

## **Bridging Salafi Tafsir and Modern Science: A Study of the Interaction of Religion and Science**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to examine the interaction between the Salafi approach to religious interpretation and the development of modern science, focusing on their responses to the theory of evolution, cosmology, and other scientific phenomena. This study is motivated by the Salafi approach, which is known for its effort to preserve the purity of Islamic teachings through a literal understanding of the Qur'an and hadith. Using a qualitative method with an in-depth literature study of Salafi scholars' writings, exegetical works, and academic sources, the data are analyzed through a thematic approach to understand the interaction with and responses to science within the Salafi doctrinal framework. The findings show that Salafi exegesis tends to adopt a selective stance toward modern science. They accept scientific theories or findings as long as they do not contradict textual evidence (*dalil naqli*), but reject ideas considered potentially harmful to Islamic creed or diminishing the purity of the textual meaning. This stance affirms the Salafi role in maintaining Islamic orthodoxy while simultaneously opening space for possible dialogue with the scientific community. Thus, the integration of religion and science from a Salafi perspective remains possible, provided that it is situated within a framework of respect for the sacred texts. Ultimately, this approach may serve as an important contribution to enriching mutual understanding amid the challenges of the modern era. This article contributes to the discourse on religion–science integration by positioning revelation as the primary epistemology. This model expands the typology of religion–science relations in Islamic studies and provides insight into the dynamics of Islamic orthodoxy in the modern era.

**Keywords:** *Religion–science interaction, Salafi exegesis, Modern science*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini bertujuan membahas interaksi antara pendekatan Salafi terhadap penafsiran agama dan perkembangan ilmu pengetahuan modern, dengan fokus pada respons mereka terhadap teori evolusi, kosmologi, dan fenomena ilmiah lainnya. Hal ini dilatarbelakangi oleh pendekatan Salafi yang dikenal karena upayanya untuk menjaga kemurnian ajaran Islam melalui pemahaman literal al-Qur'an dan hadis. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan studi literatur secara mendalam mengenai tulisan ulama Salafi, tafsir, dan karya ilmiah, data dianalisis dengan pendekatan tematik untuk memahami interaksi dan respons terhadap sains dalam kerangka ajaran Salafi. Hasil penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa tafsir Salafi cenderung bersikap selektif dalam menghadapi sains modern. Mereka menerima teori atau temuan ilmiah selama tidak bertentangan dengan dalil *naqli*, namun akan menolak gagasan yang dianggap berpotensi mengganggu akidah atau mengurangi kemurnian makna teks. Sikap ini menegaskan peran Salafi dalam menjaga ortodoksi Islam, sekaligus membuka ruang bagi kemungkinan dialog dengan komunitas ilmiah. Dengan demikian, integrasi antara agama dan sains dalam perspektif Salafi tetap memungkinkan, asalkan ditempatkan dalam kerangka penghormatan terhadap teks suci. Pada akhirnya, pendekatan ini dapat menjadi kontribusi penting untuk memperkaya pemahaman bersama di tengah tantangan era modern. Artikel ini berkontribusi terhadap integrasi agama dan sains yang tetap menempatkan wahyu sebagai epistemologi primer.

Model ini memperluas tipologi hubungan agama–sains dalam studi Islam dan memberikan pemahaman tentang dinamika ortodoksi Islam di era modern.

**Kata kunci:** *Interaksi agama-sains, Tafsir salafi, Sains modern*

## Introduction

The relationship between religion and science is one of the themes that continues to attract attention in the modern era, especially among Muslims. Modern science with all its achievements has provided a new way to understand the reality of the universe.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, centuries of Islamic tradition remain a spiritual and moral guide for millions of Muslims around the world. At the intersection of these two domains, the exegetical approaches of various Islamic schools, such as Salafism, play an important role in shaping the ummah's response to scientific developments.<sup>2</sup>

The Salafi approach is known for its efforts to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings through a literal understanding of the Qur'ān and Hadith.<sup>3</sup> Rooted in the tradition of *the salaf al-salib*, the first generation of Muslims, this approach emphasizes the importance of returning to the original teachings without being influenced by innovation or heresy.<sup>4</sup> For Salafis, preserving the sanctity of religious teachings from external influences, including those of modern science that are considered deviant, is an obligation. However, in the context of an increasingly complex world, this approach is often faced with major challenges, especially when dealing with scientific findings that require more contextual and flexible interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

As science progresses, new theories and concepts emerge that often seem to contradict traditional understandings in Islam.<sup>6</sup> Evolutionary theory, modern cosmology and biotechnology, for example, challenge the literal understanding held by Salafis. In this situation, the Salafi approach faces a dilemma: whether to stick to a conservative literal interpretation or open up to a more contextual interpretation that can harmonize scientific findings with religious teachings. This dilemma becomes an important point in the discussion of how Islamic religious traditions can adapt to changing times.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary B Ferngren, "Science and religion," in *The Routledge History of American Science* (Routledge, 2022), 200-214.

<sup>2</sup> Amer Zulfiqar Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 39-52; Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and traditionalism: scholarly authority in modern Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Ali, "Understanding Salafis, Salafism and Modern Salafism," *ISLAMIYYAT: The International Journal of Islamic Studies* 41, no. 1 (2019): 125–36.

<sup>4</sup> Simeon Evstatiev, "Salafism as a contested concept," in *Knowledge, Authority and Change in Islamic Societies* (Brill, 2021), 172-201; Hamdeh, *Salafism and traditionalism: scholarly authority in modern Islam*.

<sup>5</sup> Amine Tais, "Islam, Salafism, and Peace: Facing the Challenges of Tradition and Change," *Religions* 15, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>6</sup> Muzafar Iqbal, "Islam and Modern Science: Formulating the Questions," *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 517–70, <https://doi.org/stable/23076112>; Stefano Bigliardi, "The Contemporary Debate on the Harmony between Islam and Science: Emergence and Challenges of a New Generation," *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 167–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782583>.

