

1. Introduction: The Project of Islamic Social Sciences

A number of Muslim authors have advocated the development of Islamic Social Sciences. Sometimes, this is seen as a part of a general Islamization of knowledge, while others focus on the social sciences and humanities as being particularly biased by assumptions contrary to Islam. The term "Islamization of knowledge" was first introduced in 1978 by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. His discussion of the Islamization of knowledge is worth reviewing, since he brings together the ideas:

- (1) that the sciences as developed in the West are biased in a manner that is unacceptable from an Islamic point of view;
- (2) that this bias is particularly prevalent in the human sciences; and
- (3) that this bias occurs because of flaws in interpretation.

Al-Attas argues that knowledge imported into the Muslim world from the West is "infused with the character and personality of Western culture and civilization and moulded in the crucible of Western culture."¹ He continues that the elements and key concepts of Western culture need to be identified and isolated.

*These elements and key concepts are mainly prevalent in that branch of knowledge pertaining to the human sciences, although it must be noted that even in the natural, physical and applied sciences, particularly where they deal with interpretation of facts and formulation of theories, the same process of isolation of the elements and key concepts should be applied; for the interpretations and formulations indeed belong to the sphere of the human sciences.*²

Finally, the Islamization of knowledge is to be achieved, according to Al-Attas, by replacing the Western elements and key concepts by Islamic ones, so that the sciences may be remolded "in the crucible of Islam."

According to the nephew of Al-Attas, Farid Alatas, the approach taken by his uncle was influenced by the Sufi tradition, and emphasized the need for proper inspiration (ilham) to inform one's research.

We are really talking about what my uncle once told me: it is the Islamization of the mind. The way I understand it, the discussion is about the way Islam provides the metaphysical and epistemological basis for knowledge. Those concerned are not interested in creating an Islamic sociology or an Islamic physics, but what they say is that, whatever your discipline, there is a particular metaphysical and epistemological framework that is provided by Islam. [3](#)

Al-Attas insists that Islamization is not merely a matter of taking Western sciences and adding some Islamic decorations. He proposes a much more thorough and profound reworking. Nevertheless, it is by no means clear that his aims could be achieved by a replacement of elements and key concepts, or how this replacement could be carried out.

Some understanding of how Al-Attas sought to carry out the project can be gained by examining the manner in which he directed the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). Alatas explains that this institute "was created specifically to Islamize knowledge, not only to teach the various branches, but also to provide that metaphysical and epistemological basis that should be infused by all scholars and teachers, whatever the discipline."[4](#) As currently organized, however, ISTAC has no philosophy department, and without one, it is difficult to see how the metaphysics and epistemology that Al-Attas viewed as the basis for islamization might be provided.

As Farid Alatas understands the Islamization of the social sciences, we should not expect an islamized sociology, economics, or political science to rival secular versions of these sciences, rather researchers who are well grounded in the Islamic epistemology and metaphysics should use concepts drawn from them to provide a framework in which to carry our empirical research.

The only way in which Islam can be brought into closer alignment with knowledge is if people start to do empirical work. And that takes me to my own understanding of these matters. I think that, rather than to talk about Islamizing knowledge, one should actually look at Islamic traditions as sources of concepts and ideas, and do actual research with that. [5](#)

Alatas goes on to explain that he proposes that historians, sociologists, and other social scientists should look at work done by classical Muslim thinkers, such as Biruni, extract key ideas from them, "and undertake empirical historical research with these ideas."

A rival approach to the Islamization of knowledge was initiated by Isma'il Faruqi in 1982.[6](#) This approach was integrated with several other goals, including the reform of Islam, the salvation of the West, and a substantive view of how the modern sciences were to be Islamized. In order to carry out this program, Faruqi participated in the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1981.

