

Fast 29: Knowledge, science and the Holy Quran — 1

- Neil DeGrasse Tyson is an American astrophysicist, and author of books and presenter of TV programmes on communicating science to the public. His book *Letters from an Astrophysicist* is a collection of letters he received from members of the public and his replies. Among these letters, one is from a Muslim who wrote to Dr Tyson saying “that the Quran contains many verses that reference specific discoveries of modern physics”, and asking why doesn’t Dr Tyson acknowledge this?
- In reply Dr Tyson says: “...nobody has ever made a successful prediction of previously unknown objects or phenomena based on the contents of any religious texts.” He adds that it is **after** scientists have made discoveries that devout people “go back into their religious texts in search of passages that hint at what is already known”. He politely asks the enquirer if he can come up with **predictions** from the Quran that would stimulate research to find out if what the Quran has already stated comes out true in the future.
- Dr Tyson has made a fair point, worthy of every Muslim’s attention. If he wasn’t so polite he could also have asked: Why didn’t Muslims themselves make these modern discoveries if they had already read about them in the Quran before they were made?
- I would say that, instead of looking for specific predictions in the Quran, let us look first at the principles that it teaches. The first of these is that man must acquire knowledge of the world around him, and if he does then this will benefit him. There are far too many passages in the Quran proclaiming this to include in these Studies but we may mention three:

<p>“In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, there are surely signs for those who have understanding, those who remember Allah, standing and sitting and (lying) on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say): Our Lord, You have not created this in vain! Glory be to You! Save us from the punishment of the Fire.” — ch. 3, v. 190–191</p>	<p>إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاجْتِذَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿١٩٠﴾ الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ ﴿١٩١﴾</p>
<p>“And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for the learned.” — ch. 30, v. 22</p>	<p>وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاجْتِذَافِ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَالِدَاتُ إِذَا اللَّوَاتِكُمْ يُحْسِنُ وَيَسْتَكْفِرُ لَكُمْ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾</p>
<p>“Surely in the heavens and the earth are signs for believers. And in your creation, and</p>	<p>إِنَّ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لآيَاتٍ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾ وَفِي</p>

<p>in the animals He spreads all over, are signs for a people who are sure; and (in) the alternation of the night and the day and (in) the sustenance which Allah sends down from the heaven, then gives life with it to the earth after its death, and (in) the changing of the winds, are signs for a people who understand.” — ch. 45:3–5</p>	<p>حَلَقُكُمْ وَمَا يَبُثُّ مِنْ دَابَّةٍ آيَاتٌ لِقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾ وَ اِخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ رِزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيْحِ آيَاتٌ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾</p>
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The first quotation above speaks of “those who have understanding”, the *aul-il-albāb*, which really means those having the deepest intellect. The second quotation mentions “the learned”, the *‘ālimīn*, the possessors of knowledge. The third refers to a people “who understand”, *ya ‘qilūn*, those who exercise reason or *‘aql*. The Quran thus expects people to use their intellect, to the deepest level, and to become possessors of knowledge, and to use their reason, in the study of the universe around them. The word “signs” in these verses also means miracles.

This was no doubt a prediction that people would find signs of guidance and miracles in the operation of nature *if they studied it*. Muslims in the first half of Islamic history, when they acted on these exhortations, fulfilled this prediction and found signs. After that, modern civilization has been fulfilling this prediction to an unbelievable extent.

- We also find it stated in the Quran that there is **no limit** to the knowledge that human beings can acquire. Every scientist holds the same view. This may seem obvious but in the late 1800s physicists believed that all laws of physics discovered by that time were perfect and complete and could explain everything in the universe. But then further discoveries in the 1890s led to the development of what is called modern physics because classical physics was inadequate to explain those discoveries.
- Here are some verses of the Quran which indicate that knowledge is limitless:

<p>“Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the same again to add (to it).” — ch. 18, v. 109</p>	<p>قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لَكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ جُمْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا ﴿١٠٩﴾</p>
<p>“And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea with seven more seas added to it (were ink), the words of Allah would not be exhausted.” — ch. 31, v. 27</p>	<p>وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ</p>
<p>“We raise in degree whom We please. And above everyone possessed of knowledge is the All-Knowing One.” — ch. 12, v. 76</p>	<p>نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَنْ نَشَاءُ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾</p>

“And say: My Lord, increase me in knowledge.” — ch. 20, v. 114

وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا ﴿١١٤﴾

In the first two verses the mention of ink and pens shows that it is man who is acquiring knowledge and recording it. The knowledge of the creation of God is limitless, far beyond what can be stored by man. Hence we now have what is called “big data” in science.

The third verse shows that man is elevated by the acquisition of knowledge, but no matter how much knowledge he acquires, the All-Knowing One will be yet more knowledgeable. The fourth verse is a prayer that Muslims are taught to say, that their knowledge may always be increasing, to which there would be no limit.