Natural, Process and Islamic Theologies: A Brief Comparison

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Abstract

The idea that God is the creator and sustainer of nature or universe is acknowledged by Muslims, Jews and Christians. They have studied the nature and they acknowledged and admitted that there are divine activities in nature pointing and indicating to the existence of God and His divines attributes. The very idea of divine activities in nature is acknowledged and expounded by natural theology, process theology and Islamic theology. However, some differences are evident from these three theologies. This paper aims at explaining the three theologies and some of their differences.

Key Words: Natural theology, Process theology, Islamic theology, Koran, Bible

Introduction

The Koran contains the Arabic words indicating the universe or the nature is created by Allah and Allah is its creator. Some of them are in Arabic verbs and nouns such as *khalaq* and *khaliq*, *badi`*, *j`ala*, *fa`ala* and *fa`il*, *fatar* and *fatir* and *ansh`a*. These Arabic terms are found in the Koran (6: 1-3), (32: 4), (29: 61), (31: 25), (2: 117), (6: 101), (42: 11), (6: 98) and (67: 23). If one refers to the Bible, there are statements or verses indicating that God is the creator of the universe or the nature. He is its creator. For example, there is the history of creation in the first book of Moses called Genesis. Genesis 1 states "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 25 states "And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good." Genesis 27-28 states, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them Then God blessed them, and God said to them, `Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Hence Muslims, Jews and Christians hold that the universe is created by God and God is its creator. However, the question has been debated among Muslims, Jews and Christians if God created the universe out of something or out of nothing or *ex nihilo*. According to Harry A. Wolfson, Muslims, Jews and Christians do not find the clear terms in their scriptures to indicate that God created the universe out of nothing or *ex nihilo*. "A conception of creation expressed explicitly in terms which mean creation *ex nihilo* is not to be found either in the Jewish or in the Christian or in the Muslim Scripture."(Wolfson 1976: 355). However, Muslims, Jews and Christians all believe that the universe is created by God because their scriptures say so. "But as to the manner of creation, whether *ex nihilo* or from a pre-existent matter and, if the latter, whether that pre-existent matter was created or eternal, is, as we have seen, not clear."(Wolfson 1976: 362-363). Based on this view, Muslims, Jews and Christians agree that God is the creator of the universe but they do not agree on how God has created the universe either *ex nihilo* or out of the pre-existent matter.

1. Natural Theology

To define natural theology, it will be best to start from the general notion of theology. Etymologically, "theology (Gr. *Theologia*, i.e. *peri Theou logos*) means objectively the science treating of God, subjectively, the scientific knowledge of God and Divine things. If defined as the science concerning God (*doctina de Deo*), the name theology applies as well to the philosophical knowledge of God, which is cast into scientific form in natural theology or theodicy."(Pohle 1912). This citation indicates that natural theology is "the philosophical knowledge of God". It is the knowledge of God attained through philosophical means or methods. Hence, it is very plausible to conclude that the knowledge of God attained by philosophers is called "natural theology".

This plausible conclusion is in direct connection with another definition of natural theology that says natural theology is "the science of God Himself, in as far as the human mind can by its own efforts reach a definite conclusion about God and His nature: it is always designated by the adjective natural." (Lehmkuhl 1912). In the Glossary in the work named *The Modern Theologians* (1989), natural theology is defined as "Theology attempting to know God and God's relationship to the world through nature and human reasoning without divine revelation."(Ford 1989: 1: 321)

In *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008) whose author for the article on "Natural Theology" is James Brent, one finds the meaning and history of natural theology. It says that "Natural Theology" is the favorite term in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries designating the knowledge of God drawn from nature in distinction from the knowledge of God contained in revelation. This division of theology into natural and revealed had its roots in the scholastic distinction between the two truths, one derived from nature by use of the Aristotelian logic, subject to the authority of the Church, the other, truth above reason, revealed by God but formulated and taught solely by authority of the Church."(Brent 2008). Brent also says that philosophers, thinkers or theologians who relied exclusively on natural theology are known as deists. They argue and uphold that "the being and attributes of God could be exhaustively ascertained from the constitution and course of the world, thus superseding the necessity of supernatural revelation."(Brent 2008). According to Brent, natural theology after the 19th century is no longer in vogue due to the strong opposition made against natural theology. "The function and name of *natural theology* continued in vogue until the latter portion of the 19th century. This habit of thought has, however, been strongly opposed by Ritschl and his school. Relaying on Kant's distinction between the pure and practical reason, they seek the source of the knowledge of God not through the theoretic judgments of science or philosophy, but only through value-judgments to which revelation addressed. Nature being impersonal can neither receive nor communicate the personal redemptive disclosure of God which man needs for reconciliation with him; this is to be sought ultimately only in Christ and the Christian community."(Brent 2008). Brent points out that some Christian theologians like Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) do oppose natural theology on the ground that "Nature being impersonal can neither receive nor communicate the personal redemptive disclose of God which man needs for reconciliation with him; this is to be sought ultimately only in Christ and the Christian community."

