cArabī, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 111) which held that the connection between sickness, medicine and health mirrored the connection between humans' obligations, good deeds and reward.

10 Lutpi Ibrahim, 'The Relation of Reason and Revelation in the Theology of az-Zamakhsharī and al-Bay āwī', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 54 (1980), pp. 63–74 at p. 65. These limits surfaced in al-Bay āwī's comments on Q. 4:65, 3 1? ? 1 ? fi 3 ? 13 - 3 3 31

11 A.H. Johns, 'Exegesis as an Expression of Islamic Humanism: Approaches, Concerns, and Insights of al-Baydāwī', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22 (1999), pp. 37–58, at p. 38.

12 Charles Melville, 'Qā ī Bay āwī's zā ā ī in the ī - ? ī : An Early Witness of the Text' in A.A. Seyed-Gohrab and S. McGlinn (eds), *Islamic Studies* 3 (Amsterdam and West Lafayette, IN: Rozenberg Publishers and Purdue University Press, 2007), pp. 91–102, at pp. 94–5.

13 Andrew March, 'The Post-Legal Ethics of Tariq Ramadan: Persuasion and Performance in *Islamic Law and Ethics*', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (2010), pp. 253–73. Al-Bay āwī, the focus of this article, has been cited by more modern practitioners of ī ī. See al-^cAzīz ājī, *al-ā ī 3* (Damascus: Dār al- asanayn, 2000), pp. 377–81, esp. p. 377.

14 Al-Nisābūrī's ī, entitled ā ī ā followed (but did not always agree with) al-Rāzī's ī ī. See Morrison, *The Principles of the Islamic Law*, ch. 6. Ahmad Dallal (Ahmad Dallal, art. 'Science and the Qur'an' in *Islamic Studies* 3 ā) with justification called (p. 551) al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) ī (*al-āiḥ* 31) the most important example of scientifically and philosophically-informed ī. See also Tariq Jaffer, *al-ā ī* (unpublished PhD dissertation: Yale University, 2005).

290a), the proof that the moon could not be rotating in an epicycle is that the same side of the moon is always visible.

28 Al-Ghazālī (in

38 For more commentaries on *T-ā c - ā*, see Carl Brockelmann, *Leiden: Brill, 1943*, vol. 1, p. 533. Al-I fahānī's own commentary spawned a gloss by al-Jurjānī and a super-gloss by al-Dawwānī. For a better list, see, now, Robert Wisnovsky, 'The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-classical (1100–1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations' in P. Adamson, H. Baltussen and M.W.F. Stone (eds), *83:1–2* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2004), pp. 149–91, at p. 177.

39 Al-Bay āwī, *T-ā c - ā*, pp. 133–5.

40 Al-Bay āwī, *T-ā c - ā*, p. 138 ff.

41 Al-Bay āwī, *T-ā c - ā*, p. 138. Al-Bay āwī wrote that, according to the philosophers (*h-ā*), the simple bodies were spherical since bodies of a single nature did not require multiple forms. Al-I fahānī's commentary (*-fā c - zā*, p. 258) agreed that the simple bodies were spherical.

42 Al-Bay āwī, *T-ā c - ā*, p. 139. Al-I fahānī's commentary (*-fā c - zā*, p. 258) laid out, from the point of view of the astronomers, some of the philosophical principles of the investigation of the celestial orbs. These were: attributing each motion to a single body moving through its essence (*h-ā*), a body moving what it encompasses accidentally (*h-ā*), the simple motions of the orbs were continuous, the orbs' motions were uniform, and the orbs cannot be pierced or mended.

43 Al- ūsī had acknowledged the possibility of attributing the daily motion to the cosmos as a whole in the *h-ā*. See al- ūsī, *-ī - ī - Tū ī* (ed., tr. and comm. F.J. Ragep (2 vols. New York, Heidelberg, Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1993), vol. 1, p. 140. Al- ūsī's reason for preferring a nine-orb cosmos, that the fixed stars had two motions, was identified as incorrect by al-Shīrāzī (*-c - ā -ī*, Istanbul Fatih MS 3175/2, 168r).

