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## *Review Essay*

### SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

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#### **Abstract**

*Since the 1970s, Muslim intellectuals have offered alternatives to Euro-American dominance in the realm of knowledge. A new movement known as the “Islamization of Knowledge” was founded arguing for an epistemological revolution that hinged on the ideals of Tawhid (unity) and the sacralization of “secularized” disciplines and subjects. This article offers some critical reflections on this intriguing undertaking. In our view, the Islamization of Knowledge project was structured primarily around the idea of civilizational difference and a partial reading of the history of knowledge formation. The notion that knowledge can be “Islamized” or has been “secularized” is equally problematic because human knowledge incorporates both secular and sacred dimensions. Duality exists only in the minds and practices of knowledge producers and policymakers.*

#### **Introduction**

This article offers some critical reflections on an influential intellectual movement known as the “Islamization of Knowledge.” We develop two overlapping arguments. First, the Islamization of Knowledge project was conceived from the perspective of

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civilizational difference. That is the modern Western worldview as well as the conception of knowledge are viewed by the theorists and ideologues of Islamization of Knowledge as radically distinct from the Islamic one and therefore irreconcilable. Such sharp distinctions, in our view, flies in the face of unremitting civilizational syntheses between Islam and the West for over a millennium till the present. Secondly, we assert that all attempts at disaggregating sacred knowledge from secular academic pursuits and re-sacralizing modern knowledge are only viable if “sacred” and “secular” knowledge do not share symbiotic features. The nature of knowledge and of life, however, shows the contrary. All knowledge is imbued with sacred and secular elements. As Talal Asad reminds us, the secular and the religious remade each other. The “‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not essentially fixed categories.”<sup>3</sup> Decoupling of the sacred from the secular, or fusing the sacred with the secular in the realm of knowledge formation are contingent largely on the producers of knowledge and policymakers. In other words, dualism does not exist in knowledge. It exists in the minds of the purveyors of knowledge. Precisely for the same reason, the current project of integrating knowledge in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Malaysia is counter-productive. Noble and aspirational, such efforts, however, depart from the spirit of universalism in Islam.

This reflexive article is divided into three parts. We begin by discussing the circumstances surrounding the growth of a promising intellectual movement christened as the “Islamization of Knowledge.” We offer a broad overview of the thoughts and reflections of key thinkers in this movement. Following this, we delve into how civilizational difference has structured the movement. In the third section, we then provide a brief exposition of the history of knowledge formation to show that all attempts at secularizing and sacralizing knowledge are, in essence, problematic, if not impractical.

### **The Islamization of Knowledge Project: Origins and Trajectories**

Since the 1970s, Muslims in the modern world have been faced with

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<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 25.

intellectual conundrums which they viewed as a consequence of the infusion of secularism into their homelands. In Malaysia, for example, the dualistic educational system introduced by the British gave rise to a segregated Muslim society. Traditional religious education no longer guaranteed employment or prestigious positions and was perceived by Muslim themselves as second-tier to modern and Western-oriented education.<sup>4</sup> In response to this dilemma, a new crop of Muslim intellectuals initiated an “epistemological revolution”.<sup>5</sup> They saw Western and secular knowledge as detrimental to the Muslim way of life (*dīn*). Secular knowledge, they reasoned, runs into conflict with Islam as it is detached from spiritual and religious values. Among the prominent scholars spearheading this epistemological revolution is Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. Knowledge in Islam, according to Al-Attas, is “not neutral and can indeed be infused with a nature and content which masquerades as knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> In response to the perceived threat of secularization and Westernization, Al-Attas pioneered the Islamization of Knowledge movement. The movement seeks to liberate “man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition, and then from secular control over his reason and his language.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the objectives of the Islamization of knowledge is dewesternizing secular frameworks of thought. Al-Attas deconstructs foreign elements that have regulated how Muslims conceive knowledge. Those elements are: “dualism in envisioning reality and truth; dualism of mind and body; their separation of *intellectus* and *ratio*, their stress upon the validity of ratio; their methodological

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<sup>4</sup> Rosnani Hashim, “Educational dualism in Malaysia: Progress and problems toward Integration,” *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol. 11, no.3 (1994), 34-41. See also Suhailah Hussein, “Critical pedagogy, Islamisation of knowledge and Muslim education,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 15, no.1 (2007), 85-104.

