On the Nature and Scope of the Islamization Process: Towards Conceptual Clarification

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Abstract: *The Islamization of Knowledge movement seems to be at a point in its history where a conscious effort is needed to clarify the concepts and the different ways in which it is being used. This paper is meant to generate some discussion that may hopefully help to bring about some measure of conceptual clarity. The first part of the paper is an attempt to identify the different approaches to understanding the basic nature of the Islamization process itself. Here, we differentiate between two approaches: the "engagement" of modern social science scholarship, and the "disengagement" therefrom. It is pointed out that the truth seems to lie somewhere in between the two approaches. The second part of the paper asserts that the term "Islamization" is being used in many confusing ways. A case is made for limiting the use of this term to Islamization of "Knowledge," rather than expanding it to Islamization of societies, or reducing it to the level of talking about the Islamization of "curricula."*

Since Ismāʿīl al-Fārūqī and his colleagues coined the term "Islamization" in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the term has come to be widely used, albeit in a number of different ways. It seems to have acquired a distinct life of its own. Although al-Fārūqī's original work seemed to present a fairly clear and well-defined description of the nature of this "process," others have started to use the term in ways that reflect different perceptions of its basic nature. While al-Fārūqī's focus was on "Islamization of knowledge," scholars joining the growing movement started to apply the term to broader and broader areas. It seems only appropriate, at this juncture, to have a closer look at the different ways

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in which this term has come to be used by different people. Conceptual clarity is a *sine qua non* for efficient communication and better collaboration among those interested in contributing to the Islamization effort.

In what follows, we will first attempt a brief survey of the different conceptions of the nature of the Islamization process. We will try to identify the basic ways in which this process is being understood today. This will be coupled with an assessment of the situation, and some discussion on the question of how to tackle the issue of defining the scope of Islamization in current usage. I will try to state my own position (or my bias) in this regard. The purpose of the whole exercise is to provide a platform from which serious discussion may begin, with each participant indicating clearly where he stands. It would be self-defeating to attempt a premature consensus around any one particular view at this point in the history of the Islamization movement, but it is indispensable for all engaged in that effort to bring the basic assumptions underlying their thinking to the fore in an explicit fashion. This is the only way that allows constructive criticism in a clear and forthright manner, which is a prerequisite for achieving any real progress.

NATURE OF THE ISLAMIZATION PROCESS

Anyone who closely examines the literature on Islamization, or keenly follows conference discussions on the subject, cannot but detect two distinct approaches to understanding the nature of this process. (To focus this part of our discussion, let us limit ourselves to the "Islamization of the social sciences" rather than "Islamization of knowledge"). Those two approaches basically differ in terms of the place each assigns to modern social science scholarship vis-á-vis Islamic insights. The first approach conceives of a rather "important" role to be played by "modern" social science scholarship in the Islamization effort. The second approach hardly sees any significant role to be played by "modern" social science theory or research, especially in the early stages of the Islamization process.

It is difficult to label these approaches, because they do not seem to represent two clear-cut, discrete conceptions. They rather look like two extreme ends of a continuum, with all different shades in between. Both, however, certainly subscribe to the view that Islamization entails some sort of "integration" of knowledge based on Islamic sources, and that generated by "modern" social science methods. Beyond that, those adhering to the two points of view sharply differ in terms of the extent

to which they see how modern social science theories and methods could be utilized. It may be tempting to call adherents of the first point of view "modernists," and that of the second group "traditionalists." However, these may be only misnomers. The use of such terms in this respect would be confusing rather than illuminating, given the way they are used beyond our context.

In view of the fact that the main difference between the two approaches lies with their perception of the role to be played by modern social science, it would seem more appropriate to use terms directly related to that issue. It may be pertinent then to differentiate here between those who call for "engagement" of modern social science scholarship on its own terms (and beyond), and those who call for "disengagement" therefrom.

Let us move to a brief description of each of these positions. We are not concerned, however, with reference to particular authors or particular works. What we intend here is to discuss the general thrust of the two currents of thinking and their underlying logic.

The Engagement Approach

Those who espouse this side of the argument believe that modern social science has a very important role to play in the Islamization process. They would ask: what are we Islamizing, if not the body of knowledge and methods which constitute contemporary "social sciences," taught and learned and practised all over the world?