The English Christian theologian and philosopher William Paley (1743-1805) came out with the book with the title *Natural Theology* in 1802. Educated at the University of Cambridge where he became fellow and then tutor for many years before he joined the Christian ministry and then became Archdeacon of Carlisle. In his work on natural theology, Paley proves the existence of God from the evidences of design in nature. "His basic analogy was that of a watchmaker: just as a watch requires a watchmaker, so the world requires and an intelligent designer. The argument is then supported by adducing instances of design from nature. His favorite instance is the subtle and careful adaptation of the parts of the eye to make sight possible. (Reese 1980: 407).

According to L. Charles Birch, "When Bishop William Paley [1743-1805] wrote his *Natural Theology*, he intended his work to be an exaltation of God. Arguing from what he took to be the machine-like nature of the universe, a universe operating like clockwork, Paley felt he could deduce the existence as well as the many divine characteristics of God. His theology – and natural theologies of the time like his – filled out the argument for the existence of God from design with mechanistic understandings of the universe…. The mechanistic, deterministic views of Paley and others like him since the Enlightenment have often led us astray philosophically and theologically."(Birch [2011]).

2. Process Theology

Process theology is also called "neoclassical theology". What is Process theology? It "is a school of thought influenced by the metaphysical process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)."(Wikipedia [2011])

Whitehead is a British philosopher who studied mathematics at Trinity College, University of Cambridge and "from 1910 until 1924 he held the chair of Applied Mathematics at the Imperial College of Science in South Kingston. From 1924 until 1947 he served as professor of philosophy at Harvard University." (Reese 1980: 622). Regarding God's existence and His attributes, Whitehead "posits the *primordial nature of God*. This nature of God accounts for the fact that the world never runs out of possibility. There is a grading of possibilities beyond possibilities allowing creative advance as selected groups of possibilities are actualized."

Whitehead also "posits *the consequent nature of God* to provide for" the possible adventure into novelty and the retention of "the novelties achieved as the contingent future becomes the actual present and the immortal past…. He has thus presented us with a dipolar view of God, providing the foundation for process, and conserving its results by retention of the past in the divine immediacy. The supreme being, for Whitehead, is beyond challenge by any other being, yet he is in process in the sense that all of the happenings of the world become part of his nature. Far from being impassive, he suffers and rejoices with the world. "(Reese 1980: 624-625).

According to Donald Viney who wrote the article on "Process Theism" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in July 2004 and revised in 2008, "Process theism typically refers to a family of theological ideas originating in, inspired by, or in agreement with the metaphysical orientation of the English philosopher-mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and the American philosopher-ornithologist Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). For both Whitehead and Hartshorne, it is an essential attribute of God to be fully involved in and affected by temporal processes. This idea contrasted neatly with traditional forms of theism that hold God to be in all respects non-temporal (eternal), unchanging (immutable,) and unaffected by the world (impassible). (Viney 2008)

"Process theology is an acknowledgement that contemporary understanding of God and God's expression through creation, including human beings, is always in `process' and never complete. That is to say that Process Theology is unlike traditional theologies in that it is not static. The idea that our understanding of God should be `the same yesterday, today, and forever' is thus rejected in Process theology." (Goff 2008).

3. Islamic Theology

Islamic theology is based on the religion of Islam and the two authentic and authoritative Islamic religious texts are the Holy Koran and the Prophetic traditions. Islamic theology is different from natural theology and process theology since Islamic theology depends and relies on the Revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad from Allah. Islamic theology does not consider natural theology and process theology as a sufficient and complete way or method of knowing and believing in the existence of Allah and His perfect attributes. All Muslim theologians from the Sunnite and Mu`tazilite theological schools agree that all Muslims must rely and depend on the Revelation revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad if they want to know and believe in the existence of Allah and His perfect attributes in a complete, reliable, authoritative and true method.

In Islamic theology, the signs of Allah or the ayat of Allah are divided into two categories namely the verbal and non-verbal signs. The verbal signs are contained in the Koran and Prophetic traditions. While the non-verbal or physical or natural signs contained in the universe and the law of nature. In other words, there are the revealed signs and the natural signs pointing to Allah and His attributes. The revealed or verbal signs are found in the Koran as indicted in the Koran (3: 112-114), (12: 1) and (13: 1-2). Meanwhile, the natural or non-verbal signs are found in the Koran as indicated in the Koran (41: 53), (45: 3-5) and (51: 20). Toshihiko Izutsu (2002) discusses the ontological relation between God and man in chapter five and the non-linguistic and linguistic communications between God and man in chapter six and seven.