<sup>5</sup> Rosnani Hashim and Imron Rossidy, “Islamization of knowledge: A comparative analysis of the conceptions of Al-Attas and Al-Fārūqī,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2013), 19-44, <http://irep.iium.edu.my/25955/>.

<sup>6</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1978), 127.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 174, see also, Rosnani and Imron, *Islamization of Knowledge*, 19-44.

cleavage about rationalism and empiricism; their doctrine of humanism; the secular ideology; their concept of tragedy-mainly in literature.”<sup>8</sup> Once all these elements (i.e., secularism, dualism, humanism, and tragedy) are eliminated from the human sciences, Islamic concepts can then be infused. This will then shepherd fresh interpretation of facts and the formulation of new grand theories.<sup>9</sup> According to Al-Attas, knowledge should be grounded in the principle of unity. Islam upholds that there is “only One Reality and Truth, and all Islamic values pertain ultimately to it alone, so that to the Muslim, individually and collectively, all endeavour towards change and development and progress and perfection is invariably determined by the worldview that projects the vision of the One Reality and confirms the affirmation of the same Truth.”<sup>10</sup>

Another prominent Palestinian-American thinker, Ismail Al-Faruqi, in turn, theorizes the Islamization of knowledge as the integration of “new knowledge into the corpus of the Islamic legacy by eliminating, amending, re-interpreting and adapting its components as the worldview of Islam and its values dictate.”<sup>11</sup> Extending Al-Attas’ ideas, Al-Faruqi questions the epistemological bases of modern academic disciplines and calls for the incorporation of the concept of *Tawhid* (unity). Al-Faruqi argues for eliminating the dichotomy between ‘*aql* (acquired) and *naql* (revealed) sciences. He underlines the unity of life whereby all actions of human beings are to be analyzed on equal terms and not determined by ethnicity, colour, class and so forth which are the hallmarks of Western orientalism. He sees all disciplines as humanistic and sought to harmonize them to address worldly problems.<sup>12</sup>

The third scholar to be considered here is Seyyed Hossein Nasr who emphasizes the need to resacralize knowledge instead of Islamization of knowledge since all world religions view knowledge

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: The Problem, Principles, and the Workplan* (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 1982), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge*, 22.



as sacred.<sup>13</sup> Agreeing however with the earlier thinkers, he emphasizes the internalization of the concept of *Tawhid* in the process of reconstructing knowledge to reveal the underlying “unity and inter-relatedness of all that exists.”<sup>14</sup> Even though the concept of *Tawhid* fundamentally refers to unity and oneness of God, Nasr believes *Tawhid* also symbolizes a comprehensive metaphysical view of the unity of all knowledge.<sup>15</sup> “The testimony of the faith *La ilaha illa 'Llah* (There is no divinity but the Divine) is a statement concerning knowledge, not sentiments or the will. It contains the quintessence of metaphysical knowledge concerning the Principle and its manifestation.”<sup>16</sup>

These three thinkers influenced a burgeoning generation of scholars advocating for a holistic conception of knowledge consistent with the *tawhidic* worldview. To them, knowledge is inherently connected to the divine. To operationalize the Islamization of Knowledge project, Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman along with other scholars associated with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) based in North Virginia, United States devised a workplan that involved the production of new textbooks offering Islamic approaches to academic disciplines and the training of a cadre of academicians.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Alwani, in turn, emphasizes the importance of reading and understanding both the signs of God in the Qur’an (*ayat al-Qur’aniyyah*) and the signs of God in His creation (*ayat*

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<sup>13</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (State University of New York Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim Kalin, ‘The sacred versus the secular: Nasr on science’, in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian Stone (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing CO., 2001), 451.

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Wolf-Gazo, ‘The sacred versus the secular: Nasr on Science’, in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian Stone (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing CO., 2001), 277-303.

<sup>16</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> The comprehensive discourse on the malaise of the Ummah and the action plan to reconstruct the Muslim thought are highlighted in Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, *Islamization of Knowledge: The Problem, Principles, and the Workplan* (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 1989).

*al-kauniyyah*) as the mainsprings of the Islamization of Knowledge project.