The argument goes on as follows: we are social scientists, attempting to Islamize an existing body of knowledge called "the social sciences." We cannot just pretend that this body of knowledge does not exist. We cannot afford to let our legitimate suspicion of its underlying basic assumptions lead us to write it off completely and start all over again. The appropriate strategy should be to "engage" this body of knowledge in a confident and constructive way. Basically, this "engagement" of modern social science scholarship would consist of the following:

a) mastering modern social science scholarship (the theoretical, methodological, empirical literature);

b) serious examination of its explicit or implicit underlying ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions;

c) rigorous criticism of all of the above from Islamic perspectives;

d) integration of whatever measures up to the above, with pertinent

insights generated from Islamic sources; and

e) examination of the validity of this integrated knowledge with reference to empirical reality.

The assumption here is that modern social science knowledge, imperfect as it may be, still has a valuable role to play in the Islamization process. That corpus of knowledge was the result of over a century of diligent research efforts by thousands of (partially misguided) scientists around the world. During that same era, and in fact for the previous three centuries, the Muslim world was caught in the firm grip of stagnation and even deterioration. Ignoring what others have found during our absence may lead us to try to reinvent the proverbial wheel—in some respects at least. This would be a gross loss of energy and talent indeed!

The Disengagement Approach

The proponents of this approach would argue that the flaws in the basic logic and structure of modern social science render it useless, if not outright dangerous, for the Islamization effort. They can convincingly argue that modern social science is the product of the "modern" era of the predominantly "Western" civilization, an era that is basically materialist, secular, and anti-religion. They would point out that modern social science shares the same "Western" world-view. As a case in point, it would be noted that sociology was introduced by its modern founder Auguste Comte as a substitute for religious guidance—a scientific one. He even went as far as to establish a new religion, that did not last long, where Man would be the object of worship instead of God. Its priests would be the scientists.[1] The argument goes on to ask: how on earth are we going to reconcile this with the basics of the Islamic world-view?

The correct approach, for them, is to start with "full disengagement" from this flawed modern scholarship. They would argue that we have to disabuse ourselves completely of its conceptualizations and its mental categories, in order to proceed "genuinely" from Islamic categories generated from the noble Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. It is dangerous to start from "modern" preconceptions, because of the natural tendency to superimpose them upon our understanding of Islamic sources. We have to be wary of the power of ready-made models, for they tend to shape our perceptions, wittingly or unwittingly. This sentiment is shared, oddly enough, by the post-modernists, with the difference, of course, that instead of the abyss of relativistic nihilism, Muslims have their own

valid road-map and compass.

An Assessment

It should be clear by now that each of the contending positions has a valid point indeed. However, the advocates of each tend to stretch their points to extremes. There can hardly be any serious doubt that modern social science has a lot to offer. Consider, for example, the research methods, analytical tools, theory building mechanics, and explorations of general social processes which were developed by modern social scientists. Even social science theories, suspect as they may be in terms of their valuational stance and hypothetical substance, still have a lot to offer. In fact, we can identify their basic shortcomings in terms of a number of errors of omission and commission. The flagrant omissions in these theories relate to the complete absence of spiritual factors, which are not considered legitimate subjects for "scientific" inquiry. A related omission is that of exclusive focus on sense perception, denying revelation as-a source of any valid scientific knowledge. Consequently, the basic commissions relate to embracing materialist values which are concerned solely with this life rather than anything beyond. A related error of commission is that of advocating a relativistic stance which deifies humans as the only source of all valuation.

The important question here becomes: is there, despite the errors of omission or commission mentioned above, anything of value in these modern social sciences to be redeemed? My own bias is to answer that question in the affirmative. In the light of the preceding analysis, it seems clear that the situation could be remedied in two ways: complementing and substituting. Whenever we detect an omission, the strategy would be one of "complementing" our analysis by providing for the missing components, e.g., injecting the spiritual factors into the analysis, utilizing insights gained from "revelation," etc. Whenever we detect an error of commission, the strategy would be one of "substitution," that is, discarding incongruent components and replacing them with Islamically-correct ones, e.g., substituting secularized valuations with balanced, Islamic valuations.

It should be emphasized at this point that Islamization is not a simple-minded addition and subtraction process. It is a creative and sophisticated process of genuine synthesis or reintegration at a higher plane. It is within this context that one can understand the concern of those who feel very offended, as they watch attempts at superficially supporting questionable social science theories with some verses from

the noble Qur'ān or *sunnah* on the basis of apparent but hardly valid similarities. These can never be accepted as authentic Islamization efforts.

