God's Action in Nature: Science And Theology From An Islamic Perspective

Institution: Sharif University of Technology (SUT), Department of Philosophy of Science, Tehran-Iran

Instructor: Pirooz Fatoorchi

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to the main issues in the field of “Science and Theology” from an Islamic perspective.

The characteristic of this course is that it concentrates on the topic of “Divine action” which implicitly or explicitly, permeates much of current discussions in the field of “Science and Theology”, and allows a variety of particular theological and philosophical issues to be pursued under a general title. While references will be made to the contemporary Christian approaches to understanding God’s action in nature, the primary focus will be on various models of Divine action based on three major schools of Islamic thought. This will include Kalam (classical theology), Hikmah (Philosophy) and Irfan (Mysticism) points of view.

A range of scientific topics will be dealt with (sections 7-16). Each of these sections has three main parts: a) an introduction to a particular field of natural science. This includes: an overview of related theoretical and conceptual developments and a brief note on the topics which have significant theological/ philosophical implications. b) a consideration of challenges and implications raised by the given field for the notion of Divine action referring to the current literature on “Science and Theology”. c) an examination of various models for Divine action in the light of scientific perspectives. Although, a special attention will be paid to schools of Islamic thought, some prominent Christian approaches and models will be explored. Here the comparative and inter-theological study plays a key role.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the interdisciplinary field of “Science and Theology” to Iranian students and scholars through focusing on a governing theme of the current “Science and theology” debates, i.e., Divine action, and to help them develop an ability to critically reflect on the primary issues in this field.
- To show how the topic: “God’s Action in Nature” is a foundational theme in “Science and Theology” debates and how it has significant theological and philosophical dimensions.
- To provide some grounds for deliberated and appropriate involvement of Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism in the current “Science and Theology” debates and to illustrate that it could help enrich the field. Also, the course will aim to provide the students and other participants with an appreciation and
intellectual skill for the use of Islamic relevant sources in “Science and Theology” debates particularly in issues concerned with “God’s action in nature”.

- To articulate some commonalities and points of divergence between Christian theology and major schools of Islamic thought in understanding and interpreting Divine action specially within the field of “Science and Theology”. This would hopefully play a key role in constructive dialogue and mutual enrichment between Christian and Islamic theologians in this growing field.

This course is intended to provide graduate level students in department of philosophy of science at SUT and other participants with an understanding of the major themes and debates in the growing field of “Science and Theology” and to facilitate formation of relevant literature within Islamic culture.

The proposed course is a 2-credit course and will be offered in Fall-2000. The course meets once a week and contains 17 sections: 16 main sections and one section for final examination. Each main section includes 1.5-hour lecture and discussions (30 minutes) sessions. About 15-20 students are expected to enroll.

Because it would be of great help to have a scientist involved with such discourse, two guest lectures (sections 7, 8) will be given by Professor Mehdi Golshani. He is a distinguished professor of physics at Sharif University of Technology and head of department of Basic Sciences of the “Iranian Academy of Sciences” and director of “Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies (IHCS)”, Tehran-Iran. Prof. Golshani is one of the judges of the “Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion” and he was a faculty member of SSQ conference (CTNS-1998).

STUDENT EVALUATION

- **Participation**
  At the end of each lecture, students will be asked to participate in a discussion about the given lecture. The participation receives up to 16% of the grade. Grading on this portion of the course will be based on the instructor’s evaluation of participation.

- **Home questions**
  Every week, students will be required to write their answers to the questions (5 questions per week) designed by the instructor. These questions will be addressed at the end of each session, and will cover the main theses of the course. This portion of the course will count in total 16% of the grade.

- **Four short papers**
  Each student will write four short papers (3-5 pp) on relevant areas of the course. These papers should be based on sources which are presented in Required readings. Specific guidelines will be given at the beginning of the course. These are due two weeks to 20 days after completion of the course. The four short papers will count collectively for 28% of the grade.

- **Readings**
  Each of the 16 main sections of the course has a specific “Required Reading” list.
In addition, there are “Recommended Reading” list. They are given so as to help students pursue particular topics of special interest in more depth. Copies of all required readings and a number of recommended readings will be on reserve in the SUT library.

- **Final examination**
  In order to assess specific understanding of the total course content in depth, finally a written examination will be conducted (section 17 of the course). The final exam will count 40% of the grade.