Abu Hasan al-Ash`ari (d. 330A.H./942A.D.), the founder of the Ash`arite school of Sunnite Muslims, used the natural theology to prove the existence of Allah in one of his theological works. In the first chapter of his work, he discusses the existence of the creator and his attributes. He said that if someone asked you about the proofs or signs to indicate the existence of the creator of the universe, say to him about the creation of human being who has to undergo many stages in the processes of human being creation. A human being begins his creation in his mother's womb and then he was born and he becomes a child and young and adult and old man. He is unable to change himself in every stage of his creation. He cannot become a child after he becomes a young and adult. It means that a man does not create himself. But a man is created by his creator who is Allah. (al-Ash`ari 1952: 6).

The other two natural signs or proofs for the existence of Allah who created the universe are the process taking place from the cotton to become a piece of cloth and the existence of a building. Al-Ash`ari points out that in order for the cotton to become a piece of cloth, it has undergone many processes and stages by human beings such as the cotton planters, the cotton knitters. The cotton cannot change itself into a piece of cloth without the cotton planters and then the cotton knitters. Hence, the cotton needs its planters and knitters to change it to become a piece of cloth. As regard the existence of a building, it needs builders to build a building. If someone thinks that a building does not need builders or constructors, he is insane because a building cannot build itself.

So the conclusion made by al-Ash`ari from the three natural signs namely human creation, the cotton and the building is this universe has its creator and administrator. (al-Ash`ari 1952: 6-7) In addition to the existence of the categories of the signs of Allah, Islamic theology demands all Muslims to believe in other pillars of faith or beliefs that are not easily found in the non-verbal or natural signs such as the angels and djinns, the spiritual beings created by Allah for certain reasons. If one refers to the Sunnite theological pillars, they are six; all Muslims according to the Sunnite theologians must believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His prophets, the Hereafter and in the standards of goodness and evilness decided by Allah. The Sunnite theologians rely on the Koran and the Prophetic traditions and they number their together six pillars of faith or belief. There are many verses in the Koran and the Prophetic traditions concerning the articles of faith. Some of them are found in the Koran (2: 285), (4: 162), (24: 62) and (49: 15).

If one refers to the Sunnite theological works, there are six topics or themes discussed in their works and they are considered as the pillars of faith. The six pillars of faith are belief in Allah, the angels and djinns, the divine books, the prophets and their missions, the *qada'* and *qadar* and the Hereafter. (al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah 1997). If one refers to the Shi`ite theological works, their articles  or pillars of faith are five; they are the Oneness of Allah,  the Divine Justice,  the Divine Promise and Threat,  the Prophethood and Imamology.(al-Tusi 1986). Shaykh Muhammad bin Hasan al-Tusi, the Shi`ite theologian died in 460 A.H. or 1067 A.D.

If one refers to the Mu`tazilite theological works, their articles or pillars of faith are five; they are the Oneness of Allah, the Divine Justice, the Divine Promise and Threat, the Position between the two positions, and the commanding the good and prohibiting the evil. (Ahmad 1988); `Abd al-Jabbar bin Ahmad, the Mu`tazilite theologian died in 415 A.H. or 1024 A.D.Therefore, Islamic theology as in the Sunnite, Shi`ite and Mu`tazilite theological schools, cannot consider natural theology and process theology as both true, authentic and reliable method and source of theology since Islamic theology demands Muslims to believe not only in God or Allah but in other articles or pillars of faith that cannot be found in the nature or the universe.

Conclusions

From the three theologies briefly presented in this paper, the major difference between them is related to the main sources for the three theologies. The main sources of natural and process theologies are philosophers and theologians who are considered as their founders or pioneers respectively. In other word, the main source of natural and process theologies is human reason, mind or thought and its reference is the universe or the nature. The main source of Islamic theology is the Holy Koran and the Prophetic traditions.

The main purposes of natural and process theologies are to study and fonder on the nature or the universe to prove the existence of God and His attributes and how God acts or responds to whatever happens in the universe. Natural theology proves the existence of God and His attributes by analogy and by arguing from the design. The universe is like a watch that needs or requires a watchmaker. Process theology proves the existence of God and His attributes by analogy and by arguing from the processes taking place in the universe.

The main purposes of Islamic theology are for human beings to know and believe in the existence of God and His attributes as found and explained in the Holy Koran and the Prophetic traditions and the natural theology and process theology can be the secondary or supplementary rational and scientific method to support the textual facts or proofs found and available in the Holy Koran and the Prophetic tradition. However, the characteristics or attributes of God as expounded and upheld by the founders of natural theology and process theology and their exponents and supporters or adherents should be evaluated and judged by the attributes of God mentioned in the Holy Koran and the Prophetic traditions.

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