The foundation of the tawhīdi episteme which holds that the universe has a Creator, who has charged humanity with His stewardship and what they knew not, making revelation a principal source of knowledge and likewise the natural world, so that by means of reading the two within a framework of pure tawhīd, proper, discerning, and purposeful knowledge may result”.<sup>18</sup>

In Malaysia, a noted intellectual and former rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), Kamal Hassan further expands these thinkers’ ideas by subjecting to critical assessment facets of social and natural sciences that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings and worldviews. Modern paradigms, theories, concepts, and methodologies that are compatible and in harmony with Islam should not be judiciously incorporated into the heart of what he calls the “Islamicization of Knowledge,”<sup>19</sup> a mere terminological refurbishment of the Islamization of Knowledge endeavour.

The Islamization of knowledge project is not without problems. Osman Bakar, one of the leading theorists in the movement, sees the Islamization of Knowledge as rapidly losing its relevance since new perspectives have not been offered to address new global epistemological developments. Among the new epistemological developments is postmodernism, a deconstructive system of thought that encouraged many scholars and institutions to consider various traditions of knowledge into the heart of the Western academe.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, Mumtaz Ali highlights a core

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<sup>18</sup> Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, “The Islamization of knowledge: yesterday and today,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no.1 (1995), 5.

<sup>19</sup> The full text of the lecture delivered by the late Prof. M. Kamal Hassan in January 2022, entitled “Islamisation of human knowledge,” can be accessed at [https://www.iium.edu.my/media/84229/MKH\\_UNICORE%204-IOHK.docx.pdf](https://www.iium.edu.my/media/84229/MKH_UNICORE%204-IOHK.docx.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Osman Bakar, *Islamic Civilisation and the Modern World: Thematic Essays* (Gadong: University Brunei Darussalam Press, 2014). Osman Bakar also calls for a new grand synthesis between Islamic science, modern science, and post-modernity in Osman Bakar, “Islamic Science, Modern Science, and Post-Modernity: Towards a

weakness in any attempts at Islamizing knowledge. It is necessary, according to him, “to make a clear distinction between the Divine and human...the real issue does not lie in the absence of principles and values, rather the real issue arises when we come to their application and this involves the issue of methodology.”<sup>21</sup> Going further, we show that epistemological and methodological problems found in the Islamization of Knowledge project have to do, first of all, with a misleading perception of civilizational difference and a partial view of the nature of knowledge.

### **Civilizational Difference and the Inter-civilizational Nature of Knowledge**

The Islamization of Knowledge project was based on the idea of civilizational difference. Islamic worldview and conception of knowledge are regarded as fundamentally distinct from the West. In making out binaries between Islam and the West, theorists of the Islamization of Knowledge de-emphasize inter-civilizational exchanges that took place over many centuries; inter-civilizational exchanges that became an elementary attribute of knowledge formation in Islam. Indeed, a cursory survey of the global history of knowledge across the Muslim civilization and beyond informs us that Arabic numerals and algebra were developed through the interactions between Indian, Muslim, and Western traditions of knowledge. Many mathematical concepts such as the concept of zero, geometry and infinity were discovered during the Vedic period of Indian civilization. These concepts did not emerge from pure reason but were formulated through the study of the Vedas. The concepts of zero and the decimal system can be found in the Atharvaveda and this was later studied and developed further by Muslim thinkers.<sup>22</sup>

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new synthesis through a Tawhidic epistemology,” *Revelation and Science*, vol. 1, no.3 (2011), 13-20.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Mumtaz Ali, “Reconstruction of Islamic thought and civilization,” *American Journal of Islam and Society*, vol. 16, no. 1 (April 1, 1999), 93–109, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v16i1.2132>.

<sup>22</sup> Subhajyoti Borgohain, “Mathematical concepts and its theories in the Vedas,” *Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD)*, vol. 5, no.3 (2021), 735-737.