In the midst of this tension, some Salafi scholars show a spectrum of approaches. While they basically stick to a literal interpretation, some try to find a balance between religious teachings and science. Some scholars accept modern science to the extent that it does not contradict the basic principles of Islam, and see science as a means to deepen the understanding of Allah's greatness.<sup>7</sup> This approach is nevertheless taken with great caution, to ensure that religious teachings are not compromised by interpretations that are deemed too speculative.

The biggest challenge of the literal approach in the context of modern science is its limitation in explaining complex natural phenomena.<sup>8</sup> For example, literal interpretations of Qur'anic verses about creation are often difficult to apply in the context of evolutionary theory or modern cosmological concepts.<sup>9</sup> This raises the question of whether the literal approach is still relevant or whether a more contextual and metaphorical interpretation is needed to bridge the gap between religion and science. This resistance to more flexible interpretations can narrow the space for discussion and isolate the Muslim community from wider scientific developments.

A number of previous studies have discussed the integration of religious studies and science from an Islamic perspective, both through the concept of Islamization of Knowledge and models of scientific integration in various Islamic educational institutions. Studies such as those conducted by Syihabuddin, Manggala, and Mustofa (2023)<sup>10</sup> and Nurcholis (2021)<sup>11</sup> highlight the importance of synergy between Islamic epistemology and modern scientific findings. Similarly, Efrinaldi (2024)<sup>12</sup> outlines the functionalization of the paradigm of knowledge integration in Islamic higher education institutions. However, all of these studies are still general in nature and do not specifically highlight how the Salafi group, with its textual interpretation approach, responds to modern science.

This gap indicates that there has been no in-depth research analyzing the dialogue between Salafi interpretation and scientific developments, particularly in examining Qur'anic verses that discuss natural phenomena. The scarcity of literature exploring the interaction between Salafi thought and contemporary scientific theories presents an important area for exploration. This study aims to fill this gap by examining to what extent

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<sup>7</sup> Rizqa Ahmadi, "The Ideological Transformation and Fragmentative-Ambiguity of Global Salafism," in *Proceedings of Annual Conference for Muslim Scholars*, 2018, 100–113.

<sup>8</sup> Joas Wagemakers, "Emad Hamdeh, Salafism and Traditionalism. Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam," *Die Welt des Islams* 63, no. 1 (2022): 133-135.

<sup>9</sup> Qayyum Akhtar, "A Critical Review of the Qur'anic Interpretation of the Universe and Modern Scientific Thought," *Pakistan Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (2025): 1–12.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Syihabuddin, Kayan Manggala, and M Lutfi Mustofa, "Islamization of Knowledge of Ismail Raji Faruqi: Integration-Interconnection to the Contextualization of Indonesian Science," *Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 7, no. 2 (2023).

<sup>11</sup> Moch Nurcholis, "Integrasi Islam Dan Sains: Sebuah Telaah Epistemologi," *FALASIFA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 12, no. 1 (2021): 116–34.

<sup>12</sup> Efrinaldi Efrinaldi, Toha Andiko, and Taufiqurrahman Taufiqurrahman, "The Paradigm of Science Integration In Islamic University: The Historicity and Development Pattern of Islamic Studies in Indonesia," *Madania: Jurnal Kajian Keislaman* 24, no. 1 (2020): 97–108.

the Salafi approach can interact with, reject, or even integrate modern scientific findings, as well as the potential for building constructive dialogue between Salafi scholars and the scientific community in the modern era.

This article aims to explore how the Salafi approach to tafsir interacts with modern science and how the tradition responds to changes in contemporary scientific understanding. Through an examination of its epistemological foundations, exegetical methodology, and Salafi responses to scientific theories, this article hopes to provide a comprehensive insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by the Salafi approach in the modern era. Thus, it is hoped that a space for constructive dialogue between Islamic religious tradition and science can be opened, to jointly answer the challenges of the times without compromising the integrity and integrity of religious teachings.

This research method uses a qualitative approach to analyze the interaction between Salafi approaches and modern science.<sup>13</sup> Data was collected through an in-depth literature study of Salafi scholars' writings, tafsir, and scientific works related to science and religion. In addition, the research included an analysis of discussions and dialog forums between Salafi scholars and scientists to understand how the two sides interact with each other and respond to scientific issues. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns in attitudes and responses to science within the framework of Salafi teachings.<sup>14</sup> The research assessed how Salafis interpret religious texts in the context of scientific discovery and how they seek to maintain religious orthodoxy while interacting with modern science. Findings from the literature study and interviews are then compared to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Salafis and scientists can build bridges of understanding and collaboration in the modern era.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Epistemological Foundations of the Salafi Approach**

The Salafi approach in interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith is based on a strong epistemological foundation, which focuses on the purity of Islamic teachings as understood by the first generation of Muslims, namely *salaf al-shalih*.<sup>15</sup> This understanding leads to a textualist, literal and conservative approach in interpreting revelation, with the aim of maintaining religious purity from any form of innovation or interpretation that is considered deviant.<sup>16</sup>

#### **1. A Literal Understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith**

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<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Walliman, *Research methods: The basics* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Thematic analysis in this study refers to a qualitative analysis method for identifying and interpreting thematic patterns from data, not thematic interpretation in the study of Qur'anic exegesis.

<sup>15</sup> Jamhari Makruf and Saifudin Asrori, "In the Making of Salafi-Based Islamic Schools in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ab* 60, no. 1 (2022): 227–64, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2022.601.227-264>.

<sup>16</sup> Hamzehali Bahrami and Abdolrasool Meshkat, "Epistemological Comparison of the Discourse of Modernity and Traditional Salafism; Convergences and Divergences," *Comparative Theology* 13, no. 27 (2022): 117-132.

