

Metaverse: The World of 3D Virtual Reality and its Challenges and Opportunities for Islamic Education

Professor Muhammad Alhasan Biraima

Contemplation in the holy Quran for a long time led me to infer that the religion of Islam is founded, at the conceptual level, on five generic and chronologically interactive concepts: “**Knowledge**”; “**Iman**”, “**Self**”, “**Wealth**” and “**Children**” and their structural relationships. The verse that ascertains this claim is the following:

«Certainly, did Allah confer [great] favor upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses, and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom, although they had been before in manifest error» [Al-i'Imran: 164].

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❖ The **Knowledge** concept (*reciting to them His verses*), as depicted in the **holy Quran**, encompasses all knowledge about the Creator (**Allah**) and about His creation as a sign of His unicity.

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- ❖ Tracing the structural relationship in the holy Quran through the method of abstraction and deduction shows that knowledge leads causally to belief in **Allah** (SWT), which is **Iman**, the second generic concept in the conceptual building of the religion of Islam. This Iman, as a belief, takes place inside the human heart where the **Self** dwells, followed by the process of purification from the traits of “Shirk” (*and purifying them*).

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- ❖ **Knowledge and Iman**, interacting within the **Self**, lead causally to the fourth and fifth concepts of “**Wealth**” and “**Children**”, mediated by the generic concept of “**Good Deeds**”. “Wealth” and “Children” are the domain of empirical good deeds by Muslims mediated by the knowledge of “Ahkam” as taught and acted by the Prophet (*and teaching them the Book and wisdom*).

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- ❖ Between them, these five generic concepts, in their structural relationships, embody the system of knowledge brought by the holy Quran to be mapped into the human **Self**(heart) which will then transform it into empirical actions (**Good Deeds**) in the real space of “**Wealth**” and “**Children**”.

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The human **Self** is a real dual entity, emerged from the interaction and merger of two contradictories, physical and spiritual, and consists of three main faculties: the “**Cognitive**”; the “**Affective**” and the “**Volitional**”. There is one to one correspondence between the knowledge embodied in the holy Quran of the three concepts of “Knowledge”, “Iman”, “Good Deeds” and the three faculties of the self (Cognition, Affection, Volition).

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- ❖ The domain of deeds, good or bad, for which human beings have been created to be tested and rewarded for their actions in the day of Judgement, consists primarily, according to the holy Quran, of “**Wealth**” and “**Children**”. They are bounties for people to enjoy and be thankful for, but at the same time they are the allurements of life of this world which can seduce man and get him astray. **Wealth** and **Children** as depicted in the holy Quran are generic concepts and between them, in their structural relationships, represent the entire natural and human resources needed to establish human life on earth.

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- ❖ The human **Self** is molded in such a manner as to have an incessant craving for the lusts imbued in **Wealth** and **Children**, which are the source of its transgression of Allah`s commands of “do and don’t do”. However, the **Self** is also imbued with piety properties that enable it to obey the commands of Allah (SWT) if it wishes. Contradictory duality, in terms of transgression and piety, is a fundamental characteristic of the human **Self**, the interplay of which is mediated by the free will to act. This contradictory duality in terms of properties is intimately related to the first contradictory duality of the **Self** in terms of its structural constitution.

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- ❖ Man is created and made vicegerent on earth and commanded to worship Allah alone by managing the resources of “Wealth” and “Children” through acting upon them as to be thankful for Allah’s bounties, and to maintain the balance that sustains the original reformation of the earth. Unlike other creatures, Allah (SWT) has honored humans by endowing the **Self** with a complete system of divine attributes via the infusion of the divinely created soul into the human body. Example of these divine attributes are mercy, knowledge, justice, patience, dignity, generosity, thankfulness, forgiveness, piece, belief, will, wisdom...etc.

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❖ The relative share of man from these divine attributes makes the Trust “Amanah” entrusted to man to make them efficacious through his actions in the world as vicegerent. Only through this process can man do good deeds, become thankful, and truly worship Allah (SWT), and the whole world cooperates and submits its treasures to his toil, as the holy Qur`an tells us:

«And if only the people of the cities had believed and feared Allah, We would have opened upon them blessings from the heaven and the earth; but they denied [the messengers], so We seized them for what they were earning.» [Al-A'raf: 96].

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- ❖ To honor these divine attributes Allah (SWT) gave man the freedom to choose between believing in Him, and thus follow His commands, or not to believe and follow his own whims. In either choice consequences follow in this life and in the hereafter, with obedience to Allah`s commands rewarded with good life in both worlds. Disobedience of Allah`s commands results into corruption of the earth, and misery in human life in both worlds.