Al-Khwarizmi (780-850) was one great Muslim mathematician and astronomer who was influenced by the works of Indian mathematical giants and, in effect, inspired generations of mathematicians from different civilizations.<sup>23</sup>

In other fields of knowledge, the same inter-civilizational exchanges were evident. Islamic medicine was developed from intense knowledge exchanges with Greek and Indian civilizations. Research by Meyerhof and Speziale reveals the translation and incorporation of many concepts from Ayurvedic texts such as alchemy (*rasaśāstra*) and rejuvenating therapy (*rasāyana*) into Arabic and Persian.<sup>24</sup> This transfer of knowledge and expertise advanced the Arabo-Persian medicine during the late medieval and early modern periods. A combination of Ayurvedic and Greco-Arabic medicinal practices were eventually used by Muslim and Hindu doctors in South Asia. In the field of astronomy, during the Song Dynasty, a Hui Muslim known as Ma Yize had introduced the seven-day week into the Chinese calendrical system.<sup>25</sup> An Islamic astronomical handbook called *zij* that was translated into Chinese with the title, *Huihui Li* or *Huihui lifa* (Islamic astronomical system). The handbooks contained large sets of mathematical tables that aided astronomical and astrological calculations.<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, the European Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries blossomed through the contributions of Muslim thinkers during the height of Islamic civilization.<sup>27</sup> Europeans were

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew E. Falagas, Effie Zarkadoulia, and George Samonis, "Arab science in the Golden Age (750–1258 C.E.) and today," *The FASEB Journal*, vol. 20, no. 10 (August 1, 2006), 1581–86, <https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.06-0803ufm>.

<sup>24</sup> Max Meyerhof, "On the transmission of Greek and Indian Science to the Arabs," *Islamic Culture*, vol. 11, no.1 (1937), 17-29. See also Fabrizio Speziale, "Rasāyana and Rasaśāstra in the Persian medical culture of South Asia," *History of Science in South Asia*, vol. 7 (2019), 1-14.

<sup>25</sup> The contributions of Muslims in the development of knowledge and science in other civilizations are further discussed in Johan Meuleman, *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity* (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Benno Van Dalen, "Islamic astronomical tables in China: the sources for the Huihui li," in *Astrophysics and Space Science Library: Vol. 275. History of Oriental Astronomy*, ed. S.M. Razaullah Ansari (Springer, 2002), 19-31.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmed Essa and Othman Ali, *Books-In-Brief: Studies in Islamic Civilization: The Muslim Contribution to the Renaissance* (International Institute of Islamic

exposed to sciences developed by Islamic scholars through the work of translation, from Arabic to Latin. They utilized these sciences for the advancement of their knowledge. For example, the works of Leonardo of Pisa (Fibonacci) on algebra were mostly derived from his readings of al-Khwarizmi's texts. The reverse held true. Three hundred years before the translation movement in Renaissance Europe began, a similar translation movement was well in operation in the heart of the Islamic world. Classical Greek works such as Euclid's *Elements* and Ptolemy's *Almagest* were translated into Arabic.<sup>28</sup> Al-Farabi (870-950), as a case in point, benefited from the writings of Greek sages. Conferred the title of a "second master" or "second teacher" after Aristotle, he became a source of reference for philosophers and scholars from other religions and civilizations. Al-Farabi believed that human intelligence originated through inspiration from God. Religious scriptures should, to him, be studied by scientists in their bid to offer new theories and discoveries. The work of a Jewish philosopher and theologian, Maimonides (1138-1204), entitled *Guide to the Lost* shows traces of al-Farabi's ideas. Through the works and ideas of al-Farabi, the Europeans recovered ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese also contributed to medical discoveries through the study of Daoist texts. They deliberated on the concept of *Qi* that pays emphasis on longevity. Daoist texts stress on preserving one's self and nature through the philosophy of *Daodejing*. This goal can be achieved through nurturing a life of meditation and proper living (*yangsheng*).<sup>30</sup>

The sacred origins of knowledge especially in European and non-European societies have been highlighted by Nasr:

In the beginning, Reality was at once being, knowledge, and bliss (the *sat*, *chit*, and, *ananda* of the Hindu tradition or *qudrah*, *hikmah*, and *rahmah* which are

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Thought (IIT), 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Jim Al-Khalili, *Pathfinders: The Golden Age of Arabic Science* (Penguin UK, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Osman Bakar, *Al-Farabi: Life, Works and Significance* (Islamic Book Trust, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Raphals Lisa, "Daoism and Science," in *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, ed. Xiaogan Liu (Dordrecht Toronto: Springer, 2015), Vol. 6, 539-550.

