

SCIENTIFIC HISTORY AND THE MUSLIM WORLDVIEW

David Blanks

Are the disbelievers unaware that the heavens and the earth were but one solid mass which We tore asunder, and that We made every living thing from water?

Qur'an, Al-Anbiyā 21.30

Despite its claims to universalism, big history is, at its core, a Western / European reaction to religious thinking, especially Christian thinking.¹ Its foremost practitioners (to date) tout it as a modern approach to knowledge for modern people – by which they mean everyone but which ends up being for only those who share their secular outlook.² In this sense, it is exclusionary, and a great deal of time,

1 David Christian, *Maps of Time*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 1–12; idem, ‘The Return of Universal History’, *History and Theory*, vol. 49, no. 4, December, 2010, pp. 6–27.

2 As big historian Fred Spier writes: ‘From a very detached point of view, one may argue that, in principle, there is no reason why scientific principles ought to be applied to analyzing data in the present to reconstruct an account of events that may once have happened. One may, for example, decide to accept literally what sacred texts have to say regarding the past. This may not be scientific in the current meaning of the term, but I cannot see any reason why this would be an issue as long as one does not care about science’. Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 210, note 9.

energy and anxiety is expended doing boundary work and ‘keeping the barbarians at the gates’.³ It might even be said that big history was born in opposition to religion, specifically, Christian fundamentalism.⁴ There is a pervasive fear of, and distaste for, religiosity and spirituality of any sort that is palpable in the halls of big history conferences.⁵

Moreover, big history has not yet attempted to analyze religion in any meaningful way. In the aggregate, religion is all but ignored: an unsightly bit of theoretical untidiness that is best swept under the macrocosmic rug. World religions and spiritual processes appear in big history only as what psychologist Akop Nazaretyan calls ‘epiphenomena of material structures’.⁶

One can find, it is true, a somewhat more benign (albeit still condescending) attitude towards non-Christian religions. Non-Westerners are given a pass on the harsh criticisms reserved for fundamentalist Christianity because it is politically correct (from a liberal viewpoint) to ‘tolerate’ them and because people living in the developing world seem to have a ‘plausible excuse’ for not yet being ‘modern’. But the overall position is the same. There is no room in big history’s house for anyone who will not take the vow of ‘empirical evidence and scholarly interpretation’, a phrase Fred Spier repeats like a mantra (five times in the first ten paragraphs) of a recent essay in which he unsuccessfully attempts to defend the border between big history, on the one hand, and religion, spirituality and metaphysics on the other.⁷

The continuous engagement in such boundary work is profoundly shortsighted. Big historians have a tendency to preach the same naïve

3 Cf. Thomas Gleryn, ‘Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 48, no. 6, December, 1983, pp. 781–795.

4 Alexander Mirkovic, ‘Big History and the End of History’, *Evolution: A Big History Perspective*, eds. Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev and Barry Rodrigue, Volgograd: Uchitel Publishing, 2011, pp. 49–70.

5 William Katerberg, ‘Myth, Meaning and the Scientific Method’, *Origins*, vol. 5, no. 12, December 2015, pp. 3–12.

6 ‘Big (Universal) History Paradigm: Versions and Approaches’ *Evolution: A Big History Perspective*, eds. Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev and Barry Rodrigue, Volgograd: Uchitel Publishing, 2011, pp. 82–100.

7 Fred Spier, ‘Big History is Not an All-Encompassing World View’, *Origins*, vol. 6, no. 2, February 2016, pp. 3–5.

faith in the authority of nature and reason that Carl Becker found in Enlightenment philosophers: ‘They defended toleration valiantly, but could with difficulty tolerate priests. They denied that miracles ever happened, but believed in the perfectibility of the human race’.⁸ Perhaps this is not so surprising, given that elements of big history derive precisely from this same eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinking.⁹ But instead of barring the gates to those with different interpretations of what the ‘scientific creation myth’ means, we should be opening our classrooms and journals to spiritually-oriented students and researchers who – and this is something that most Westerners have not really grasped – *for the most part share* our understanding of cosmology, geology, evolution, and the history of people and civilizations.