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❖ The fundamental interaction between the five wholes, “**Knowledge**”, “**Iman**”, “**Self**”, “**Wealth**” and “**Children**” mediated by human communication results in the emergence of human societies and social systems with their social structures that mediate human action in the quest for realizing individual and social goals. Two main normative social systems can be discerned from this universal and perpetual interaction, the **secular** social system, characterized by a belief system centering around **whims** and maximization of **worldly pleasures**, facilitated by the transgression properties of the self. Then there is the normative **Tawhidi** social system, characterized by a belief system centering around **Iman** and maximization of **good deeds**, facilitated by the properties of piety in the self. Real-world human societies and social systems are made up of a mixture of these two normative systems.

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- ❖ The manifestation, in real time and space, of this great interaction is the cause of the evolutionary development of human societies and is at the heart of human history with all its ramifications. The fundamental mechanism that drives this evolution of human history is the basic contradiction characterizing the duality in the constitution and properties of the human self as manifested in the interaction between the five wholes of “**knowledge**”, “**self**”, “**wealth**”, “**children**” and “**Iman**” in the case of Tawhidi interaction, or “**whims**” instead of “**Iman**” in the case of the secular interaction.

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❖ I coined a name for this great divine existential plan by calling it “**The Master Plan of Creation**”, or (**MPC**) for short. I gave it this name because Allah (SWT) said in the holy Quran He created the heavens and the earth, and the Day of Judgement for this very Plan:

«And it is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days - and His Throne had been upon water - that He might test you as to which of you is best in deed. But if you say, "Indeed, you are resurrected after death," those who disbelieve will surely say, "This is not but obvious magic."»
[Hud: 7].

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- ❖ The holy Quran is not alone in telling us about the majesty of the MPC and the central role of man in its execution and evolution, but even the contemporary discoveries made in quantum physics and in cosmology are showing clearly that the evolution of the universe is as if it is a precursor to the coming of man in the world stage. There seems to be intelligence and purpose behind the splendid coherence that spans the entire universe, from the infinitely small at the quantum level to the infinitely large at galactic level. This is what the physicist Basrab Nicolaescu is telling us in his fascinating book “From Modernity to Cosmodernity”, although, as he said, physicists like Steven Hawking dismissed the evidence, not on scientific basis, but simply because it seemed absurd to them that such an infinitely large and coherent universe is designed regarding what is going to happen in this disproportionately small planet called earth.

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But as the holy Quran stated earth is not just the single planet now inhabited by man but there are seven of them distributed all over the universe and man, as a vicegerent on earth, will reach them all and inhabit them all before the Day of Judgement.

«It is Allah who has created seven heavens and of the earth, the like of them. [His] command descends among them so you may know that Allah is over all things competent, and that Allah has encompassed all things in knowledge» [At-Talaq: 12]

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- ❖ It is obvious that man, through his presently accelerating space programs, is taking his first steps in the journey to his predestined cosmological enterprise, which means that the true human history as envisioned by the MPC is only just beginning. It is a history to come in which Islam and the Muslims, under the guidance of the holy Quran will play a central role in the cosmological events which will ensue. Only the holy Quran will be there to provide a true roadmap, and only Muslims will be able to show certitude in a world of uncertainty. This may take many more billions of years, after all nothing in the holy Quran stands against such time horizon.

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- ❖ An unimaginable treasure of knowledge and technology will be opened for humanity that may surpass those made available for prophet Sulaiman (SAAS) when the wise man, who has knowledge from the book said to him I am ready to bring you the “Throne” of queen Bulgees from thousands of miles away in a blink of an eye, which he did:

«Said one who had knowledge from the Scripture, "I will bring it to you before your glance returns to you." And when [Solomon] saw it placed before him, he said, "This is from the favor of my Lord to test me whether I will be grateful or ungrateful. And whoever is grateful - his gratitude is only for [the benefit of] himself. And whoever is ungrateful - then indeed, my Lord is Free of need and Generous."» [An-Naml: 40]

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❖ In this tumultuous cosmological journey, the signs of Allah (SWT) in the “universe” and in the “self” will become manifest to the nonbelievers as the holy Quran tells us:

«We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness? » [Ha-Mim: 53].

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- ❖ Throughout human history Allah (SWT) sent messengers to tell man about this MPC and to warn him of the consequences of the way he acts to actualize this Plan. Yet, throughout the actualization of the MPC in time and space by man the secular outcome has dominated the theatre of the drama of human life, with very short intervals for the Tawhidi outcome to materialize. This is true whether the history of man is narrated by the holy Quran or recorded in books by man. But never has secularism dominated private and social life on earth as it is doing today with the advent of the twin revolutions in science and technology, the salient features of modernity and postmodernity.

