



Critical Reflections on the Islamicisation of Psychology

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Abstract

This paper explores three issues: first, the historical factors which contributed to calls for the Islamization of psychology; second, the forms that articulations of Islamic psychology have subsequently taken; and third, the difficulties inherent in attempts to Islamize the discipline. It begins with the observation that, from the 1960s onwards, the international academy became mired in debates about social 'relevance'. In psychology, the anti-establishment posturing exhibited itself in American and European debates about 'relevance'; while, in the hinterlands of the psychological fraternity, troubling questions were posed regarding the Third World applicability of an intellectual package imported wholesale from the disciplinary centre. It was in response to these concerns of developing nations that efforts to 'indigenise' psychology began. Among Muslim thinkers, it was argued that psychologists had regurgitated Western psychological theories and practices which were unsuitable for Muslim populations. As a result, attempts at fashioning an authentic Islamic psychology gathered pace, assuming typically, one of two forms: a critical revision of Western psychology (with accompanying analyses of relevant Qur'anic passages) or an elaboration of the classical Islamic tradition. A quandary arises, however, as to the feasibility of transforming an originally Western discipline whose questions, topics and methods were forged in the maelstrom of specific social contingencies. The fact that the birth of modern psychology was closely related to the rise of a liberal-capitalist hegemony is an important consideration in the search for an Islamic psychology. Moreover, the homogenisation of world culture necessitates critical reflection on the very desirability of Islamizing the discipline.

Keywords: *Islamicisation, relevance, psychology.*

Abstrak

Kajian ini mendalami tiga isu: pertama, faktor sejarah yang menyumbang kepada pembentukan pengislaman psikologi; kedua, pembentukan kelahiran psikologi Islam yang telah diambil; dan ketiga, permasalahan yang wujud dalam percubaan untuk mengislamkan disiplin. Bermula dengan pemerhatian dari tahun 1960-an dan seterusnya, akademi antarabangsa terperangkap dalam perbincangan mengenai 'perkaitan' sosial. Dalam psikologi, pendirian anti-golongan yang menonjolkan diri mereka dalam perbincangan Amerika dan Eropah berhubung dengan 'perkaitan' sosial, manakala, di kawasan pedalaman persaudaraan psikologi, persoalan yang timbul mengenai kebolegunaan Dunia Ketiga mengendalikan pakej intelek diimport dari pusat tata tertib. Ia adalah sebagai tindak balas terhadap kebimbangan negara-negara membangun yang berusaha untuk mengawal permulaan psikologi. Di kalangan pemikir Islam, perdebatan mengenai para psikologi telah mengulangi teori-teori dan amalan-amalan psikologi Barat yang tidak mempunyai kesesuaian bagi populasi Islam. Akibatnya, cubaan mencipta satu psikologi Islam sah berkadar, dengan andaian, salah satu daripada dua bentuk: semakan kritikal psikologi Barat (dengan disertakan analisis petikan Al-Quran yang berkaitan) atau penjelasan daripada tradisi Islam klasik. Kekeliruan yang timbul, walau bagaimanapun, untuk kemungkinan mengubah disiplin asal Barat yang mempersoalkan, topik dan kaedah telah dipalsukan dalam pergolakan kontingensi sosial tertentu. Hakikat bahawa kelahiran psikologi moden berkait rapat dengan kebangkitan hegemoni liberal-kapitalis merupakan satu pertimbangan yang penting dalam pencarian satu psikologi Islam.

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Selain itu, homogenasi budaya dunia memerlukan pemikiran kritikal terhadap kebaikan disiplin pengislaman.

Kata kunci: *Keislaman, perkaitan, psikologi.*

Introduction

Efforts to Islamicise psychology should be viewed in their wider context, namely, the Islamicisation of Knowledge (IOK) project, which originated under particular social, economic and political conditions. Indeed, the IOK project was just one in a series of attempts by academics the world over to make knowledge practices 'relevant' to their societies. The social protests of the 1960s had led to appeals for educational 'relevance' on university campuses internationally (Long, 2013). In the United States, at a time when 1950s' privatism had become contemptible, young people appalled by the country's domestic racism and foreign aggression felt alienated from a higher education system that did not share their political ideals (Sampson, 1970). In Europe, young radicals inspired by critical theory and the Frankfurt school pushed for revolutionary change in the social and academic domains (Long, 2013). Meanwhile, the development imperatives of newly independent countries in the Third World led to wide-ranging critiques of existing knowledge-making institutions (al-Attas, 1985; al-Faruqi, 1982; Mazrui, 1978). These calls for 'relevance' were especially influential in the social sciences and were taken up subsequently in psychology (Long, 2013).