The literal understanding in the Salafi approach to the Qur'an and Hadith is the main foundation of their method of interpretation. For Salafi scholars, the Qur'an and Hadith are the primary sources of law and guidance for Muslims, which must be understood and applied according to the plain or explicit meaning of the texts.<sup>17</sup> This approach is based on the belief that God's revelation is perfect and clear, so it does not require complex or allegorical interpretations that can obscure its true meaning. In other words, the explicit meaning of the text is considered the most authentic and should not be shifted by subjective or speculative interpretations.<sup>18</sup>

This literal approach is also influenced by the desire to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings from outside influences, be it philosophy, culture, or traditions that developed after the time of the first generation of Islam, namely the *salaf al-shalib*.<sup>19</sup> Salafi scholars believe that the early generation of Muslims, who lived during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, had the purest and truest understanding of Islamic teachings.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, they try to emulate the perspective and interpretation of the salaf in understanding religious texts. In this view, any attempt to interpret the Qur'an and Hadith must always refer to the understanding inherited by that generation.

However, this literal approach often faces challenges when applied in more complex contexts, especially in the face of scientific developments and social changes occurring in the modern era. For example, verses that speak of natural phenomena, creation, or certain laws are often difficult to defend literally when confronted with scientific findings or changes in the structure of society.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Salafi scholars stick to the principle that a literal interpretation is the closest to divine truth, and that any adjustments or reinterpretations should be done with great care and should not compromise the original meaning of the text.

The literal approach also has implications for the way Muslims understand and apply Islamic laws in daily life. In the context of fiqh (Islamic law), Salafi scholars tend to reject *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) that is not based on clear *nash* (text), and prefer to follow established opinions among the salaf.<sup>22</sup> They argue that the Qur'an and Hadith already provide clear and complete guidance for all aspects of life, so there is no need for innovations or new interpretations that could undermine the purity of religious teachings.

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<sup>17</sup> Evstatiev, "Salafism as a contested concept."

<sup>18</sup> Mohamed Ali, "Understanding Salafists, Salafism and Modern Salafism," *ISLAMIIYYAT* 41, no. 1 (2019): 127, <https://doi.org/10.17576/islamiiyyat-2019-4001-15>.

<sup>19</sup> Joas Wagemakers, "Salafism: Generalization, conceptualization and categorization," *Contextualizing salafism and salafi jihadism*. (2020): 21–37.

<sup>20</sup> Nofri Andy N, Ja'far Assagaf, and Kamaluddin Nurdin Marjuni, "The Dialectic of Hadith Between Salafi-Sufi and Its Influence on Religious Practice In West Sumatra," *Penamas* 37, no. 2 (2024): 249–59, <https://doi.org/10.31330/penamas.v37i1.831>.

<sup>21</sup> Itzhak Weismann, "New and old perspectives in the study of salafism," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 22-37.

<sup>22</sup> Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, *Understanding salafism* (Springer, 2022).

This attitude is often considered rigid by others, but for Salafis, it is the best way to maintain the sanctity and integrity of Islam.

Despite criticism for being rigid, Salafi scholars believe that a literal approach is a form of loyalty to God's revelation and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. For them, a literal understanding ensures that people avoid misunderstandings and maintains the relevance and purity of Islam throughout the ages.

## 2. Rejection of *Bid'ab* and External Influences

The rejection of *bid'ab* (innovation in religion) is one of the main tenets of the Salafi approach. For Salafi scholars, *bid'ab* is any form of religious practice that has no basis in the Qur'an and Hadith, and was not taught by the salaf al-shalih generation.<sup>23</sup> *Bid'ab* is considered a serious threat to the purity of Islamic teachings, because it can introduce new elements that have the potential to deviate people from the right path.<sup>24</sup> Salafis therefore strongly reject any form of innovation in religious practice, even if it appears to provide practical or spiritual benefits.

The basis for this rejection can be traced back to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who, according to Hadith, warned that every *bid'ab* is a heresy, and every heresy will lead one to hell. On this basis, Salafi scholars are very wary of any changes or additions in religious teachings that are not supported by clear texts from the Qur'an and Hadith. They argue that Islam has been perfect and complete since the time of the Prophet, so there is no need for additions or modifications in its teachings.<sup>25</sup>

This rejection of heresy also means that the Salafi approach tends to be conservative in responding to external influences, whether from other religious traditions, philosophy, or modern science. For example, the Greek philosophy that was widely adopted by Muslim philosophers of the classical period, such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, was often rejected by Salafi scholars.<sup>26</sup> They believe that philosophy and rational speculation can obscure or corrupt the pure and simple faith taught by the Qur'an and the Prophet. In the Salafi view, true knowledge can only be obtained through revelation, not through reason or philosophical speculation.<sup>27</sup>

Besides philosophy, mysticism or Sufism is also a frequent target of Salafi criticism. They view practices of Sufism that involve unorthodox dhikr, the pursuit of mystical experiences, or esoteric doctrines as a form of heresy that deviates far from the

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<sup>23</sup> Roel Meijer, "Global Salafism," *Politeia: Journal of Islamic Politics* 5, no. 2 (2023): 85-104.

<sup>24</sup> Takashi Shogimen, "Rethinking Heresy as a Category of Analysis," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 3 (2020): 726-748.

<sup>25</sup> Walid A. Saleh, "The formation of the classical tafsir tradition - The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha'labi (d. 427/1035)," in *Texts And Studies On The Qur'an*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Joas Wagemakers, "The Citadel of Salafism," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Brill, 2021), 333-347.

<sup>27</sup> Hatice Kübra İmamoğlul, "The Relationship between Reason and Revelation from the Perspective of an Extraordinary Salafi Abū Al-Wafā' Ibn 'Aqīl," *Entelekyia Logico-Metaphysical Review* 4, no. 2 (2020): 119-28, <https://doi.org/izlik.org/JA72UB46LP>.

straightforward teachings of Islam.<sup>28</sup> Salafi scholars emphasize that worship should be performed in the manner prescribed in the Qur'an and Hadith, with no additional rites or practices that have no basis in these two primary sources.