There can hardly be any serious doubt about the power of dominant paradigms in shaping—or even enslaving—minds; even those of practising scientists. Complacency may result in uncritical acceptance of preconceived ideas and mental category-systems that apparently sound benign while being implicitly steeped in completely different frames of reference. A certain degree of disengagement from the prevailing paradigm is a must for genuine development of categories based on the Islamic world-view.

To sum up, it seems reasonable to assume that modern social science scholarship can definitely play a significant role in rebuilding the social sciences from an Islamic perspective. However, it is equally true that one can never be too cautious in utilizing paradigms developed within the context of other cultures or divergent world-views. Modern social science can only be utilized to the extent to which it is congruent with the Islamic perspective, without undue reverence or undue contempt.

SCOPE OF ISLAMIZATION

Although initially the term "Islamization" was used in connection with knowledge, (i.e., "Islamization of Knowledge"), the term came to be extended gradually to cover areas much higher or much lower in terms of their level of abstraction. On the one hand, discussion became more specialized and more specific. It was applied to general categories of science, as in the case of Islamization of social sciences, or to single disciplines within the social sciences, (e.g., Islamization of sociology or psychology), or even to the curricula of such individual disciplines. On the other hand, discussion moved up one or more rungs on the ladder of abstraction, to the level of Islamization of whole societies. This is, to be sure, another sign of the validity, vitality, and the dynamic nature of the Islamization paradigm. However, the extension of usage of this term calls for a conscious effort at conceptual clarification, particularly in terms of looking at links between the Islamization efforts at different levels of abstraction.

Islamization of Disciplines and Islamization of Curricula

In academic circles, especially in Islamic universities, a lot of interest is quite naturally focused on what is increasingly coming to be known as "Islamization of the curriculum." As a matter of fact, concern about

university courses, curricular contents, and textbooks, looms large among the areas identified for Islamization action, even in al-Fārūqī's seminal work.[2] The need for careful review of course contents to rid them of any material incongruent with, or antagonistic to, the Islamic perspective has long been recognized. The recommendation was always that new pertinent subject matter areas should be included. Reference material should be sifted out to exclude the inappropriate and to include the relevant. In all cases, there was the expectation that instructors would use utmost discretion when they present standard theories which are incongruent with the Islamic perspective, particularly within the realm of the social sciences. They are expected to couple their presentation with a hard-nosed critique based on the Islamic viewpoint. Last, but not least, every effort would be made to scour the literature in search of those nuggets of already Islamized concepts to include them in the subject matter and the bibliography. Where none of the above are identified, the expectation, again, was for the instructor to do his own research and to do his best to present his students with a rudiment of an "Islamized view" of a particular area of content; that is, to participate in the "Islamization of the discipline" that he is teaching.

As a matter of fact, this particular connection seems to confuse the so-called Islamization of curricula with the Islamization of the concerned discipline. Islamization of the discipline, e.g. Islamization of sociology or that of social work, is basically a programme of systematic research which applies rigorous Islamization methodologies to the study of specific research problems.[3] It is not a stop-gap, one-shot effort, to give an Islamic face to a presentation of some course material. That research activity (Islamization of the concerned discipline) should never be confused with what is basically a "curriculum development," an educational administrative concern. Islamization of the disciplines is a separate activity that should be carried out in its own right, even if no Islamization of curriculum is being done at the moment. The important thing to be borne in mind here is that—strictly speaking—Islamization of the disciplines is what gives Islamization of the curricula any significant meaning; without it, the latter would be nothing more than an act of rubble-removal or some sort of a cosmetic facelift. It may be advisable, under the circumstances, to discard the term Islamization of the curricula altogether, and to use some less ostentatious term such as "curriculum reform" from the Islamic perspective. This may help remove the confusion. But the important thing is that it may also help direct precious staff time and effort to the real effort of "doing" Islamization research on particular aspects of their respective disciplines—the real

Islamization. Once this is done, curricula would be automatically Islamized. The reverse is not true.

Islamization of Knowledge and Islamization of Societies

As far as the level of abstraction is concerned, the term Islamization has been used recently in confusing ways. As previously noted, Islamization of knowledge is basically an epistemological and methodological concern. Even when discussions of the subject explore its deeper ontological and axiological prerequisites, such discussion is only brought to the fore at the service of the epistemological, and more specifically, the methodological concerns.