Faruqi proposed to adopt the best of Western science and technology, but to base it on Islamic

principles and values that would guide the further development of the sciences. He agreed with Salafi ideas of the need to return to a pristine original Islam, but he considered this original Islam to be fundamentally rational, and open to dialogue with non-Muslims. He found inspiration in both Abd al-Wahhab and in Muhammad Abduh.⁷

His program for the Islamization of knowledge was ideological and advocated the strengthening of Islamic identity. According to Faruqi, the Islamization of knowledge is to "recast knowledge as Islam relates to it., I.e. to redefine and reorder the data, to rethink the reasoning and relating of the data, to reevaluate the conclusions, to reproject the goals—and to do so in such a way as to make the disciplines enrich the vision and serve the cause of Islam."⁸

*At the heart of his vision was the Islamization of knowledge. He regarded the political, economic, and religiocultural malaise of the Islamic community as primarily due to the bifurcated state of education in the Muslim world with a resultant lack of vision. He believed that the cure was twofold: the compulsory study of Islamic civilization and the Islamization of modern knowledge.*⁹

Faruqi's program of Islamization is summarized by Ibrahim Ragab as having three main components:

- 1) Mastery of modern disciplines, and the critical assessment of their methodologies, research findings, and theories within the Islamic perspective.
- 2) Mastery of the Islamic legacy, and the critical assessment of Islamic scholarship against :
 - a) a pristine Revelational perspective
 - b) current needs of the Ummah, and
 - c) modern advances in human knowledge.
- 3) Creative synthesis of the Islamic legacy and modern knowledge; a creative leap "to bridge over the gap of centuries of non- development"¹⁰

The work of IIIT has been subject to much criticism¹¹ for being rhetoric without substance, for poor quality of IIIT publications, and for the conceit that the true meaning of knowledge is privy to those working in accordance with its own ideology. Although these criticisms have been raised against the Islamization of knowledge project, in general, IIIT seems to have borne much of the brunt of it.

Kalin faults Faruqi's project for using Islamic labels that obscure deeper philosophical issues involved in the current discussions of science, and for focusing on the social sciences to the exclusion of the natural sciences, despite the fact that his original project aim at Islamizing all the knowledge imported from the West. Kalin observes two outcomes of Faruqi's project and the work of IIIT: an over-emphasis on social sciences and constituting "knowledge"; and neglect of the secularizing effects of the modern scientific worldview.

This leaves the Muslim social scientists, the ideal– types of the Islamization program, with no clue as to how to deal with the questions that modern scientific knowledge poses. Furthermore, to take the philosophical foundations of modern, natural sciences for granted is tantamount to reinforcing the dichotomy between the natural and human sciences, a dichotomy whose consequences continue to pose serious challenges to the validity of the forms of knowledge outside the domain of modern physical sciences. [12](#)

IIIT has responded to the criticism by reformulating the program as first conceived by Faruqi in a series of papers. [13](#) Faruqi's plan was seen as too "mechanical" and alternatives are proposed that aim at greater flexibility, and propose drawing on the ideas about the Islamization of knowledge that have been drawn up by others. [14](#)

Yet another call for the Islamization of knowledge may be derived from the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, although he calls his project one of reviving the sacred sciences, rather than Islamization, and emphasizes the idea that the religious traditions of the world share a perennial wisdom opposed to the cultural and intellectual trends that emerged from European modernity. [15](#)

Nasr calls for a return to sacred science in a number of his writings, most prominently in his *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981) and *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993), although his position is stated in his earliest work on Islamic science. [16](#) Nasr does not limit his criticism of modern science to the social sciences, but takes the modern scientific revolutions in the natural sciences to have ushered in a worldview that is incompatible with and dismissive of sacred science.

In recent reflections on his life, Nasr writes:

*...many people have made claims to be the originator of one of the most important intellectual exercises that is taking place in the Islamic world today and which they call the "Islamization of knowledge," the effort to incorporate Western knowledge into the Islamic framework. I have never liked the usage of this term, but the fact is that I spoke about this integration in 1957/58 when I wrote my book *Science and Civilization in Islam* parallel with my Ph.D. Thesis, although this book was not published until a few years later. It was then 1957, at least ten, fifteen years before other people such as Isma'il al-Faruqi and Naquib al-Attas, who are now known for this project, came to the fore that I wrote about the integration of all knowledge into the Islamic worldview.* [17](#)

Nasr argues that the modern science that emerged with the scientific revolutions of the 17th century is a direct challenge to the traditional worldview, particularly as developed in Islamic civilization. Hence, modern science and technology are not to be considered as value-free. It imposes a value system inimical to Islamic civilization. Nevertheless, modern science is not to be simply abandoned. Muslims should master the modern sciences, but critically. It is the responsibility of Muslim scientists to formulate a critique of modern science based on the Islamic intellectual tradition.