The 'irrelevance' of psychology

American psychology would suffer a backlash at the 1969 APA convention when the Black Students Psychological Association protested against the 'irrelevance' of psychology for black America (Simpkins & Raphael, 1970). Earlier that decade, psychological experimentation had come under fire in several respects – concerns were raised about subject effects (Orne, 1962), experimenter effects (Rosenthal, 1966) and the ethics of deception (Baumrind, 1964) – leaving many psychologists wondering about the suitability of their investigative methods. Allegations of 'frivolity' in experimental social psychology (Ring, 1967) and the historicity of its knowledge claims (Gergen, 1973) exacerbated the sense of crisis, precipitating "the age of relevance in social psychology" (Rosnow, 1981, p. 78). In a milieu characterised by rapid social change, the question arose of how a discipline that prided itself on its universalist disdain for history could ever hope to be socially 'relevant' (Long, 2013).

Across the Atlantic, the outlook appeared equally bleak. European psychologists were accused of importing mindlessly an American "social psychology of the nice person" (Moscovici, 1972, p. 18) that had little do with European social realities. For Harré and Secord, the problem was a behaviourist hegemony that encouraged the study of "a kind of

never-never land of behavior" (1972, p. 49). What made matters worse was a perception that the American research agenda was being controlled by powerful interest groups (Parker, 1989). In short, both the theory and method of European social psychology was seen as 'irrelevant' (Long, 2013).

Soon enough, the 'relevance' epidemic spread to the discipline's periphery. From the mid-sixties onwards, a discourse of 'relevance' took hold in Africa (Abdi, 1975), China (Ching, 1984), India (D. Sinha, 1984), the Philippines (Enriquez, 1993), Latin America (Ardila, 1982) and other parts of the Third World. It was clear that the Euro-American psychologies that had been institutionalised in these countries did not speak to the social problems obtaining on the ground. The "immorality of irrelevance" (Baumrin, 1970 quoted in D. Sinha, 1973, p. 5) meant that psychologists in developing nations – whether they were working in clinical, developmental, educational, industrial or social psychology (Dawes, 1985; Martín-Baró, 1996; J. B. P. Sinha, 1997) – needed to reimagine the discipline in ways that took cognisance of their respective lived realities. Attempts to 'indigenise' psychology proliferated, seeking "indigenization from within", which required the utilization of native psychologies, and/or "indigenization from without", which involved the adaptation of foreign psychologies to local circumstances (Enriquez, 1979 cited in Church & Katigbak, 2002).

It is within this context that the quest for an Islamicised psychology should be understood. Without an appreciation of the socio-historical antecedents of the Islamicisation movement – vis-à-vis psychology in particular and knowledge-making in general – it becomes difficult not only to anticipate the challenges involved in the indigenization of disciplines but, also, to remedy them. This, then, is an appropriate juncture at which to discuss the emergence of a significant but underemphasized intellectual movement of the 20th century: the Islamicisation of Knowledge (IOK) project.

Islamicising knowledge

After World War Two, most Muslim countries had attained independence from their erstwhile colonial masters – but by the late 1960s a new milieu had arisen. Emboldened by political autonomy, the sudden advent of 'black gold' *nouveaux riches* and widespread agreement regarding the failures of capitalism and socialism this *zeitgeist* provided fertile breeding grounds for advocates of 'Islamic' solutions to the problems of Muslim countries (Haneef, 2005). The *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community) was in a state of 'malaise' epitomized by political disunity,

economic underdevelopment and religio-cultural alienation – and the root cause of the malady was considered to be the knowledge enterprise itself. For the Palestinian-American philosopher, Ismail al-Faruqi, the Muslim world had committed the cardinal error of embracing a “bifurcated” educational system that differentiated between religious and secular knowledge (1988, p. 16). The result of this distinction was that the non-religious sciences – including the social sciences and humanities – were imported indiscriminately from the West. By contrast, the Malaysian philosopher, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, reasoned that the principal cause of Muslim backwardness was the “loss of *adab*” of Muslims themselves (1985, p.99). Because of this loss of discipline “that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s proper place in relation to one’s self, society and Community” (ibid.), Muslims were no longer able to distinguish between categories of knowledge.