44 Al-Bay āwī, *T-ā c - ā*, p. 139.

45 Sabra, 'Science and Theology', p. 35. Sabra discussed both the precedent for the idea of rings in Ptolemy's *h-ā* and the later appearance of the idea in al-Ījī's *-ā*.

46 Al-I fahānī, *-fā c - zā*, p. 262.

47 Al-Jurjānī, *ā ? -ī - c - ā* (in the margins of *-fā c - zā*), p. 258. Arabic: *h-ā*

53 Walid Saleh, *Al-Bay āwī* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 2.

54 Al-Bay āwī mentioned his *ā* [text](#)thisnu.53(i)-2873.3his

p. 100. usayn pointed to this comment as evidence both for al-Bay āwī's engagement with science and for al-Bay āwī's dependence on al-Rāzī's *ḥikmah*.

87 Al-Rāzī, *ḥikmah*, vol. 20, p. 148.

88 Al-Bay āwī, *Tārīkh al-ḥikmah*, pp. 55–69.

89 The geometers may have been primarily a group of sceptics, rather than practitioners of the mathematical sciences. Al-Ijī (van Ess, *al-Ijī*, pp. 274–6) understood the *ḥikmah* to be sceptics who denied the possibility of real knowledge beyond sense perception. Still, al-Ijī (p. 276) saw himself as one who borrowed a great deal from geometry, so these *ḥikmah* may have been, perhaps for al-Bay āwī as well, a friendly group.

90 Al-Bay āwī, *Tārīkh al-ḥikmah*, pp. 65–6.

91 Al-Bay āwī, *Tārīkh al-ḥikmah*, p. 67.

92 Al-I fahānī, *al-ḥikmah*, p. 76. 'The starting point of the intellect in theological issues (al-ḥikmah) is perceived by the estimative faculty (al-qalb)'.¹

93 Ni ām al-Dīn al-Nīsābūrī (Morrison, *al-Nīsābūrī*, p. 70) wrote that *fi* and *ḥikmah* had similar methodologies.

94 Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-ʿUr ī (d. 664/1266) was the astronomer most concerned with the epistemological validity of astronomy. See al-ʿUr ī (ed. Saliba), *al-ʿUr ī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wa da al-ʿArabiyya, 1990), p. 212. See also George Saliba, *Islamic Cosmology* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), p. 106. For more on astronomers' arguments for the validity of their conclusions, see Bernard R. Goldstein, 'The Arabic Version of Ptolemy's Planetary Hypotheses',

106 Al-ūsī, *al-āwā'ir*, p. 467. Al-Bay āwī's comment on Q. 85:22 (*al-āwā'ir*, vol. 2, p. 586) held only that *al-āwā'ir* existed above the seventh heaven. Al-Bay āwī, in his comments on Q. 6:59 (*al-āwā'ir*, vol. 1, p. 304), explained that the *al-āwā'ir* could mean God's knowledge or *al-āwā'ir*.

107 Al-Bay āwī, *al-āwā'ir*, vol. 1, p. 37. Subsequently, in his comments, al-Bay āwī noted that rain was caused by the clouds and the skies, as well as by the orbs (*al-āwā'ir*).

108 Al-Rāzī (*al-āwā'ir*, vol. 2, pp. 110–1) had made similar arguments. One potential distinction between the two commentators was that al-Rāzī created the appearance of natural causes according to habit (*al-āwā'ir*, vol. 2, pp. 111), whereas al-Bay āwī left open that God actually created in the water a power (*al-āwā'ir*, vol. 1, p. 37), *al-āwā'ir* ... *al-āwā'ir*. On al-Rāzī's comments, see also Dallal, 'Science and the Qur'ān', p. 549.