BOOK REVIEW

Osman Bakar - Qur'anic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology

(Gadong: UBD Press; Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2016). 216 pp.
ISBN 978-967-0526-26-3 (Hardback); ISBN 978-967-0526-25-6 (pbk.)

by Senad Mrahorović, *Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID)*

Since the publication of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's pioneering work on traditional Islamic cosmology, entitled *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), there has not been a major contribution in English on the same subject and from the same point of view until this latest book by Osman Bakar, entitled *Qur'anic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology*. As a leading authority on the philosophy of science, Dr Bakar has already written a great deal on Islamic cosmology, but never in such an extensive and meticulous study as this.

From the title of the book, one is able to discern the two main subjects examined by the author, the first being the Qur'anic depictions of the Universe and the second the nature of Islamic cosmology as founded on the Qur'an and its classical exegesis, the latter of which is impregnated with rich scientific, philosophical and spiritual data concerning the universe as envisaged within the traditional Islamic realm. As interpreted by the author, the Qur'an's cosmos displays numerous images of its realities, each reality or image being distinct, while at the same time maintaining an interrelatedness with other realities forming, so to speak, a unity in an infinite multiplicity contained in the cosmos – or what Islamic philosophers call the correlation between universal (*kullī*) and particular (*juz'ī*). In his erudite study, Bakar discusses five of the most important images of the cosmos portrayed in the Qur'an.

The book is divided into seven chapters complemented by an introduction, bibliography and a very detailed index of names and technical terms. The first two chapters are dedicated to an elaboration of several questions concerning the definition of the universe, its relationship with God as its Creator and Sustainer, and various technical terms derived from the Qur'an, and which were subsequently developed and used by Muslim philosophers and scientists for over a millennium

(chapter one). The text then moves on (in chapter two) to the multiple images of the universe found in the Qur'anic text, their scientific and spiritual implications and how all those images or aspects of the cosmic realm (viewed as *al-‘ālam al-kabīr*, macrocosm) relate to humanity (viewed as *al-ālam al-ṣaghīr*, microcosm) and its varying perspectives. The author has explained all the aforementioned philosophical and scientific ideas remarkably well, providing them as a necessary introduction, as well as an essential underpinning, for the material presented in the following five chapters of the book.

The first picture of the Universe, related to the astronomical aspect of the cosmos, is discussed in the third chapter. This aspect of the cosmos deals mainly with the configuration of the celestial bodies, their various constructions and properties, as well as their impact on the Earth. Having defined astronomy in accordance with both modern and traditional sciences, Bakar provides his readers with not only the essential astronomical concepts used within the classical Islamic sources, but also with the fundamental advancements of modern science and the continuous discoveries that have changed scientific perceptions of the universe. In doing so, the author has succeeded in proposing some new ideas and bringing fresh insight to the Islamic interpretation of the astronomical conception of the universe, while at the same time maintaining a close link with the cosmological structure provided by the Qur'an. The best example of this reinterpretation of certain Qur'anic verses concerning the astronomical aspect of the cosmos is the notion of "lower heavens" (*samā' al-dunyā*) which, according to Bakar, requires a new understanding based on the "rapid advancement of astronomical knowledge in modern times..." (Bakar, p. 67). Added to this are the author's constant exegetical inputs, based on his sketching of the scientific path of Muslim scholars in the field of astronomy based on the Qur'anic revelation and frequently accompanied by both classical and modern *Tafsīr* works.

In the fourth chapter, the author presents another picture of the universe, namely, its architectural aspect. The best evidence that the cosmos did not come into being on its own or by some unexplainable chance is its architectural setting, specific regulation and, most visible of all, its beautiful arrangement designed by God as its sole Creator and Sustainer. The author cites a number of Qur'anic verses that clearly point out, in symbolic terms, an intentional and well-planned design of the whole cosmos. Within this cosmos the planet Earth is skillfully built as a perfect planetary home for human beings, with its firm and fully functional floor and wonderfully structured roof and ceiling, all of which are adorned with dazzling natural phenomena. The author then proceeds to explain that the firmness of these gigantic celestial bodies and the precise order that governs them depends on the Divine Will or, scientifically speaking, on the natural force of gravity.

The picture of the cosmos as a Divine kingdom is portrayed in the fifth chapter. Here emphasis is placed on the universe as an immensely expanded theatric stage where God directs and rules the drama of creation using His loyal cosmic agents, known in Arabic as *junūd*. In this regard, the cosmos is a Divine kingdom which “extends from the Divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*) to the furthest region of the material world where the Earth is located” (Bakar, pp. 89-90). Such a kingdom certainly necessitates a constant and precise governing of its affairs, which in scientific terms is called natural laws. However, based on the Qur’anic revelation, the universe is governed and ruled by the Divine law (*sunnat*“ *Allāh*) comprising countless forces and beings, especially those of angelic nature, to which certain powers are given to keep the vast expanses of the universe in harmony and order. A number of Qur’anic verses are discussed by the author in this regard.

The sixth chapter of the book depicts the Universe as a world of light (*nūr*) and darkness (*ẓulumāt*). As the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) of the cosmos, where light interplays with darkness, God is also called *al-Nūr* or Absolute Light. This Divine Light encompasses all other lights that, in hierarchical order, start with the angels (known in Islamic philosophy as *‘uqūl*, intellects), which are entirely created out of light, before extending down to the material world, where numerous celestial objects (such as stars and planets) are endowed with this luminous quality, either directly or through reflection. The author examines several Qur’anic verses that deal with the notions of light and darkness and their different connotations. However, the most intriguing lesson to be learned from this aspect of the universe is perhaps the spiritual light (or the light of Divine Names and Qualities) that manifests itself in the “perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), whose heart has been purified as a result of his total devotion to God and surrender to His Will.

In the final and most extensive chapter of the book, entitled “The Human Microcosm in the Qur’an: The Universe within Man,” Professor Bakar elaborates on one of the most important subjects of Islamic cosmology: the human microcosm. According to traditional Islamic cosmology, this concept occupies a central place in the cosmos, known as the macrocosm. Although the term microcosm is not directly mentioned in the Qur’an, the author has remarkably managed to establish it within the Qur’anic text by carefully examining nine different but related passages or sets of verses dealing with the common theme of the origin and nature of man. Each of the said passages deals with different aspects of humanity and his nature in relation to the rest of Divine creation. As a result of this meticulous and comprehensive investigation, involving explanation of various Qur’anic and Islamic scholarly terms referring to human beings – their creation, characteristics, intellectual and ethical nature, function and their eschatological ends, among others – the author is able to conclude that the idea of humanity as a microcosm “is a key conceptual component of the Qur’anic worldview” (Bakar, pp. 190).

Finally, this book may be regarded as a significant contribution to cosmology, especially in the Islamic scientific realm, penned as it is by one of the foremost authorities in the history and philosophy of Islamic science. Thus, the book is strongly recommended not only for students of Islamic studies, but also for a wider audience interested in exploring one of the most important subjects in traditional Islamic scholarship.