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Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān

Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī

(4,361 words)

Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (1862-1940) was an Egyptian exegete famous for having composed a scientific interpretation of the Qur'ān. His publications were considered controversial and provocative by Islamic scholars, including staff at al-Azhar University and other Muslim places of learning, in the early twentieth century. The printing and distribution of his Qur'ān commentary was banned throughout Arabia, and his strong belief in spiritualism also caused some of his works to be banned in the Dutch East Indies for a time (Goldschmidt, *Biographical dictionary*, 96). Although he was not as influential as some of his predecessors, such as Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), he was a pioneering scholar as he familiarised his contemporaries with many previously neglected matters related to the connection between Islam and science. His Qur'ānic exegesis makes extensive reference to reports of important scientific events and discoveries that had been published in various magazines and journals in both the West and the East. In this work, Jawharī tried to prove the truth of Qur'ānic verses through reference to translations of European intellectual and industrial discoveries, as well as to the ideas of Asian thinkers (e.g. Confucius) that were new to Muslims in general and Arab Muslims in particular. This was in contrast to Christian Arabs such as Jurjī Zaydān (d. 1914) and Shiblī Shumayyil (d. 1917), who highlighted the remarkable discoveries made in the West, such as Darwinism, in Arabic-language journals without reference to Islam.

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Life and thoughts

Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī was born in the village of Kafr ‘Awadallāh Ḥijāzī, southeast of al-Zaqāzīq (Zagazig) in the province of al-Sharqiyya, Egypt. After learning the basic tenets of Islam, he began attending al-Azhar in 1877. He was well-versed in Arabic literature and its grammatical principles, in *fiqh*, and in issues related to *kalām*. Due to his father’s ill-health, in 1883 he returned to his home village, where he worked on a number of farms; it was during his time here, he said, that he came to see the manifestation of God. This seems to be reflected in his particular, and perhaps excessive, fascination with nature, farming, and agriculture. He was extremely interested in natural and cosmological phenomena, stating “when I was in al-Azhar, I had an inordinate enjoyment of the planets; how many nights I passed simply gazing at the stars and their beauty. Such was my negligence.”

During the First World War, he was denounced several times for his outspoken anti-colonial stance and his contacts with the Democratic (National) Political Party (*al-Ḥizb al-waṭanī*), a secret society founded by Muṣṭafā Kāmil Pāshā (d. 1908), one of the figures most strongly opposed to the British occupation of Egypt (Fahmy, Francophone Egyptian nationalists, 170-83). Jawharī himself was also dedicated to political and social affairs, and played a role in the anti-colonial movement; as such, it is thought that colonial officers monitored his activities.

Not only was he known as *al-ustādh al-ḥakīm* (“the wise master”; Khalīfa, *Malāmiḥ shakhṣiyya*), but, among other epithets, he was also referred to as *faylasūf al-sharq wa-l-Islam* (“the philosopher of the East and of Islam”), a title that often appears before his name. Several years after the First World War, a number of Arab newspapers began referring to Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī as *al-faylasūf al-kabīr* (“the great philosopher”), because: (a) his writings were the most recent on the idea of the Arab Utopia; (b) he had written the most important exegesis of the Qur’ān after Shaykh ‘Abduh; and (c) he had helped revive Arabic science in Cairo (‘Aṭiyya, *I‘ādat iktishāf mufakkir ‘arabī ḥadīth*, 6).

There is evidence that Jawharī frequently criticised the Cairo educational system, recommended that European languages should be taught, and declared that the quality of science and the extent of its practise would have a direct impact on the success or failure of any nation. He also asserted that a nation’s downfall and decadence or success and victory are related to what is in the hearts of its people, as stated in the Qur’ān: “Allāh does not change a people’s lot unless they (first) change what is in their hearts” (Q 13:11; Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī, *Nahḍat al-umma*, 16). Similarly, in Jawharī’s *Ayn al-insān* (“Where is man?”), the order of the universe is compared to the order of the nations, and it is stated that man moves against the natural order established by God: the movements of the planets are wondrous but the movements of the nations in their injustice and disunity are unnatural (Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī, *Ayn al-insān*, 18).

One of the main aims of his works was to make Islamic texts and history relevant to ordinary

Muslims' lives. Another was to highlight that knowledge of mathematics and the physical/natural sciences are important, as maths and geometry are useful in the military and in agriculture (for planting, harvesting, and so on), while astronomy helps humans to determine time and thereby helps guide merchants, princes, engineers, and physicians while travelling (Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī, *Nahḍat al-umma*, 63).