among the Names of Allah in Islam) and in that “now” which is the ever-present “in the beginning,” knowledge continues to possess a profound relation with that principal and primordial Reality which is the Sacred and the source of all that is sacred.”<sup>31</sup>

Scientific discoveries during the Golden Age of Islam, in particular, were inspired by Quranic verses about the relationship between nature and man. Muslim scholars studied nature to deepen their faith in God and understand the wisdom of divine creation.<sup>32</sup> They were especially motivated by natural phenomena mentioned in the Quran. For example in Surah Al-Mu’minun, verse 12-14, the creation of human beings was unravelled and this spurred Muslim scientists to invent theories and scientific tools to test and confirm the validity of revelation:

We did create man from a quintessence (of clay). Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest firmly fixed. Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature: so blessed be Allah the Best to create!<sup>33</sup>

It is evident from the above account that knowledge is a product of inter-civilizational exchanges. The so-called “Western knowledge” in our times traces its genealogy to interactions with other bodies of knowledge. By distinguishing Western knowledge and Islamic knowledge, the proponents of Islamization of Knowledge are presumably disowning the contributions of other civilizations. Hence, the claim made by Al-Attas that Western philosophy must be totally rebutted runs contrary to the methodology of Muslim scholars of the past. They did not reject but sought to harmonize any traditions of

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<sup>31</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Yasmeen Mahnaz Faruqi, “Contributions of Islamic scholars to the scientific enterprise.,” *International Education Journal*, vol. 7, no. 4 (September 1, 2006), 391–99, <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v7n4/Faruqi/paper.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> The Qur’an, 23:12-14.

knowledge they considered inconsistent with Islamic values. Such harmonization of knowledge was not without contestations from within the Islamic intellectual circles. Ibn Sina (980-1037) was criticized by Al-Ghazali in *Tahāfut Al-Falāsifah* (The Incoherence of Philosophers) for being overly enamoured by Greek philosophy and contravening Islamic principles. According to Fazlur Rahman: “This was an attempt to sift what al-Ghazali thought to be Islamic from what he thought to be un-Islamic.” Fazlur goes further to make a compelling point about the futility of dewesternizing and Islamizing knowledge. What is most crucial to him is not whether knowledge is Western or non-Western but whether such knowledge is consistent with Islamic values.<sup>34</sup>

### **Secularizing Knowledge and Sacralizing Knowledge: Two Sides of the Same Problem**

Modern secularists’ claim that secular knowledge can be objective and value-free if methodological agnosticism is adhered to. Extending the views of Robert Proctor,<sup>35</sup> we would like to stress the fallacious nature of this claim for the fact that secular knowledge too has metaphysical foundations. Many scientific discoveries were inspired by or grew from religious teachings and convictions. Knowledge of sacred scriptures has given rise to various branches and forms of knowledge about the world and these two bodies of knowledge alternately affected one another. The symbiotic relationship between the sacred and the secular meant that any attempt to secularize or sacralize knowledge is unfeasible or futile. Still, we must trace the origins of the bifurcation between secular and religious knowledge to appreciate why such divisions became mainstream especially during the advent of Western modernity. The term secularism was coined as early as 1871 by George Holyoake in his book *The Principles of Secularism*:

Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by

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<sup>34</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Islamization of knowledge: A response,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1988), 3-11.

<sup>35</sup> See Robert Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

material means; measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life-having for its objects the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point, as the immediate duty of society: inculcating the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism, or Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Holyoake considers secularism as an alternative to the theological understanding of life. The term “secularization,” in turn, was discussed in the influential work of the Dutch theologian Cornelis Van Peursen. Al-Attas also uses Van Peursen’s definition of secularization as “the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language.”<sup>37</sup> Al-Attas however does not make a distinction between the concept of secularization and secularism. Both secularism and secularization, he writes, “are equally opposed to the worldview projected by Islam. As far as their opposition to Islam is concerned we do not find the distinction between them significant enough for us to justify our making a special distinction between them from the point of view of practical judgement.”<sup>38</sup>

The Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe was an era when secularization expanded. More emphasis was given to worldly domains of life and learning and religions were viewed with scepticism and cynicism.<sup>39</sup> According to Reader, the Enlightenment was “an emphasis on the primacy of reason as the correct way of organizing knowledge, a concentration on empirical data accessible

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<sup>36</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism Illustrated*. Third Edition, Revised, (Austin & Company, 1870).