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- ❖ The five universals of “**Knowledge**”, “**Iman**”, “**Self**”, “**Wealth**” and “**Children**” and their interaction within a social setting is the necessary and sufficient condition for realizing the religion of Islam in the world, at the individual level and at the Tawhidi social system level. That is why their preservation is a primary goal of the Sharei`ah of Islam. In fact, if we put “belief” to replace “Iman” for the generalized interaction of the MPC then it is immediately evident that the preservation of these five universals and their interaction is the common concern of all human societies. The difference is in the internal and external structures of these five universals from one individual to another, and from one society to another.

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- ❖ The most salient feature of the MPC as described above is that its fundamental interactions take place first and foremost inside what the holy Quran calls the **Heart** in the breast, indicating that it is the dwelling of the human self. It is the outcome of this internal interaction that manifests itself in the form of human actions and interactions in the external real world.
- ❖ According to the holy Quran all three faculties of the human self (cognitive, affective, volitional) dwell in the **Heart** which is in the breast. It is the **Heart** that sees not the eye; it is the **Heart** that conditions hearing not the ear, and it is the **Heart** that reasons not the brain:

*«So, have they not traveled through the earth and have **hearts** by which to reason and ears by which to hear? For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the **hearts** which are within the breasts» [Al-Hajj: 46].*

*«Has it not become clear to those who inherited the earth after its [previous] people that if We willed, We could afflict them for their sins? But We seal over their **hearts**, so they do not hear» [Al-A'raf: 100].*

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- ❖ Thus, it is the heart of the Muslim individual that should be the target of the system of Islamic education to empower the Muslim by providing him an integrated system of knowledge and upbringing that addresses simultaneously his integrated cognitive, affective, and volitional faculties. This should take place as early as kindergarten and continue up to higher education, with each level serving as a prerequisite for the next level. The system of education must be integrated in a loop that starts with abstract ontological knowledge of existence and ends with practical knowledge and praxis.

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- ❖ The system of knowledge must include all that knowledge which is necessary to establish the religion of Islam in time and space, at the personal and social levels, particularly in the domains of “Iman”, “Self”, “Wealth” and “Children”. Our knowledge system must be capable of endowing the heart of the Muslim with an effective Quranic worldview that enlightens his consciousness and elevates it to the universality and eternal relevance of the message of Islam and expand the horizon of his actions to span the social space of all humanity and extend his future vision to be of cosmodernity.

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- ❖ All such knowledge is Sharei`ah knowledge because Sharei`ah in the holy Quran means the whole religion of Islam, in contradistinction to the narrow technical definition of jurists which limits its meaning to the “Ahkam” of actions (do and don`t do). Thus, the holy Quran states:

«He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], and what We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus - to establish the religion and not be divided therein. Difficult for those who associate others with Allah is that to which you invite them. Allah chooses for Himself whom He wills and guides to Himself whoever turns back [to Him] » [Ash-Shura: 13].

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- ❖ All what I have said so far is but a prelude to the main thrust of this keynote speech as reflected in its title “Metaverse: the world of virtual reality and its challenges and opportunities for Islamic education”. Throughout human history winning the hearts of people is the key to success in achieving stability, continuity and durability of cultures and societies. In the present-day world technoscience has enabled secularism to develop a seductive way of life based on the allurements of “Wealth” and “Children” that has won the hearts of human beings the world over, Muslims included. This is because it appeals to the alluring aspect of these two sources of the test for man, not to their spiritual aspects as bounties from Allah (SWT) over which vicegerency should be exercised and thankfulness to Him realized.

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❖ The battle for the hearts of people is now raging in the cyberspace, a new level of reality over and above the other three levels of physical, psychological, and social realities to which people are accustomed. The technology and the services being provided by the internet are gradually dominating all aspects of our life with positive and negative consequences. Given the fact that the core of the secular civilization as depicted by the MPC is the immersion of people in worldly pleasures the damage brought by this virtual world to the fabric of personal and social life has arguably outweighed the benefits. This is not the end of the story, however, but only the beginning, for the insatiability of the self with respect to worldly pleasures is an established law in social science, and a condemned fact in the holy Quran:

«Indeed, Allah will admit those who have believed and done righteous deeds to gardens beneath which rivers flow, but those who disbelieve enjoy themselves and eat as grazing livestock eat, and the Fire will be a residence for them» [Muhammad: 12].

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❖ Now we are moving into the new phase of virtual reality named by Mark Zuckerberg, owner of Facebook, as **Metaverse**. But what exactly is this Metaverse? How does Mark Zuckerberg envision the metaverse being used? And what is the potential impact of it on the world at large? The following is an answer quoted by me from the internet:

“The term comes from a 1992 science fiction novel titled Snow Crash, and it’s used to encapsulate a realm where physical, virtual, and augmented realities converge. That’s exactly what the Facebook metaverse is: an enormous, interconnected online universe where users can gather, work, collaborate, play, learn, and even make a profit. Zuckerberg calls it an embodied internet, and this is a great way to explain it: an extension of the social media platform we know and use today that goes a step beyond the “social” aspect.