Of Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī's works and treatises, some of which have been translated into other languages, two earned him Nobel Peace Prize nominations (seemingly in the first domestic round) in 1939, a year before his death. Two of his books, *Aḥlām fī l-siyāsa wa-kayfa yataḥaqqaq al-salām al-‘āmm* ("Political dreams and how universal peace can be realised") and *Ayn al-insān*, were reviewed by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars (including, in the latter group, David S. Margoliouth [d. 1940]). Margoliouth's review highlighted Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī's attempts to bring about peace and mutual respect between various peoples, and it presents an image of Jawharī as being an open-minded scholar who had not descended into "fanaticism" (Margoliouth, *Political dreams and how universal peace can be realized*, 378-9).

Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī was familiar with English and had contacts with several famous non-Muslim scholars. For instance, a survey of his works suggests the influence of John Lubbock, also known as Lord Avebury (d. 1934). Jawharī himself stated "I made sufficient progress to [be able to] read English books and at the time the book that impressed me most was *The beauties of nature and the world we live in* by Lord Avebury, with whom I corresponded for many years" (H.K., *An Egyptian candidate*, 35). It is thought that Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī's *Jamāl al-‘ālam* ("The beauty of the universe") and various other works in which his love for nature is clear were inspired by Lubbock's books *The pleasures of life* (1887) and *The beauties of nature and the wonders of the world we live in* (1892). Reading his publications, it is also clear that, just as Herbert Spencer's (d. 1903) views had influenced ‘Abduh (Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 195-6), so did Immanuel Kant's (d. 1804) thought influence Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī's works, especially *Where is man?* He also translated the English version of Kant's *Über Pädagogik* into Arabic.

He interacted with leaders and thinkers from what was considered the "Orient" at the time, including the Middle East and Central Asia, but also Japan. He opened the letters he wrote to them by placing particular emphasis on the need to re-think and moderate religion, and suggested that progress would never be achieved by Muslims unless they became acquainted with the Qur’ān. According to Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī, the commands found in the Qur’ān relate to modern science and all types of human industry, as well as Islamic legal issues such as prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, etc. He believed that, through these, Islam could become famous for its virtue and justice. As well as publishing dozens of books and treatises, he was also the editor of the magazine *Majallat al-ikhwān* from 1933 until 1938.

His exegetical work

One of his works, *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm al-mushtamil ‘alā ‘ajā’ib badā’i’ al-mukawwīnāt wa-gharā’ib al-āyāt al-bāhirāt* (“Jewels in the interpretation of the Holy Qurʾān, containing marvels of the beauties of creation and wonderfully luminous divine signs”), is an exegesis of the entire Qurʾān, although many parts of it had been published previously. This 26-volume work also relates the latest discoveries made by modern European communities at the time, as well as scientific discoveries, notes, and events reported by Western news agencies and magazines, in order to inform readers of the Qurʾān (i.e. Muslims) of the many things required to gain a more prominent political and social position in the world. In line with Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Jawharī wanted to spread so-called “pan-Islamism” across the world and prevent Muslims from deserting their faith. His perception of the European presence in Egypt, as well as the impressive progress made by Westerners in every domain of science and industrial development compared to the apparent backwardness of Muslims and their concomitant failure to make any new discoveries or present scientific findings, led Jawharī to devote most of his life to familiarising Muslims with their heritage, rights, and identity, mainly through his *tafsīr*.

A commonly-held view is that, through this work, Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī promoted a new approach to Qurʾānic exegesis. However, many Muslim scholars, commentators, and thinkers did not support his methodology, which was criticised for many years because he included scientific notes in his comments on Qurʾānic verses despite lacking scientific knowledge. After his death in 1940, Muslim scholars gradually lost interest in *Jawharī*’s concerns and his approach to science and the Qurʾān, although Muslims around the world continued to analyse his methodology (*manhaj*) of *tafsīr*. Jawharī’s opponents accused him of encouraging an erroneous understanding of *tafsīr* and of the purpose of the Qurʾān, and declared his work to be a scientific encyclopaedia rather than an exegesis (Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam’s quantum questions*, 149). They also declared that Jawharī often followed Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1210) exegetical methodology, which thus shaped his own exegesis to some extent, and meant he offered ideas unrelated to the Qurʾānic passages in question. They also believed that Jawharī followed the ideas of Muḥammad ‘Abduh; as such, some of ‘Abduh’s friends and colleagues, including Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), criticised Jawharī. Additionally, Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) and, later, Sayyid Quṭb (1906-66), both rejected his method of extracting scientific notions from Qurʾānic verses (Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 315-6).