<sup>37</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15. See also Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press eBooks: 2019), <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691161327.001.0001>.



to all and a belief that human progress was to be achieved by the application of science and reason.”<sup>40</sup> Enlightenment thinkers critiqued religious dimensions in knowledge and emphasised the autonomy of reason. Nonetheless, Enlightenment thinkers were not opposed to religion per se. Rather they shunned elements of superstition, extremism and other ‘irrational’ aspects of religion. Even Voltaire, a staunch critic of religion, subjected his criticism towards the oppressive Catholic Church in France but not towards Christianity in general. Charles Taylor maintains that secularism itself had theological origins and eventually influenced the rise of Christian monotheism and the Protestant Reformation. “The interesting story is not simply one of decline but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life.”<sup>41</sup> Protestantism underscored individual liberty and raged against the authority of the Church. In effect, Protestantism further strengthened the Enlightenment era in the West. Most Protestant thinkers, however, leaned on the authority of religious scriptures. This was different from the approach used by the atheistic philosophers during the Enlightenment era. To develop natural science, atheistic philosophers believed that the Bible could not be taken as a source of knowledge. Even so, the Enlightenment did not eradicate religious communities’ place had in the development of knowledge. Instead, a recent work by David Sorkin shows that there were different Enlightenments co-existing within the same times and spaces, a strand that emphasised reason over religion and another strain that highlighted the roles of religious beliefs in the enhancement of knowledge. Both Enlightenments were in competition with each other and interactions between both was commonplace.<sup>42</sup>

Religion and metaphysics, therefore, did not completely lose their importance during the Enlightenment era. It was ‘rationalized’ yet remained ‘unsecularized.’ As a matter of fact, some

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<sup>40</sup> John Reader, *Beyond All Reason: The Limits of Postmodern Theology* (Aureus Publishing, 1997), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 437.

<sup>42</sup> David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

Enlightenment philosophers and scientists such as Spinoza and Leibniz wrote their works based on metaphysical and theological grounds.<sup>43</sup> One of the renowned rationalist philosophers, René Descartes (1596-1650), developed scientific arguments based on metaphysical foundations. According to Descartes, all human knowledge including the knowledge gained through the senses stems from knowledge of God though he departed from Christian theology. “And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else.”<sup>44</sup>

In his book entitled *The Principle of Philosophy*, he wrote:

The philosophy whole is like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, emerging from the trunk, are all the other sciences, which maybe reduce to the three principle ones, namely, medicine, mechanics and morality...by morality I understand the highest and most perfect morality, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate degree of wisdom.”<sup>45</sup>

The foundation of knowledge, according to Descartes, begins with metaphysics. The so-called Western secular knowledge, therefore, was not totally objective, neutral, and value-free. It had theological and metaphysical origins.

The post-Enlightenment period witnessed the expansion of European colonialism into Muslim lands. Most Muslim empires had succumbed to Western domination by the early twentieth century. The secularization process became more comprehensive than ever, so

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<sup>43</sup> Pauline Phemister, *The Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz* (Wiley, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 47. This great philosophical text was originally published in Latin in 1641.

<sup>45</sup> Roger Ariew, “Descartes and the tree of knowledge,” *Synthese*, vol. 92, no. 1 (July 1, 1992), 101–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00413744>.

much so that some would-be nation-states, such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey adopted secularism as state ideology. In communist-ruled countries, secular institutions dominated religious ones. Be that as it may, colonialism, Western modernity and other secularizing processes did not totally obliterate Islamic piety from the hearts and minds of Muslim scholars and intellectuals. Granted that some Muslim countries such as Turkey and Tunisia took on aggressive secularist stances and marginalized Islam from public space and education, but such secularizing policies had a reverse effect decades later. Many studies have shown that modernity and secularization spurred the coming into of new waves of Islamic revivalism and modernity defined in Islamic terms.<sup>46</sup>

It is, therefore, unsurprising that almost all the founding thinkers of the Islamization of Knowledge movement were trained in secular schools and Western universities. They provide evidence of the continued sway of Islam in the modern age. Colonialism, communism, capitalism and other forces of secularization did not annihilate Islamic piety. It had, in fact, provided the very basis for the Islamization of Knowledge movement. In other words, secularization of Muslim lands in the modern period, as Aljunied has shown, marshalled Islamization by other means. And yet, such Islamization became, at times, defensive as part of the postcolonial responses to Western domination.<sup>47</sup> Just as secularization had a theological and metaphysical origin, Islamization also had a secular antecedent.