**COURSE OUTLINE**

Sections 1-3: Introduction
Section 4: Current Christian Approaches to Divine Action.
Sections 5-6: Islamic Approaches to God’s Action in Nature
Sections 7, 8: Quantum Theory and Divine Providence.
Sections 9, 10: Modern Cosmology and the Problem of the Beginning of the Universe
Sections 11, 12: Evolutionary Biology and Continuous Creation
Sections 13, 14: Chaos Theory and God’s Action in Nature
Sections 15, 16: Theological Implications of Scientific Approaches to Mind and Consciousness
Section 17. Final Examination

**Sections 1-3: Introduction**

**Content of lectures:**

What is “Science and Theology” field? (Some preliminary notes on important features of contemporary ‘Science and Theology” debates).

Recent typologies of the relationships between science and theology, the topics include:

- “Four-theses” approach of Ian Barbour
- “Eight-Fold” typology of Ted Peters
- Arthur Peacocke’s eight conceivable relationships between science and theology
- “Nine-fold” classification of Willem Drees

(Approaches of John Haught, Philip Hefner and complementarity thesis may be indicated if time permits)

Divine action as a central theme for the field of “Science and Theology”.

**Required Reading:**

Section 4: Current Christian Approaches to Divine Action

Content of Lecture:

Some historical notes on Christian approaches to Divine action.

Brief note on current Christian theological approaches to Divine action particularly in the context of “Science and Theology” field. (Neo-Thomism, Process theology, Uniform action, Personal agent, Assessment).

Required Reading:


Sections 5, 6: Islamic Approaches to God’s Action in Nature

Content of Lectures:

These lectures center on “Divine action” from major schools of Islamic classical Theology (Kalam), Philosophy (Hikmah) and Mysticism (Irfan). Topics include:

- A historical introduction to Islamic interpretations of God’s action in nature.
- Divine action from Kalam point of view (Ash’arites, Mu’tazilites, Imamites).
- God’s action in nature from Hikmah point of view (Peripatetic, Illuminationist, Transcendent Hikmah).
- Divine action from Mysticism (Irfan) perspective.

Required Reading:

Sections 7, 8: Quantum Theory and Divine Providence

Content of Lectures:

A short introduction to Quantum Theory. (Part of a guest lecture by Prof. Golshani).

A brief survey of Quantum Mechanics interpretations: Copenhagen interpretation, many-universes interpretation and some other interpretations if time permits. (Part of a guest lecture by Prof. Golshani).

Philosophical trends and backgrounds in interpreting Quantum Mechanics.

Indeterminism, uncertainty, chance and the nature of reality in relevant interpretations of Quantum Mechanics.

Divine providence and quantum possibilities. (Is God active in quantum events?).

Required Reading:


Sections 9, 10: Modern Cosmology and the Problem of the Beginning of the Universe

Content of Lectures:

The problem of the Beginning in the context of cosmological models and theories: Steady-State theory, Big Bang theory, oscillating, universe hypothesis, Quantum Cosmology, Inflationary models.

Some examples of philosophical trends among eminent cosmologists, e.g., Hoyle, Weinberg and Hawking.

A classification of philosophical/ theological responses to and implications of relevant cosmological models and theories in the field of Science and Theology. (With attention to Christian models of cosmological creation).

Creation and the problem of the Beginning of the universe in the context of Islamic Theology (Kalam) and Philosophy (Hikmah) in the context of recent “Science and Theology” debates.

Required Reading:


Sections 11, 12: Evolutionary Biology and Continuous Creation

Content of Lectures

The evolution of evolutionary theories in Biology (Some brief historical perspectives).

Ways of relating Divine action and Evolution (A classification of theses).

Evolution and continuous creation.

Required Reading:


**Sections 13, 14: Chaos Theory and God’s Action in Nature**

**Content of Lectures:**

A scientific introduction to Chaos Theory.

Some philosophical/ theological reflections on Chaos: unpredictability, randomness and determinism.

The relevance of Chaos theory for Divine action.

**Required Reading:**


**Sections 15, 16: Theological Implications of Scientific Approaches to Mind and Consciousness**

**Content of Lectures**

A brief review of contemporary perspectives on mind-brain (body) problem.

An outline of recent scientific approaches to mind and consciousness.

Theological significance of consciousness, and mind-brain problem in light of scientific attitudes and some concluding remarks on Divine action in the human realm (with particular attention to *Transcendent Hikmah*).
Required Reading:

_____________. Mind-Brain Problem and Its Relevance to the “Science and Theology” Field. (Forthcoming Essay).

Section 17. Final Examination

Recommended Reading and Bibliography

Arabic/Persian:


English:


_______, Nancey Murphy, Theo Meyering and Michael Arbib, eds. 1999. *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*. Vatican Observatory and CTNS.