In the context of modern science, the rejection of external influences also means that Salafi scholars are often skeptical or reject scientific theories that are deemed to contradict a literal understanding of religious texts. For example, the theory of evolution or cosmological concepts that depict the universe as an evolving entity are often rejected as inconsistent with the Qur'anic narrative of creation. This rejection reflects the Salafi desire to defend the integrity of religious teachings from external influences that could undermine them, while emphasizing that revelation is the primary source of knowledge and should not be replaced by speculative scientific findings.

### 3. Conservatism in Interpretation Methodology

The Salafi approach to interpretive methodology is strongly influenced by conservatism, which is rooted in the desire to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings. Salafi scholars are very cautious in accepting interpretive methods that are considered new or not in accordance with the traditions inherited by the early generations of Islam, namely *salaf al-shalih*. They believe that only the methods used by the Prophet's companions and earlier scholars can be relied upon to provide correct and valid interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>29</sup>

One of the methods prioritized by Salafi scholars is *tafsir bi al-ma'thur*, which is interpretation based on authentic narrations from the Prophet Muhammad, the Companions, and the salaf scholars.<sup>30</sup> This method emphasizes the importance of referring to primary texts that are considered to have the highest authority in interpreting revelation. In *tafsir bi al-ma'thur*, interpretation is carried out by referring to verses of the Qur'an that explain each other (tafsir of the Qur'an with the Qur'an), the explanation of the Prophet Muhammad in the Hadith, and the views of companions who are considered to have direct understanding of the Prophet. With this method, room for subjective and speculative interpretation is minimized.

Conservatism in Salafi interpretive methodology is also seen in the rejection of approaches that are considered too rationalist or contextual. Approaches such as *tafsir bi al-ra'yi*,<sup>31</sup> which rely on reason and reasoning to interpret texts, are often rejected as potentially misleading. Salafi scholars argue that this approach can open the door to interpretations that are incompatible with the original meaning of the text and potentially

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<sup>28</sup> Oskar Hutagaluh, "Understanding Salafi Thoughts From Debates In" 1, no. 1 (2023): 14.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmad Syamsir et al., "Salafi Puritanism in Indonesia," *International Journal of Islamic Khazanah* 11, no. 2 (2021): 134-149.

<sup>30</sup> Nurdin, "The Consistency of Ibn Katsir in Using the Bi Al-Ma'Tsuri Method in the Interpretation of Al-Qur-Anul'Azim," *JL Pol'y & Globalization* 75 (2018): 55.

<sup>31</sup> Moorthy S Muthuswamy, "A conceptual framework of Salafi radicalization: An underlying theme and its enablers," *Available at SSRN 3131606* (2018).

deviate from the true teachings. Therefore, they prefer more restrictive and traditional methods, which are considered safer in maintaining the purity of the teachings.

This conservative approach also includes a rejection of interpretive methods that use modern hermeneutical approaches, which often involve complex contextual, historical or linguistic analysis. For Salafi scholars, such methods are too complicated and unnecessary in interpreting revelation, which is considered to be sufficiently clear and complete. They believe that the correct interpretation is one that follows methods closest to those used by the early generations of Islam, without the need to add modern elements that could undermine the authenticity of the interpretation.

However, this conservatism in interpretive methodology also brings some consequences. One of them is the limitation in addressing the challenges of modern times, especially when dealing with new phenomena that are not directly explained in religious texts. In the context of modern science, for example, an overly conservative approach may not always be able to provide adequate or relevant explanations for scientific findings. Nonetheless, for Salafi scholars, maintaining the authenticity and integrity of Islamic teachings remains a top priority, even if it means rejecting more contextual and dynamic methods of interpretation.

### **Interaction of Salafi Approach with Modern Science**

The interaction between Salafi approaches and modern science is a complex and often controversial area. Salafi approaches, which tend to be textual and conservative, often face challenges in adjusting to emerging modern scientific theories. In this discussion, we will examine how the Salafi approach interacts with some important aspects of modern science, including evolutionary theory, cosmology, and other natural phenomena.

#### **1. Response to Evolution and Creation Theory**

The response of Salafi approaches to evolutionary theory is often characterized by strong rejection, based on the belief that it contradicts the Qur'anic narrative of human creation. In religious texts, the creation of human beings is described as a direct act of God, where humans are created from the ground and given a spirit by Him. This explanation, taken literally by many Salafi scholars, does not align with the theory of evolution which holds that humans are the result of a gradual evolutionary process from primate ancestors. For Salafis, accepting the theory of evolution means doubting the accuracy of the Qur'anic text and undermining the traditional understanding of creation.

Most Salafi scholars reject the theory of evolution as it casts doubt on basic concepts in Islamic teachings, such as the creation of man and God's role as Creator.<sup>32</sup> In their view, the theory of evolution implies that human creation is the result of a natural mechanism that does not require direct intervention from God. This is considered a threat to the

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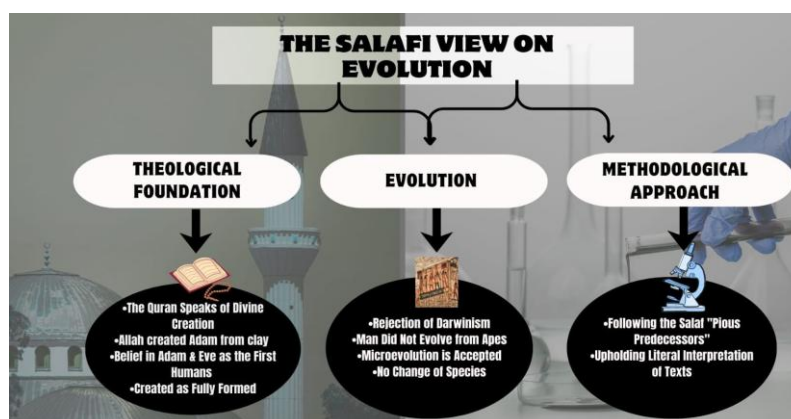
<sup>32</sup> Michael M Gunter, "Salafism and Biological Evolution: Online Salafi Reflections on the Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection by Jean-Francois Letourneau," *The Middle East Journal* 76, no. 1 (2022): 144-146.

fundamental belief that God is the absolute Ruler and creator of all things. This rejection also reflects an attempt to protect religious teachings from influences that are considered detrimental to the purity of Islamic teachings.