His *tafsīr* has not been used extensively by later commentators. References to it are, of course, to be found in many Islamic and non-Islamic publications, but only a few non-Arab exegetes of the Qurʾān have been profoundly impressed by it. Among those who have is a Persian *mujtahida* (clergywoman), Sayyida Nuṣrat Amīn (Bānū Amīn, d. 1983), who wrote a 15-volume commentary called *Makhzan al-‘irfāndar tafsīr-i Qurʾān* (“The treasure of gnosis in the interpretation of the Qurʾān”). She seems to have been the only Muslim woman at that time to have written an exegesis of the whole Qurʾān, and in it she frequently alluded to Jawharī’s commentary. For

instance, to express the meaning of the verse “If thou couldst see, when the wrong-doers reach the pangs of death...” (Q 6:93), she asserted that Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī had a unique definition for this verse and that he talked widely about how the spirit (*rūḥ*) was discussed in America, England, Italy, and elsewhere. Furthermore, she detailed how Jawharī had communicated with spirits about people, and how, according to the spirits’ messages, people can be divided into two groups: the pious (*ṣāliḥūn*) and the sinners (*fāsiqūn*; N. Amīn, *Makhzan al-‘irfān*, 5:92-3).

Jawharī’s commentary on *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q 1) was originally introduced to Persian-speaking communities by Manṣūr Taqī-zādah and ‘Alī Akbar Vā‘iz ‘Azīzī, two religious thinkers from Tabriz who had been greatly impressed by Jawharī’s efforts to reform Muslim communities. A letter written by Taqī-zādah, dated March 1933, shows that he had been keen to translate and publish other volumes of *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. Later on, Sa’dī Bihbūdī translated Jawharī’s *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa* into Persian for publication by the Cultural Committee of Jamiat-e Islami Afghanistan, based in Tehran, in 1988 (Bihbūdī, *Sūra-yi ḥamd az Tafsīr-i al-jawāhir*).

Further east, a considerable number of references to Jawharī’s *tafsīr* are evident in some South Asian and Malay-Indonesian Qur’ānic exegetical works, such as *Tafsīr al-Qur’an al-karīm* by Abdul Halim Hasan et al., written in 1937 in northern Sumatra (Ahmad, *Methodologies and issues within Tafsīr al-Quran al-karīm*). Furthermore, his commentary on Q 1 was translated into Chinese by Wan Wen Kin (Jomier, *Le cheikh Tantāwī Jawharī*), and a few of his works were also translated into Urdu.

Approaches to science in the Qur’ān

Jawharī agonised over what he perceived as Muslims’ backwardness and decline, and this was one of the main reasons he wrote his Qur’ānic exegesis. In this work, he highlighted scientific matters for so-called benighted Muslims by highlighting important points related to both the backwardness of the Muslim world and Western advances. He suggested that Europeans had made such technological progress recently mainly due to their contact with Muslims during and following the Crusades, and had originally acquired knowledge and scientific ideas from them.

Jawharī’s scientific views about various Qur’ānic verses were not only based on Muslim backwardness in modern times but also on theological-jurisprudential notions as to why Muslims – those whom, according to the Qur’ān “Your blessings are upon” – had been reduced to the position of mere bystanders of non-Muslim (i.e. Jewish or Christian) discoveries of the divine wonders. Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī assumed that Muslims were totally ignorant of and unschooled in the science of nature and empirical knowledge.

Jawharī seems to have given a modern twist to traditional Islamic views regarding science in the Qur’ān. He certainly employed ideas from the Islamic *‘ulūm* when interpreting Qur’ānic verses, but he also connected these to contemporaneous scientific findings. Furthermore, he had a definite view of nature and believed it was one of the best tools for knowing God. He essentially

wrote only for Muslims, and Arabs in particular, and thus often highlighted the shortcomings and problems within Muslim societies, after which he gave suggestions as to how Muslims could develop their skills.

At the same time, he viewed earlier jurists and exegetes as having been able to consider all aspects of the Qurʾān but as having failed to accept the scientific and modern facets of the verses in their writings. Yet he also stressed the *fiqhī* definition of verses such as Q 4:34, which he explicitly approached from a legal/*fiqhī* perspective rather than through psychological and/or sociological theories. As such, he interpreted *fiqhī* verses based on classical commentaries because he believed that they clearly explained such verses. Following his masters, he often stated that one of the main duties for Muslims was to learn science because of the need to advance the status of the Muslim world. One way he achieved this was by highlighting the importance of the *wājibāt* (obligations) for Muslims, one of which was the pursuit of knowledge.