From this, it follows that, in classifying knowledge into Islamicized and secularized types, proponents of Islamization of Knowledge merely mirrored their secular nemeses. Put differently, the problem with the Islamization of Knowledge project lies in its adoption and duplication of the reductionist approach of the ultra-secularists during the Enlightenment era, and thereafter that saw no prospects in fusing different domains of knowledge developed by varying traditions into a universally accepted form of knowledge for

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<sup>46</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> The impact of British colonialism on Islamization in Malaysia is thoroughly discussed in Khairudin Aljunied, *Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamization of Knowledge, we would like to state here boldly, is a secularism-in-reverse. Instead of bringing knowledge back to its pluralistic forms where the secular and the religious were taken as harmonious, Islamization of Knowledge proponents end up marking divisions between the metaphysical, theological and religious knowledge with what they call “secular” or “secularized” sciences. Secular knowledge was barely divorced from its religious past and what is needed instead is for Muslims to use and advance such knowledge to reflect their convictions and value systems.

Furthermore, instead of formulating new theories, building new concepts, founding new fields, ushering new disciplines and introducing new axioms for the study of natural phenomena and human societies for the benefit of humankind, proponents of the Islamization of Knowledge have merely engaged in what we call as adding “Islamic veneers” to the established bodies of knowledge. Hence, sociology becomes “Islamic sociology”, and physics as we know it today is prefixed with the term “Islamicized” without any radical changes to the disciplines. Merely adding Qur’anic verses and hadiths to justify that these disciplines are now Islamic is probably the furthest that proponents of Islamization of knowledge have achieved. It has not brought about any radical changes to the existing knowledge bases, nor has the Islamization of Knowledge project given birth to globally renowned universities with top scientists and scholars offering ground-breaking and field-changing discoveries.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, Muslim intellectuals have sought to rectify the intellectual crisis that has plagued the Muslim world by embarking on the ‘epistemological revolution.’ Known as Islamization of Knowledge, thinkers within this movement desired a dewesternization of global epistemology and infusion of Islamic values into modern knowledge. They hoped to synthesize the social sciences and humanities with the natural sciences and the incorporation of religious principles into the heart of academic pursuits. Grounded in the *tawhid* paradigm, they affirmed knowledge’s holistic and sacred nature. However, applying the

Islamization principles and strategies has yet to be achieved due to the fallacy of civilizational difference and a mistaken idea of knowledge formations. The unresolved methodological issues in the Islamization project have further reinforced dualism. The fight against secularism, coupled with the politicization of Islam, eventually led to more secularization couched in Islamic terms.<sup>48</sup>

The concept of dewesternization was based on the notion that Western civilization conflicts with the Islamic and Asian civilizations. In reality, knowledge has diverse origins and is, hence, inter-civilizational in nature. The so-called Western knowledge we inherit today resulted from interactions with Muslim, Indian, Chinese and other influences. Furthermore, the claim that the only valid scientific knowledge is secular can be refuted since most scientific discoveries in great civilizations were religiously inspired. Knowledge has been imbued with secular and sacred elements, so decoupling the two would appear to be a utopian venture. We will conclude by restating that attempts to resacralize knowledge are noteworthy yet ill-founded. It is not knowledge or institutions of knowledge that should be resacralized but how Muslims think that should be reformed to manifest the ideals of unity and universality.

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<sup>48</sup> Examples of how the politicization of Islam further reinforces secularization are discussed in Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-Ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Based on the analysis, the competition among two Islamist parties in Pakistan i.e. *Jama'at-e-Islami* and *Jama'at-ud-Da'wa* had influenced the growth of secularization.



## TRANSLITERATION TABLE

### CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h <sup>1</sup>	h <sup>1</sup>
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a <sup>2</sup>
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al <sup>3</sup>	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

<sup>1</sup> – when not final

<sup>2</sup> – at in construct state

<sup>3</sup> – (article) al - or l-

### VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

### URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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