However, there is variation in the attitude of Salafi ulama towards the theory of evolution. Some ulama may adopt a more moderate view by limiting the acceptance of evolutionary theory to aspects that do not involve humans or by adopting evolutionary theory in a very limited context. For example, they may accept evolution at the level of non-human species, but retain the specific and direct human creation narrative. This approach tries to find a middle ground between a literal understanding of religious texts and existing scientific discoveries.

On the other hand, there have also been attempts by some Salafi scholars to develop interpretations that allow integration between religious teachings and science. For example, they may argue that the theory of evolution does not necessarily contradict Islamic teachings if it is understood as part of a broader process of creation involving divine intervention. However, this view is still in the minority among Salafis and often faces criticism from more conservative circles who consider that any form of compromise with evolutionary theory could threaten the purity of Islamic teachings.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, the response of the Salafi approach to evolution and creation theory reflects the tension between trying to maintain fidelity to religious texts and dealing with modern scientific discoveries. While a firm rejection of evolutionary theory protects the purity of Islamic teachings from outside influences deemed detrimental, it also presents challenges in harmonizing religious teachings with contemporary scientific understanding. Dialogue and careful adjustment may be required to find a balance that satisfies both sides, although this is often a highly sensitive and controversial issue.



**Figure 1.** Salafi perspective on the theory of evolution

This methodological framework can also be understood through a visual mapping of the Salafi response to evolutionary theory. This visual mapping outlines the Salafi

<sup>33</sup> Jean-François Létourneau, "Online Salafi reflections on the theory of evolution by natural selection" (2020): 57-58.

perspective on evolutionary theory through three main axes, namely theological foundations, attitudes toward evolution, and methodological approaches. At the theological level, the Salafi position stems from a textual reading of the Qur'an which affirms the direct creation of the first human (Adam) by Allah, so that the origin of humans is understood as an act of special creation, not a gradual biological transformation process. From this arises an epistemological attitude towards evolution, in the sense that small changes in species (microevolution) are still acceptable as empirical phenomena, but macroevolution, which posits changes between species, especially the origin of humans from primate ancestors, is rejected because it is considered contrary to the literal interpretation of the text.

This description shows that the Salafi rejection of evolution is not merely a conflict with science, but a consequence of an interpretive methodology that emphasizes the authority of the text, the understanding of the salaf generation, and a literalistic tendency in interpretation. Thus, the position on evolution is derived from the epistemological structure of interpretation. Once the theological foundations and hermeneutical methods have been established, scientific conclusions that are considered to contradict both will be selected or rejected. This description shows that the debate on evolution in the Salafi context is essentially a matter of interpretive methodology and the authority of knowledge, not merely a biological issue.

## 2. Approaches to Modern Cosmology and Astrophysics

Salafi approaches to modern cosmology and astrophysics often face the challenge of reconciling the scientific view with the creation narrative found in the Qur'ān. Modern cosmology, especially the Big Bang theory, describes the universe as the result of a huge explosion that occurred about 13.8 billion years ago, giving rise to the entire structure of the cosmos, including galaxies, stars and planets.<sup>34</sup> This view is contrary to the literal interpretation of creation often held by Salafis, who usually consider the creation of the universe to have taken place in a much shorter time and to be a direct act of Allah.

For many Salafi scholars, the Big Bang theory and other cosmological views relating to the age and development of the universe are often seen as contradicting the textual understanding of creation in the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> In religious texts, the creation of the heavens and the earth is usually described in a more brief and direct context, which does not correspond to the time scales described by modern cosmology. This literal interpretation aims to maintain the consistency of religious teachings, and scientific theories that suggest a very long creation time are often rejected or deemed irrelevant.

Some Salafi scholars try to reconcile modern cosmological views with religious understanding in a cautious way. They argue that the Big Bang theory is acceptable if it is viewed as part of a larger creation process involving divine intervention. In this view,

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<sup>34</sup> Burago Sergey Georgievich, "About the theory of the Big Bang," *J Gen Sci* (2017): 45.

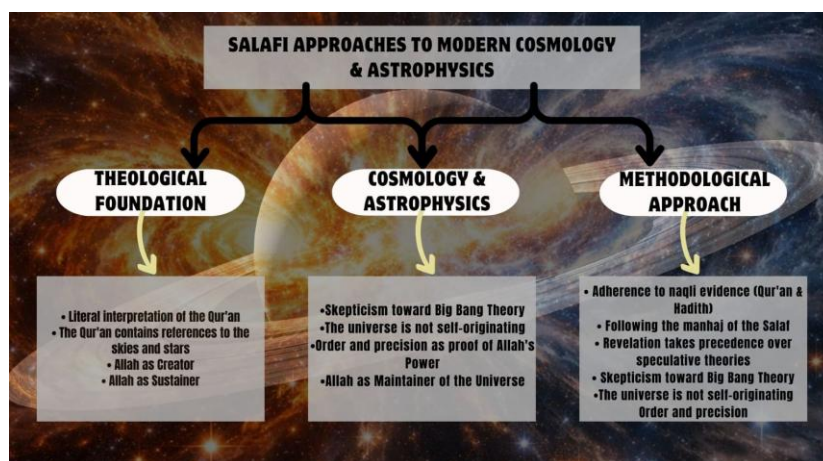
<sup>35</sup> James Sharp, "Theistic Evolution in Christianity and Islam: Two Approaches to Creation and Science in Historical Perspective" (The Claremont Graduate University, 2018): 99-102.

although cosmological processes appear to be huge explosions lasting billions of years, they are still part of God's design and creation that is not fully explained in religious texts. This approach seeks to accommodate scientific discoveries without compromising basic religious principles.