How might the Islamic world react then to big history? It is difficult to say insofar as there has not been much of an attempt to introduce it either in terms of teaching or research, but, in my estimation, there is a great deal of potential there, if we can remain open to new interpretations of what big history means.¹⁰

There are certainly those who are skeptical on both sides. Even as the hardcore science types in the big history movement try to keep out the mystics, there are Muslim creationists trying to keep people from gravitating toward what they perceive to be the Western, scientific, imperialist camp. It’s a cultural cold war – but the stakes are low; there hasn’t been much momentum built on either side. And this is what I want to explore, briefly, here in this paper, pointing, hopefully, to some further avenues of research and cooperation. Are these worldviews mutually exclusive? Or is there inter-denominational space where they could co-exist?

Theologically, it is easier to reconcile Islam to big bang cosmology and the theory of evolution than it was, say, for mid-nineteenth-century

8 Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932, p. 31.

9 Ian Hesketh, *The Science of History in Victorian Britain: Making the Past Speak*, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011.

10 Cf. David Blanks, ‘Cosmic Evolution in the Cradle of Civilization,’ *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, Vol. II, *Education and Understanding: Big History around the World*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev, Delhi: Primus Books, 2016, pp. 295–317.

mainstream Protestants and Catholics or than it is today for evangelical Baptists today. To the extent that conflict arises, it is because it is being stirred up by radical clerics with a political agenda such as Harun Yahya.¹¹ American academics by and large fail to see this point. They are accustomed to the relatively weak acceptance of the theory of evolution in the United States and to a rather widespread anti-science sentiment that has led to a failure to accept warnings about climate change. As a result, they tend to conflate all religious fundamentalisms and assume that Islam is similar in this regard to evangelic Protestantism. But in truth, Muslims in the U.S. fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum in terms of their willingness to accept the pronouncements of science – far ahead of historically black Protestant churches, evangelical Protestants, Mormons, and Jehova’s Witnesses.¹² Part of this is because the descriptions of the creation of man and the universe are less detailed in the Qur’an than they are in the Bible, but also because there is no organized hierarchy on the Muslim side trying to push a creationist agenda. (And, in any case, most of the world’s 1.6+ billion Muslims have more pressing problems to worry about.)

It must also be remembered that the data on Muslim attitudes towards scientific approaches to natural and social history are grossly inadequate. Ian Tattersall, the curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, once remarked that you could take all of the fossil evidence of human pre-history and fit it in the back of a pickup truck.¹³ This is very much like the state of sociological research in the Muslim world. We base sweeping assertions about the compatibility of Islam and modern science on what is in fact very little evidence.

Anecdotally, from, if you will, an ethnographic perspective, I have encountered greater resistance to the idea of evolution among my students at Arkansas Tech University than I ever did among the predominantly Muslim students that I taught for more than twenty years at the American University in Cairo. In Egypt, I never encountered any

11 Salman Hameed, ‘Bracing for Islamic Creationism’, *Science*, vol. 322, no. 5908, 12 December 2008, pp. 1637–1638.

12 ‘Religious Differences on the Question of Evolution,’ Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, 4 February 2009, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/02/04/religious-differences-on-the-question-of-evolution>>.

13 Ian Tattersall in Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003, p. 440.

objections to the precepts of big history. The more conservative and religious-minded among my students had no problem reconciling big history with their understanding of Islam, which amounts to what I think we can call a Muslim version of Intelligent Design.¹⁴

The trouble, as noted, is that there are some in big history who are reluctant to admit those who think in a religious way into their kingdom, much less into the castle: but this runs contrary to the interests of the discipline in the long run. Big historians fear that scholars from other disciplines, especially scientists, who are their cultural heroes, will not take them seriously if they compromise even a little bit on their hardcore atheist principles. There is this idea that allowing for religious worldviews, no matter how anodyne, somehow weakens the scientific legitimacy of the big history project.