On the positive side, the work of Nasr on sacred science has the great merit of showing how sacred

sciences must be integrated with ecological concerns, and with Islamic ethics, more generally. [18](#) On the negative side, it is not clear how the positive gains made by the modern sciences are to be integrated in sacred science.

There are many other Muslim thinkers who have tackled the problem of Islam and modern science. My purpose is not to survey all the views, but only to introduce the discourse about the problem in order to highlight the importance of interpretation in how we understand the relation between Islam and science. However, we do well to consider the words with which Muzaffar Iqbal concludes a survey of Muslims' views of the relationship between Islam and modern science.

What is needed is a major intellectual revolution in the Muslim world that would recover the lost tradition of scholarship rooted in Islam's own primary sources. This would lead to the emergence of a new movement helping Muslims to appropriate modern science and technologies like the movement that digested an enormously large amount of scientific and philosophical thought that entered the Islamic tradition during the three centuries of the earlier translation movement.

Only such a recasting of modern scientific knowledge has the hope of germinating the seeds of scientific thinking in the Muslim mind that is not laden with scientism. Only such a revolutionary change in thinking can liberate the Islam and science discourse from its colonized bondage and produce genuine Islamic reflections on the enterprise of modern science—an enterprise that looms large in all spheres of contemporary life and society. [19](#)

In sum, we find that the project or projects for developing Islamic social sciences are interwoven with a number of related issues.

1) Which Islamic school of thought is to provide the framework for the development of Islamic social sciences: Traditionalism, Salafism, Sufism, modernism? In other words, proposals for the Islamization of the social sciences have been made from specific ideological perspectives, and developments of Islamic social sciences need to clear the hurdle of ideology if they are to have any chance at success. No science can develop if practitioners are condemned on the basis of ideology rather than scientific contribution.

2) Is the development of Islamic science to cover all the sciences or is it to be limited to the social sciences and humanities? Are we to expect Muslim mathematicians to develop a modern Islamic mathematics, for example, that rejects the existence of transfinite numbers because of the rejection of actual infinities in classical Aristotelian/Islamic mathematics?

3) Will Islamic social science reject the methods and findings of modern Western social sciences, or will it reinterpret them and offer a critique? More generally, what exactly is to be the relation between the Islamicized sciences and the modern Western sciences?

4) To what extent can modern Western science be separated from scientism? Some philosophers of

science, such as Richard Dawkins, insist that modern science is essentially atheistic, while many others, such as Alvin Plantinga, claim that it is not modern science that rejects any transcendent reality, but only the scientific assumption that there is nothing in existence that cannot be investigated and described by the methods of the modern sciences.

My hypothesis is that the question of interpretation is crucial to finding a solution to all these issues, and that since the study of interpretation is hermeneutics, we should examine the issues of hermeneutics in relation to the social sciences in order to understand how best to approach the issues mentioned above and others.

[1.](#) Al-Attas (1993), 162.

[2.](#) Al-Attas (1993), 162.

[3.](#) Alatas (2008).

[4.](#) Alatas (2008).

[5.](#) Alatas (2008).

[6.](#) Faruqi (1982).

[7.](#) See Esposito and Voll (2001), 29.

[8.](#) Faruqi (1982), 15.

[9.](#) Esposito and Voll (2001), 32.

[10.](#) Ragab (2005).

[11.](#) See, for example, Stenberg (1996); Abaza (2002); Kalin (2002); Alatas (2008). A more general criticism of Islamization, from an Iranian émigré's postmodernist perspective, with more sarcasm than substance, may be found in Shayegan (1992).

[12.](#) Kalin (2002), 61.

[13.](#) See Sulaiman (2000).

[14.](#) See Sulaiman (2000); Bennet (2005); and especially Iqbal (2008), who provides a detailed analysis of the views of Nasr, among others.

[15.](#) For criticism, see Legenhausen (2002).

[16.](#) Nasr (1978), based on his Ph. D. dissertation (Harvard) completed in 1958.

[17.](#) Nasr (2010), 78.

[18.](#) See, especially, Nasr (1996), and Nasr (1993), Ch. 8 and 9.

[19.](#) Iqbal (2008), 188.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/fr/hermeneutical-foundations-islamic-social-sciences-muhammad-legenhausen/1-introduction-project#comment-0>