However, such moderate views often meet resistance in more conservative Salafi circles. For them, the integration of modern cosmological theories with religious texts is seen as a potential to undermine the authenticity of Islamic teachings. In this context, Salafi scholars are more likely to defend the literal interpretation of religious texts and reject scientific theories that cannot be easily explained in terms of religious teachings. This approach reflects a desire to protect the purity and integrity of Islamic teachings from outside influences that are deemed inappropriate.<sup>36</sup>

Limitations in accepting modern cosmological theories can also affect the way Salafis interact with other scientific discoveries. In some cases, scientific explanations of cosmological phenomena may be perceived as a threat to fundamental beliefs about the creation and structure of the universe.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Salafi clerics may prefer to focus on traditional interpretations and avoid engaging with scientific concepts that could challenge their understanding of religious texts.

Overall, the interaction between Salafi approaches and modern cosmology reflects the tension between efforts to maintain the authenticity of religious teachings and the challenges posed by scientific discoveries. Despite some attempts to bridge this gap with more flexible interpretations, many Salafis still prefer to maintain a literal interpretation that is considered more in line with Islamic teachings. The balance between religious understanding and modern science in the context of cosmology will continue to be a complex issue and requires careful dialogue to reach a harmonious understanding.



**Figure 2.** Salafi approach to modern cosmology and astrophysics

<sup>36</sup> Nidhal Guessoum and Stefano Bigliardi, *Islam and science: past, present, and future debates* (Cambridge University Press, 2023): 104.

<sup>37</sup> Hannes Alfvén, "Cosmology: Myth or Science?," *Journal of Astrophysics and Astronomy* 5 (1984): 79–98.

As seen in the figure above, the Salafi approach to modern cosmology and astrophysics is mapped in three interrelated dimensions, namely theological foundations, position on scientific cosmology theories, and methodological approaches. On the theological side, emphasis is placed on a literal reading of the Qur'an, which contains references to the heavens and stars, as well as affirmations of Allah as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. This framework then influences the way scientific theories such as the Big Bang are viewed. Skepticism arises when the theory is understood as an explanation of the origin of nature that stands alone without divine involvement. In this perspective, the order and precision of cosmic laws are interpreted as theological arguments for God's power and continuity of action, rather than as signs of the autonomy of nature.

This framework emphasizes that the Salafi response to modern cosmology is not an absolute rejection of science, but rather an epistemological selection consistent with the principles of anti-*bid'ah* and the priority of *nash*. Commitment to *naqli* arguments and the Salafi *manhaj* forms the limits of acceptance of scientific theory. Science can be accepted as long as it is understood as an explanation of the mechanisms of Allah's creation, but not as a final authority that negates His role as Creator and Regulator of nature. Thus, the cosmological debate from a Salafi perspective is better understood as a question of the hierarchy of knowledge sources and interpretive methodologies rather than a direct conflict between religion and astronomy.

### 3. Interpretation of Verses of Nature and Physical Phenomena

In the Salafi approach, the interpretation of verses relating to natural and physical phenomena is often literal, focusing on the explicit meaning of the Qur'anic texts without much consideration of modern scientific explanations.<sup>38</sup> This approach aims to preserve the purity of Islamic teachings and avoid interpretations that could be perceived as deviating from traditional understandings. However, this literal interpretation can face difficulties when dealing with scientific discoveries that point to facts not directly explained in religious texts. Here are some examples of Qur'anic verses related to natural phenomena, and an analysis of the Salafi approach to them.

#### a. Verses about the Creation of Heaven and Earth

One of the verses that is often interpreted literally by Salafis is the verse about the creation of the heavens and the earth:

إِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ

“Allah created the heavens and the earth in six days” (QS. Al-A'raf [7]: 54).

This verse describes the creation of the heavens and the earth in a period of six days. In Salafi literal interpretations, these six days are taken to be literal days, not long or

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<sup>38</sup> Namira Nahouza, “Contemporary Wahhabism Rebranded as Salafism: The Issue of Interpreting the Qur'anic Verses and Hadith on the Attributes of God and Its Significance” (University of Exeter, 2009).

metaphorical periods of time.<sup>39</sup> This interpretation is based on the understanding that the Qur'ān mentions creation in the context of human time, and therefore, the period should be taken literally. This interpretation faces challenges when compared to modern scientific theories, such as the Big Bang theory that describes the formation of the universe as a process that took place over billions of years. Salafī scholars often reject or ignore these scientific theories in order to maintain fidelity to religious texts.

b. Verse on Atmospheric Structure

Another verse that is often discussed is:

وَجَعَلْنَا السَّمَاءَ سَقْفًا مَحْفُوظًا ۗ

*"And We made the heavens a preserved roof"* (QS. al-Anbiya: 32).

This verse describes the sky as a roof or protector that is preserved from destruction. In the Salafī literal interpretation, the sky is considered a literal and tangible structure that protects the earth from external harm.<sup>40</sup> This interpretation often does not take into consideration scientific explanations of the atmosphere and stratosphere that protect the earth from solar radiation and other celestial bodies. The Salafī approach may see this verse as a simple metaphor for protection, but still consider the sky as a real structure in the context of their religious understanding. This interpretation tends to reject more complex scientific explanations of the atmosphere as part of natural processes.

c. Verse about Mountains

Another verse that is often interpreted literally is:

وَالْجِبَالِ أَوْتَادًا

*"And He made the mountains for pegs"* (QS. an-Naba: 7).