It doesn't have to be this way, though, and in many ways, this is massively counter-productive, at least if our main goals are to increase scientific literacy worldwide and to help turn people's attention toward global environmental issues. It will not be easy to overcome this obstacle to dialogue, however, because it stems from an inherent contradiction in the big history approach, where its claims to scientific objectivity bump up against its civic ethos. This has led some scholars to see big history not so much as scientific history but more as a form of popular science.¹⁵ Whether or not one accepts this line of reasoning, the fact remains that big history paints itself into a philosophical corner when it claims both to be value-free and a solution to today's global problems. This is a theoretical conundrum that it has yet to solve.¹⁶

This is why the way forward, it seems to me, must include people who share our concerns for the future of the planet, and who are scientific-minded, but who also might see different meanings in big history than those who currently control the discourse find admissible.

14 Cf. Rana Dajani, 'Why I Teach Evolution to Muslim Students', *Nature*, vol. 520, no. 408, 23 April 2015, <<http://www.nature.com/news/why-i-teach-evolution-to-muslim-students-1.17364>>. See also Blanks, 'Cosmic Evolution', *passim*.

15 Ian Hesketh, 'The Story of Big History,' *History of the Present*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 171–202.

16 See Will Katerberg, 'Myth, Meaning and Scientific Method in Big History', *Origins*, vol. 5, no. 12, pp. 3–10.

There is already in-fighting within the tight confines of the citadel – arguments about which paradigm should dominate big history: energy flows, thresholds, Goldilocks conditions, collective learning, etc. – all built (arguably) on the medieval Christian premise that there must be a single unified model through which the world operates and through which it can be understood.

But maybe this is not the case. Maybe, as many scientists already argue, multi-pronged approaches to knowledge are needed. Maybe big history itself is the theory of everything and the in-fighting over the details of how it works is a sideshow to the real job of gaining as many allies as possible, which requires encouraging a diversity of opinion.

The future of big history, it seems to me, lies outside the ramparts, in the distant villages and fields, and out beyond the borders. It lies with inclusive works such as the new three-volume series, *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, issued by Primus Books, a new academic division of the venerable textbook publishing house Ratna Sagar.¹⁷

The appearance of this series celebrates a more international outlook for big history. With more than 100 contributors from 30 disciplines and 20 countries, this body of work comes down on the side of diversity and inclusion. It veers away from a narrow insistence on a specific scientific approach and adopts a broader worldview that sees big history as a collective human experience that has emerged over the past fifty years as part of a global intellectual conjuncture. It is not so much ‘interdisciplinary’ as it is ‘transdisciplinary’, which is to say more than the sum of its parts. This version of big history evokes the ethos of cooperation and environmentalism, an optimistic worldview that looks to the future and infuses the past with meaning in a way that a narrowly construed scientific approach is incapable of doing.

The hope of building a wall between science and religion is an ideological fantasy that reflects big history’s positivist, nineteenth-century, European origins. Those who insist on so doing exhibit a naïve faith in objectivity, and an uninformed and unreflective philosophical

17 Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev, eds., *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, three volumes, Delhi: Primus Books, 2015–2017.

position. But there is no need to fear religion to that extent and indeed this is a fairly recent attitudinal shift. Prior to having established an association and a journal, and prior to obtaining the funding and international recognition that they now have, there was a much greater willingness to attend conferences and collaborate on research with scholars from different faiths who unabashedly combined their science with their spirituality.¹⁸

The Muslim world is vast. Muslims do not all think alike. And Islam is not inherently opposed to big bang cosmology, evolution or anything else that can be demonstrated through empirical evidence and the best scholarly methods. Many Muslims reserve for themselves the right to decide for themselves what it all means. While some might argue that thinking scientifically is the linchpin of modernity, of what it means to be modern, I would like to stake a claim for individualism, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression. These notions too are part and parcel of what it means to be modern. We are all in this together.



Plate 1: World History class, American University in Cairo, Egypt, 2011 during a student presentation on Brazil and Latin America. Professor David Blanks is on the right. Photograph by Nevien Samir.

¹⁸ I am thinking, for example, of the Hawaii conference run by the Genets (2008); the GF2045 conference in Moscow (2012); and the Radboud Prestige Lectures on the New Testament held in the Netherlands (2013).

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