In its essence, Islamization is a research and theory-building effort, meant to restore the scientific enterprise in general, and the social sciences in particular, to the correct path of integration of revelation and observation of the real world. Even when some tend to extend the use of the term to the so-called "*Sharīʿah* sciences," "Revealed knowledge," or "Islamic sciences," it invites confusion. It becomes a contradiction in terms, or at least a redundancy. How would one Islamize the "Islamic sciences"? To be sure, Islamization of knowledge has significant implications for the directions in which the traditional "Islamic sciences" should be moving. Through their historical development, these sciences have acquired certain characteristics which leave a lot to be desired. Many areas under these sciences, which were left in a rather underdeveloped state over the years, need to be developed to better serve the needs of the Ummah. A case in point is that of the theory of *Maqāṣid* which is so vital for the development of Islamic social sciences. Certain previous efforts at interpretation of the noble Qur'ān and at explanation of valid Ḥadīth—though commendable for what they offer—can still produce fresh ways in dealing with scripture, according to some renowned *Uṣūlīs*.[4] But once again, confusion resulting from the use of the Islamization rubric in that context may warrant discarding it altogether, in favour of a more general term such as "Reform of Islamic studies" or its equivalent.

At a more serious level, the use of the Islamization rubric in connection with reforming a whole society may even be more confusing. Again, we have to remember that Islamization of knowledge, in its genuine form, is a methodological and an epistemological issue. To stretch the concept to cover endeavours to infuse societal institutions with an Islamic character is potentially problematic. It should be reiterated that Islamization of knowledge or of particular disciplines is a separate

activity which is justified in its own right, and should be carried out, with or without any broader efforts at Islamic reform in any society at all. Making the connection between the two levels unnecessarily links the fate of both. Emotional considerations aside, Islamization of knowledge is a dispassionate, hard-nosed, rigorous, scientific enterprise, which should never be confused with broader political or economic types of human endeavour. It represents a much-needed paradigm shift of concern to those within the knowledge-building, scientific and professional communities, rather than to political parties or political movements seeking reform of whole societies.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed in this brief paper a number of issues related to "the nature" and "scope" of Islamization. In the first part, our treatment of the subject was limited to the nature of Islamization of the social sciences, the objective being to focus the discussion. We have described two ways in which the role of "modern" social science scholarship is conceived. We have differentiated between those who call for confident and constructive "engagement" of this body of knowledge and those who call for conscious "disengagement" from it. An attempt was made to find the truth in each one of these positions, and to try to chart a genuine way out of the thicket. The importance of dealing with that issue can hardly be overemphasized. It is time the movement for Islamization of the social sciences moved from preoccupation with general issues to the business of "doing" actual research which applies the "Islamization of social science" methodologies. It is only when we embark on this task that we can deal with these issues on a factual, practical basis, rather than on the basis of conjecture or intellectual- hypothetical activity.

The second part of the paper dealt with a broader issue pertaining to the uses and misuses, or near-misuses, of the term Islamization. In this respect, we have first attempted to clarify the difference between the related concepts of Islamization of curricula and Islamization of the disciplines. It is suggested that the term Islamization of curricula be replaced with that of "curricular reform from the Islamic perspective." We have next moved to clarify the relationship between Islamization of knowledge and the so-called Islamization of societies—as some people in the media identify efforts at Islamic reform of certain societies. Our recommendation is for disconnecting the two spheres. The knowledge-building, scientific nature of the Islamization effort has to be emphasized, regardless of broader efforts at social change. The

discussion was at some points intentionally blunt and categorical, in the hope of generating a broader discussion. Such a discussion is what we need today, so as to move forward with the real job of practising "Islamization" in a systematic and methodologically sound fashion. I should finally hasten to say that this paper is intended to formulate questions that need to be answered, rather than to provide full-fledged answers. The suggestions I have made at some points are only tentative, albeit at times provocative, the aim being to generate further discussion.

Notes

1. See, for example, Marvin E. Olsen, *The Process of Social Organization* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 16.

2. Ismāʿīl Rājī al-Fārūqī, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* (Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982).

3. For a discussion on the methodology of Islamization, see, for example, Ibrahīm Ragab, "Islamic Perspectives on Theory Building in the Social Sciences," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences,* 10 (1993)1: 1-22.

4. See, for instance, Ṭāhā Jabir al-ʿAlwānī, *Missing Dimensions in the Theory and Practices of Contemporary Islamic Movements* (Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1996); and Ṭāhā Jabir al-ʿAlwānī and ʿImād al-Dīn Khalīl, *The Qur'ān and the Sunnah: The Time-Space Factor* (Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).