Although al-Attas “is credited for laying the theoretical foundation of the IOK... while [al-]Faruqi’s contribution is more on the methodological side” (Haque & Masuan, 2002, p. 279), the chief implication of their respective positions was the same: knowledge was not neutral. Two things needed to be done: first, the IOK project had to be adequately defined, rationalized and theorized; second, the disciplines themselves were to be subjected to its processes. International conferences were held in Saudi Arabia in 1976 and 1977 with economics and education the first disciplines considered for Islamicisation (Haneef, 2005). In the case of education – the logic applied to all disciplines – it was argued that “[t]he foreign elements and disease [would] have first to be drawn out and neutralized before the body of knowledge [could] be remolded in the crucible of Islam” (al-Attas, 1979, p. 44).

Islamicising psychology

By 1979, psychology had become a candidate for Islamicisation. In his celebrated monograph, *The Dilemma of Muslim Psychologists*, the Sudanese psychologist, Malik Badri (1979), argued that in their desperation to appropriate for themselves the mantle of science Muslim psychologists had parroted Western psychological theories and practices that were inapplicable in Muslim countries. For Badri, the dilemma involved a tension between the psychological theories of pre-modern Muslim scholars and those of contemporary mainstream psychology (Haque & Masuan, 2002).

A direct result of the 1977 education conference was the establishment of ‘Islamic universities’ in Islamabad and Kuala Lumpur in the early 1980s

(Haneef, 2005). Muslim social scientists around the world joined Kuala Lumpur’s International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), eager to immerse themselves in the IOK project. Badri himself joined IIUM’s Department of Psychology in 1992 and became the first faculty member to introduce an undergraduate course on Islam and psychology. Despite his relocation to al-Attas’ International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) – a research institute of IIUM – he continued to publish in the area of psychology and religion. Other international figures from Algeria, Iraq, India and the Sudan subsequently taught Islamic psychology at the university (Haque & Masuan, 2002).

Attempts at fashioning a *bona fide* Islamic psychology have taken one of two forms: a critical revision of Western psychology – involving the exegesis of relevant passages from the Qur’an – or an elaboration of the classical Islamic legacy. A theocentric-individualistic outlook marks both strands and is evident in a landmark special issue on Islamic psychology in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. Badri (1998), for example, juxtaposes the West’s failed campaigns against drug abuse with an Islamic treatment approach based on religious observances, Shehu (1998) regards human development as subject to God’s Will, while, for Achoui (1998) psychology has intrinsic religious, philosophical and moral dimensions. The theocentric individualism of these accounts emulates a similar penchant in a well-known earlier attempt at articulating a framework for an Islamic psychology (al-Attas, 1990). Outwardly asocial, these formulations of Islamic psychology problematize the theoretical ‘relevance’ of Western psychology.

Recent work on Islamic psychology may also be classified as belonging to either the revisionist or classical camps. In their respective discussions of human personality, Mohamed (2009a) draws on classical Islamic philosophy in his thesis of ‘man as microcosm’ – specifically, the cosmologies of the Brethren of Purity, Ibn Miskawayh, al-Raghib al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali – while Rahman (2009) presents Mulla Sadra’s theory of the soul in relation to the propositions of Ibn Sina, al-Razi and others. Elsewhere, Alawneh (2009) identifies the shortcomings of psychoanalytic and behaviourist thinking around ‘motivation’ and frames the Islamic alternative in Qur’anic terms, just as Mohamed (2009b) – in his discussion of ‘drives’ – interrogates Western articulations of the term before clarifying Najati’s Qur’anic model. In another revisionist work, *Psychology from an Islamic Perspective*, Noor (2009) makes it clear in her preface that this collection of papers “is *not* an outright rejection of Western

psychological knowledge, but a re-examination of this knowledge so that they are in conformity with Islamic teachings” (original emphasis). In Noor’s volume, established topics are delineated – personality, learning, motivation, cognition, and so on – and then reorganised according to Islamic (i.e. Qur’anic) terms of reference.