This verse describes mountains as "pegs" that provide stability to the earth. In Salafī interpretations, mountains are regarded as physical structures that have the function of stabilizing the earth's crust.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation does not necessarily take into account scientific explanations of geology and plate tectonics, which explain that mountains form as a result of the movement of the earth's plates. Salafī scholars may see these scientific explanations as additional confirmation of Allah's power, but retain the view that mountains have a significant stabilizing role in the context of the verse.

d. Verses about the Function of the Sun and Moon

In the context of astronomical phenomena, there are verses that talk about the functions of the sun and moon:

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<sup>39</sup> Dzulfikar Akbar Romadlon, Anita Puji Astutik, and Khizanatul Hikmah, "Interpretation of Anthropomorphism Verses by the "Salaf" Generation in Tafsir Al-Tabari," *Procedia of Social Sciences and Humanities*. 3 (2022): 965–968.

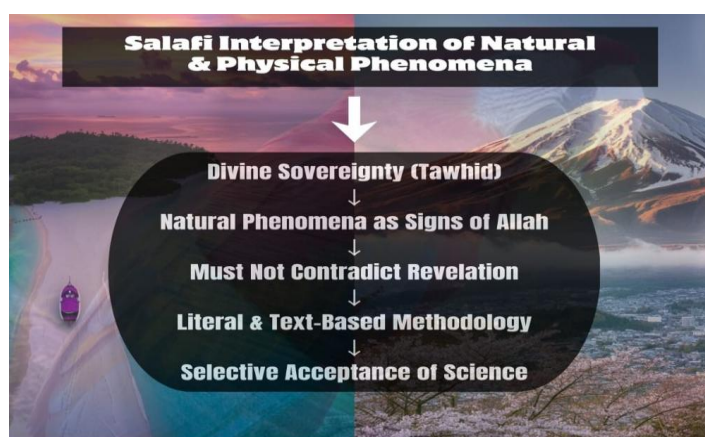
<sup>40</sup> Romadlon, Astutik, and Hikmah.

<sup>41</sup> Romadlon, Astutik, and Hikmah.

الشمس والقمر بحسبان

"And the sun and the moon (run) by calculation" (QS. Ar-Rahman: 5).

This verse indicates that the sun and the moon move in a calculation established by Allah. In Salafi commentaries, this is taken as a literal description of the regularity and precision of the movements of the heavenly bodies.<sup>42</sup> This interpretation often ignores scientific explanations of planetary orbits and rotations as well as the relative motion between the earth, sun and moon. Salafis see this verse as evidence of cosmic order designed by Allah, but they tend to ignore scientific details that could expand their understanding of the phenomenon.



**Figure 3.** Salafi epistemological approach in interpreting natural and physical phenomena

This image shows the epistemological framework of the Salafi approach to interpreting natural and physical phenomena, which departs from the principle of tawhid as its main foundation. Nature is understood as *ayat kauniyyah* (signs of Allah's power), so that every scientific explanation must be in harmony with revelation and must not contradict the Qur'an and hadith. Commitment to a literal and text-based method gives rise to a selective attitude towards science. Scientific findings are accepted insofar as they are seen as explanations of the mechanisms of creation, but are rejected or reinterpreted when they are considered to threaten the principle of divine sovereignty. Thus, it can be seen that the relationship between religion and science in the Salafi perspective is more of an epistemological filtration process that places revelation as the highest authority in understanding the reality of nature.

### Spectrum of Salafi Approaches to Science

Salafi approaches to modern science show a wide spectrum, ranging from total rejection to selective and integrative acceptance. In this context, two main aspects are discussed: acceptance and rejection of modern science, and attempts to find harmony

<sup>42</sup> Weismann, "New and old perspectives in the study of salafism."

between religious teachings and scientific discoveries. This analysis will explore examples of Salafi scholars accepting science as long as it does not contradict the Qur'ān, resistance to interpretations deemed too contextual, and attempts to integrate science and religion.

### 1. Acceptance and Rejection of Modern Science

The acceptance of science among Salafi ulama shows two different approaches. Some Salafi scholars have a more open attitude towards modern science, as long as the discoveries are in line with the basic principles of Islam. They view science as a means to better understand Allah's creation and deepen faith.<sup>43</sup> In the fields of medicine, technology, and physics, for example, scholars such as Muhammad Al-Jibaly and Ahmad Al-Khalil utilize scientific knowledge for the benefit of the ummah, as long as the discoveries do not threaten religious beliefs.<sup>44</sup>

However, this acceptance of science does not apply to all branches of knowledge. Some Salafi scholars remain skeptical of some scientific theories that are deemed to contradict Qur'anic texts. Evolutionary theory and Big Bang cosmology, for example, are often rejected because they undermine the scriptural narrative of creation. This rejection is based not only on contradictions with religious teachings, but also on the assumption that modern science is influenced by secular ideologies that can weaken faith.

These different attitudes towards science reflect internal dynamics within the wider Salafi movement. On the one hand, there is a group that seeks to integrate science and religion for the betterment of the ummah, while on the other, there is a group that is more defensive and maintains traditional understandings. Both agree that science should not displace religious beliefs, but their approaches to scientific progress remain different according to their interpretations of religious texts and social contexts.

### 2. Resistance to Overly Contextualized Interpretation

The disapproval of flexible interpretation among Salafi scholars is rooted in the desire to maintain the purity of religious teachings and textualism in understanding the Qur'ān and Hadith. For many Salafi scholars, an overly flexible, contextual approach to interpreting religious texts is considered a threat because it can change the established literal meaning.<sup>45</sup> For example, attempts to incorporate scientific theories such as the Big Bang within the framework of divine creation are often rejected as they undermine the certainty of meaning in the Qur'ān. For them, interpretations that seek to accommodate modern scientific theories are unnecessary, and are even seen as a form of compromise that undermines religious authority.

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<sup>43</sup> Pieter Coppens, "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī's Treatise on Wiping over Socks and the Rise of a Distinct Salafi Method," *Die Welt des Islams* 62, no. 2 (2021): 154-187.

<sup>44</sup> Emordi Promise Jude, et al., "Decolonizing Islamic Studies: A View From The Salafis School Of Thought," *Wukari International Studies Journal* 8, no. 5 (2024): 102-111.