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Zuckerberg's vision of the potential implications for the Facebook metaverse go so far beyond just gathering with others in an augmented virtual reality: It's a place where the physical and the virtual and the augmented realities come together to create a new online world, a place with its own unique economy and interoperability facilitated by the cooperation of multiple tech giants. Beyond this, the metaverse is envisioned as a space for goods and services to be exchanged and utilized, a place for work to be done in a shared collaborative space, a world where people from all corners of the planet can "physically" gather around a virtual table with one another and have a shared experience together.

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- ❖ *It's a revolutionary vision that Zuckerberg has, and what's so surprising is that it's well within reach. While it's a remarkable undertaking for Zuckerberg to embark on, and one that is going to require a lot of time and energy and effort not just from Facebook but also from countless other tech giants in order to be successful, the potential implications of the metaverse are too enormous to dismiss as just another wild idea from a Silicon Valley tech mogul”.*

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- ❖ Given the unimaginable horizon of potential human knowledge and technology that will take man deep into the universe in order to populate the other six-planets earth, as I claimed above, the metaverse virtual world is only a small step towards that knowledge and technology horizon. Let me briefly summarize the challenges that I see will face our education and knowledge systems in the very near future from “**Metaverse**” as defined and characterized above, in the light of the MPC worldview derived from the holy Quran and briefly summarized in the forgone pages.

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Firstly, the possible immersion of the young Muslims in the infinite forms of illicit worldly pleasures that will be at hand anytime, anywhere which will result into the corruption of the very **heart** that should be targeted by our education and knowledge systems,

Secondly, reading academic material written in natural languages, whether published in electronic, or in paper format, will be something of the past. Young generations will have neither the skills, nor the patience to read such material,

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Thirdly, any system of education that does not make itself available to students in the metaverse world will be looked down upon as something obsolete,

Fourthly, to make education available in a metaverse world will be immensely expensive, at least in the beginning, in terms of the totally novel ways that must be adopted and required by the 3D platforms of metaverse,

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Fifthly, the high probability of psychological disorders that the students may suffer because of their immersion in metaverse world and isolation from real social and family life,

Six, the possibility of high rates of student dropouts,

Seventhly, the stigma that might go with any religious education in the new era that does not accommodate in its structure such technoscience and its products.

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❖ As for the opportunities that I think metaverse will make available to our education and knowledge systems let me draw the following:

Firstly, it will provide an ideal transdisciplinary platform for Islamic integration of knowledge (IIOK) to harness the fruits of various disciplines, natural and social, to creatively develop and implement a virtually interactive ideal Islamic society, vibrant with its normative agents, institutions, and structural relations. For the first time Muslims, drawing from the spirit of the prophetic society of Madeenah, will be able to live their dreamt of society, at least virtually, and enable the embattled humanity to have an idea and a taste of what it is like to live in a contemporary society spirited by Islam, whether you are a Muslim, or otherwise.

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- ❖ Experimentation can also include the animation of different forms of societies that resemble the real societies in which the Muslims live in today and compare them with the ideal society. This, however, is not an easy electronic game, but a very protracted and expensive endeavor in terms of the required integrated knowledge, technology, art ...etc. but it is likely to be a very profitable business for private capital once the main infrastructure is there,

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Secondly, given the virtual Islamic society in the first step we can then build our system of education, with its “cosmodernity” spirit, as an integral part of that society. For upbringing, we can make **avatars** for all the companions of prophet Muhammad (SAAS), and for the great historical characters of Islam, and develop the life of each of them, as narrated to us in our authentic traditions, as he interacts in the virtual Islamic society. Children and adults alike can then choose the character of their like and try to emulate his/her life in the real world under the guidance of experts in Islamic education and upbringing,

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Thirdly, this virtual Islamic society should augment and help improving the real social life of Muslims, not to replace it. It is highly likely that the saturation of the **Self** from its immersion in the worldly pleasures of metaverse will lead many people, not just Muslims, to seek refuge in the spirituality provided by the Islamic virtual society. There are limitless possibilities of introducing true universal and eternal Islam through the opportunities that will be made available by the metaverse world to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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Fourthly, metaverse, together with simulated models of real-world Islamic societies could help us develop appropriate social technologies that increase social synergies for these societies,

Fifthly, the new era that will be ushered in by metaverse and its likes of virtual world should not puzzle us but should be smoothly accommodated as a natural outcome of the evolutionary dynamics of the Master Plan of Creation (MPC) as depicted in the holy Quran.

❖ **Lastly**, the coming last slide is a video that summarizes all what I have said so far about **Metaverse Islam**, so make sure you listen to what the New York audience say about their experience of accompanying prophet Muhammad (SAAW) in a metaverse prophetic journey.

METaverse ISLAM AND ITS POSITIVE IMPACT ON NEWYORKERS

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مدينة نيويورك