Besides this, Jawharī also described the intellectual faculty and philosophical basis that characterised Western scientific findings. However, in his writings, he did not employ the empirical sciences particularly well. When discussing *amshāj*, as part of his commentary on Q 76:2, for example, his minimal understanding of embryology and physiology meant that he remarked simply that *amshāj* deals with the elements required by the human body (Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī, *al-Jawhāhir*, 24:310-1). From his comments on verses pertaining to legal issues, as well as his outlook on humans in general and Muslims in particular, it is clear that Jawharī's main goals were the unity of Muslims and their independence from and authority in the face of Europeans. He saw the latter as being holders of science but not, in his opinion, the successors of any prophet. He essentially wished to demonstrate two things: (a) that God's Book contains fabulous wonders that Muslims were overlooking but Europeans studied; and (b) that non-Muslims had investigated and proven a myriad of matters that were mentioned in the Qurʾān 1,300 years before, as well as in other Islamic literature. What is found in his writings seems to suggest that Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī was, to some extent, following the path of al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111) and other classical exegetes who believed that science is part of the Qurʾān.

Europeans in his commentary

Jawharī was not the only thinker of his time to bring together the Qurʾān, modern science, and European works within his publications. Besides Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, the physician and scholar Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iskandarānī (d. c. 1888) was one of the first Arab Muslims to refer to modern science from a perspective that was not polemical, although he occasionally noted how modern discoveries gave Europeans superiority over Muslims. He was a pioneering scholar who, by employing modern findings – though often without mentioning a particular or reliable reference – and applying classical *tafsīrs* (e.g. those of Ibn Kathīr and al-Zamakhsharī), highlighted that the Qurʾān is fully compatible with modern

scientific knowledge, and he published works on the subject both before and after the British colonisation of Egypt. Later, Tawfīq Ṣidqī (d. 1920), another Arab physician and a close friend of Rashīd Riḍā, highlighted the role of Europeans in the Muslim world. He neither followed Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn's wish to unite all Muslims and refute Western materialism nor did he share al-Iskandarānī's purpose of merely demonstrating coherencies between modern discoveries and Qur'ānic verses. Instead, Ṣidqī chose an apologetic-polemic approach, elaborating on and attempting to prove the uniqueness of the Qur'ān as a response to what were, in his view, European attempts to deliberately mis-interpret Islamic teachings (Daneshgar, *Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī and the Qur'ān*, 79).

Jawharī, however, saw Europeans from three different perspectives: (a) Europeans as followers of a religion, i.e. as Christians; (b) Europeans as scientists and intellectuals, such as Einstein, John Lubbock, and Darwin, all of whom employed the knowledge and heritage of Muslims to explain new theories, as well as Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Kant, etc.; and (c) Europeans as colonial officers, Orientalists, and political rivals of the Muslims.

Jawharī argued that, despite their discoveries, Europeans are unable to perceive the basics of God's mercy. Their dependence on biblical literature, the removal of traces of religion from their society, and their unfamiliarity with the Qur'ān together caused Jawharī, in line with classical Islamic thinkers, to deem that Christians have gone astray. For Jawharī, the gospels (except that of Barnabas) and other religious scriptures include superstitions that prevent people from understanding the truth of religion and of God. In this regard, he discussed Christianity's connection to Hinduism, and compared Hindu thoughts on Krishna with Christian beliefs regarding Jesus (Jawharī, *al-Jawhāhir*, 3:205-9).

Jawharī's commentary is replete with the names of ancient and modern non-Muslim scholars. For instance, along with Socrates and Aristotle, he refers to early-modern philosophers and modern scholars such as Kant, John Lubbock, Spencer, and so on. Here, however, Jawharī's main aim was not to underline the importance of European figures but rather to highlight that when non-Muslims make discoveries about the universe and nature they will find things that are already explicitly mentioned in Islamic texts. As such, not only did he believe that Darwin's theory of evolution had been explained previously by medieval Islamic thinkers, but he also said that the basic ideas that led Einstein to the Theory of Relativity were expounded in the Qur'ān and other Islamic sources much earlier (Jawharī, *Naẓariyya*). This point also recalls 'Abduh "citing contemporary European scientists on the organization of ants as the pre-'Asharite ideas of early Muslim theologians" (Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 167).

Jawharī also addressed European colonial officers and political rivals, who, due to their lust (*shahawāt*) for power, authority, and non-humanist purposes, entered Eastern societies. Jawharī presented them in a similar way to those negligent Muslims he saw, being preoccupied with

their own lusts. Thus, he considered both European officers and unschooled Muslims to be ignorant, with thoughts and lives that had no spiritual purpose. He also placed in this third group of Europeans the Orientalists, and primarily the French and the British, whose superiority over the Orient extended up to World War II, after which, as Edward W. Said (d. 2003) said, America came on the scene. The importance of the notions of “Europe” and “European” for Jawharī is similar to the idea of Denys Hay, who “has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (Said, *Orientalism*, 7), by which Europeans visited and lived in the East, a region that, according to some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans, encompasses the Bible lands, and un/intentionally highlighted the backwardness of Islamic nations.

Majid Daneshgar

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