<sup>45</sup> Aaron Rock-Singer, *In the shade of the Sunna: Salafi piety in the twentieth-century Middle East* (Univ of California Press, 2022).

In addition, this concern also arises from the view that overly contextualized interpretations can open up space for understandings that deviate from the faith. For Salafi scholars who adhere to literal interpretation, any attempt to adapt religious teachings to developments in science or social context is considered dangerous. They believe that religious texts have provided sufficient guidance and do not require reinterpretation that might lead to new understandings that could deviate from Islamic teachings. Thus, maintaining a literal approach is a way to protect people from misunderstandings and innovations that are not in accordance with religious principles.<sup>46</sup>

This resistance to contextual interpretation is also influenced by fears of outside influences that could undermine basic Islamic values. Many Salafi scholars perceive that adopting a flexible interpretation risks inviting secular, liberal or non-Islamic ideologies that contradict religious principles. They prefer to maintain a traditional understanding, which is considered safer and protected from negative outside influences, so that the integrity of Islamic teachings is maintained without being affected by changing times or modern trends of thought.

### 3. The Search for Harmony Between Religion and Science

Some Salafi ulama and scholars try to find a balance between religious understanding and scientific discovery. They believe that science and religion do not necessarily have to be in conflict, provided that accepted scientific discoveries do not undermine the basic principles of Islamic teachings.<sup>47</sup> This involves careful dialog and interpretation that takes into account scientific aspects without compromising the basic meaning of religious texts. For example, in the context of creation, they may adopt a view that can accommodate scientific discoveries while still maintaining the religious view of divine power.<sup>48</sup>

This integrative approach also highlights the role of science in strengthening faith and understanding the greatness of Allah. For some Salafi scholars, science is not only acceptable, but also considered a tool to demonstrate the orderliness of the universe created by Allah. Valid scientific discoveries are seen as additional evidence of His wisdom and power, which in turn deepens one's faith. In this view, science and religion are complementary and can be used to strengthen religious beliefs, rather than as conflicting elements.

## **Bridging The Gap: Dialogue Between Salafis and The Scientific Community**

Dialogue between Salafi communities and scientists is essential in enriching mutual understanding between religion and science. While there are often tensions between the

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<sup>46</sup> Aaron Rock-Singer, "Practices of piety: an alternative approach to the study of Islamic movements," *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 520.

<sup>47</sup> Aaron Rock-Singer, "Leading with a fist: A history of the salafi beard in the 20th-century middle east," *Islamic law and society* 27, no. 1-2 (2019): 83-84.

<sup>48</sup> M. B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," *Mind* 43, no. 172 (1934): 446-68.

two sides, a space for constructive dialog can be a means to overcome differences, especially in the midst of modern scientific advances. The literal and conservative Salafi approach to religious texts is often perceived as difficult to accept scientific developments, but openness to dialog can create opportunities to understand how science and religion can complement each other.

Efforts to create a dialog between Salafi ulama and the scientific community are often faced with great challenges, especially when it comes to different approaches to knowledge. Some Salafi clerics are willing to open discussions, especially in areas that do not directly contradict basic Islamic principles, such as technology and medicine. These forums allow both sides to explore different points of view without compromising religious beliefs or valid scientific findings.

An example of successful dialog can be seen in bioethics discussions between conservative clerics and scientists in the Middle East. Salafi clerics engage in discussions on medical ethics, genetics and reproductive technologies, providing a religious perspective that helps scientists make ethical decisions.<sup>49</sup> This dialog shows that, despite fundamental differences, there is room for cooperation between religion and science, especially in matters that directly impact the well-being of humanity.

In building a more holistic understanding between religion and science, an approach is needed that allows integration without compromising religious principles. Salafi scholars can use interpretations that remain faithful to the text, while opening up space for scientific understanding of natural phenomena. With this approach, both science and religion can complement each other, where scientific findings are seen as signs of God's greatness without changing the fundamental meaning of religious teachings.

An important strategy in integrating science and religion is to distinguish between scientific facts and religious interpretations. Science can provide objective facts about natural phenomena, while religion gives spiritual meaning to these facts. For example, the theory of the creation of the universe can be accepted within a scientific framework, while Salafi scholars can interpret it in a religious context. With this approach, the basic tenets of religion are maintained, and science is seen as a means to better understand the greatness of God.

The potential for collaboration between scholars and scientists is enormous, especially in dealing with the challenges of the times such as climate change, bioethics and technology. Salafi clerics can provide ethical guidance based on Islamic teachings, while scientists offer scientific solutions. This collaboration can create a holistic approach, based on science and religious values, resulting in stronger and more meaningful responses to global issues.

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<sup>49</sup> Zachariah Matthews, "A review of the rulings by Muslim jurists on assisted reproductive technology and reproductive tissue transplantation," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 720.

## Conclusion

The Salafi approach to modern science is characterized by an emphasis on literalism and conservatism in interpreting religious teachings. Salafi scholars tend to reject scientific theories that are deemed to contradict religious texts, such as the theory of evolution and modern cosmology, although there are some who accept science as long as it does not contradict the basic tenets of Islam. They often interpret natural phenomena in the Qur'an as evidence of God's greatness, thus strengthening faith, while rejecting overly contextualized interpretations. The role of Salafis in maintaining Islamic orthodoxy is very important, especially in rejecting innovations or outside influences that are considered to undermine religious purity. Through a textual and conservative approach, they seek to maintain the stability of Islamic teachings and avoid deformation and syncretism. However, they also face challenges in accepting modern science that is sometimes seen as contradictory to traditional teachings. In the midst of these divergent views, dialogue between Salafi clerics and the scientific community is crucial to bridge the gap between religion and science. Some successful dialog efforts, such as discussions on bioethics, show that collaboration can be achieved on issues relevant to humanity. With constructive dialog, there is the potential to integrate science and religion holistically without compromising basic principles, paving the way for cooperation in meeting the challenges of the times.

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