Challenges

Modern psychology’s development within the constraints of Western social matrices dictated that its later introduction in societies that did not share those contingencies would be experienced as jarring, alienating and therefore ‘irrelevant’. Psychology prospered in the West because liberal democratic polities in which displays of naked power were unfeasible required an alternative ‘government of the soul’ – for which the discipline’s expert technologies proved well-suited (Rose, 1990). In countries with dissimilar social histories, however, the ‘irrelevance’ of an imported psychology was inevitable. Accordingly, if psychologists in the Muslim world are intent on pursuing “indigenization from without” – that is, the revision of Western psychology in a manner that complements the values of Muslim societies – then a critical engagement with the history of modern psychology becomes important. Conversely, one is also justified in viewing “indigenization from without” as a contradiction in terms: since Western psychology is saturated in a secular metatheory that cannot accommodate the Islamic worldview, any attempted revision must remain, in spirit, no different from the original articulation.

This raises the prospect of “indigenization from within”, which entails an expansion of the classical Islamic legacy. Once again, history proves a confounding factor. Early Muslim contributions to the field of psychospirituality were suitable for the social constellations of the pre-modern Muslim world. In light of the present-day homogenisation of world culture, one may well ask whether Muslim societies consider traditional forms of social organisation to be desirable any longer. Contrary to some interpretations, the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ does not represent a longing to return to an idealised past but a yearning to embrace the very best that the present has to offer. In any event, “indigenization from within” has been the province, typically, of Muslim apologists – many of whom have never received professional training in psychology and have focused consequently on the details of Islamic spirituality to the virtual exclusion of the secular discipline (e.g. Karim, 1984). Strictly speaking, in these cases it is not *psychology*

that is being Islamicised but Islamic *spirituality* that is being advocated.

Kurt Danziger (1990) has argued that the establishment of psychology as a (Western) discipline resulted from the fulfilment of two criteria: first, psychologists succeeded in producing knowledge that was deemed valuable by recognised knowledge-producers and, second, the former’s knowledge products addressed the needs of powerful social groupings. It is possible, therefore, that an Islamic psychology may yet flourish – on condition that these prerequisites are met. In the English-speaking world, for example, it is not by accident that Malaysia is the only country in which Islamic psychology has gained a foothold. It is in Malaysia, after all, that Islamic psychology is being nurtured within an affirming academic environment, namely, the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). Sponsored by several Muslim states and with a history of strong ties to the Malaysian government, IIUM’s *raison d’être* is the Islamicisation of the knowledge-making enterprise itself. But if Islamic psychology is to be accepted *internationally* as a legitimate field of enquiry, it must begin to create knowledge products that “reflect well-established preconceptions about the forms of valuable knowledge” (ibid., p. 181). This is the dilemma that bedevils attempts at Islamicising the discipline: if one aligns oneself with the norms of the international academy, then the prospect of a ‘token’ Islamic psychology presents itself, but if one relies exclusively on the epistemological, ontological and methodological commitments of traditional Islamic scholarship, then any knowledge product so formed is likely to be shunned by the international community of scholars. Both revisionism and classicalism, that is, are not without their shortcomings.

Conclusion

The metaphysical mismatch between Western psychologists and their Muslim clients has long been documented. Unfortunately, just as Muslim spiritualists have failed to Islamicise the discipline in any meaningful sense, many Muslim psychologists that have had the benefit of professional training are either unaware of, or indifferent to, the Islamic legacy. Indeed, that is to state the matter charitably: it is distinctly possible that modern psychology is simply incapable of being Islamicised. After all, Islamicising psychology – not to mention other subjects – implies an endorsement of the Western disciplinary order’s validity despite it being “a particular manifestation of... how western civilization sees its problems.... It has no real meaning for non-western cultures” (Sardar, 2005, p. 200).

This paper has endeavoured, then, to place the task of Islamicising psychology within its proper context. It has argued that the 1960s' concern for educational 'relevance' became a sticking point for psychologists throughout the world. In the Third World, specifically, the ensuing pursuit of 'relevance' fostered an indigenising impulse that, in Muslim countries, intersected gainfully with the discourse of Islamicisation. Nonetheless, it must be conceded that there is, to date, no such thing as a credibly Islamicised psychology. Whether from 'within' or 'without', attempts to Islamicise the discipline have foundered – and will continue to founder – on the essential question of secularism. While the eventual formulation of a genuinely Islamicised psychology depends in large measure on how Muslims choose to engage with the secular world, one thing is certain: an Islamicised psychology cannot be reduced to an exercise in intellectual isolationism.

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