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6. Islamic Social Sciences

The task of applying an Islamic hermeneutics to the social sciences is complicated by several factors. First, there is the old question about whether there can even be such a thing as social science.

If science is objectifying inquiry, and the interpretation of social phenomena cannot be an objectifying inquiry, it would seem that any social science would be impossible, and, hence that there could be no Islamic social science. Our suggestion is that the objectivity of interpretive inquiry can be preserved through the articulation of the assumptions upon which one's interpretation is based.

The idea that any hermeneutics must begin from one's own perspective does not imply that this perspective cannot itself be articulated and subject to critical examination. Second, if we grant that there can be social sciences, and that hermeneutics will play a significant role in them, would a religious hermeneutics not compromise the scientific nature of the sciences?

The hermeneutical foundations of the social sciences, however, will not be any more scientific for being value neutral or free from religious ideas as long as the values and religious principles that inform the hermeneutics are confessed from the outset. It must be admitted that all of the factors that determine judgment in interpretation may not be transparent to the interpreter; but efforts can be made to set out these factors to the extent possible, develop greater awareness of them, and to examine them critically. This can take place gradually through a dialectical process in which inquiry and interpretation are undertaken.

Further complications arise because of the history of the relations between theology and the social sciences in the past. Although this history is about the attitudes taken by Christian theologians to the social sciences as well as the attitudes prevalent in the nascent social sciences toward Christianity, and a concept of religion generalized from Christianity, it is essential for Muslims to become aware of how the topic of religion and the social sciences has played out in the West if they are to effectively advance a study of the social sciences in accordance with Islam that is able to avoid some of the foibles that continue to occur in other contexts.

Richard H. Roberts outlines five strategies employed by Christian theologians to develop relations

between theology and the social sciences.

First, the fundamentalist option involves the repudiation of modernity and concomitant patterns of regression; second, theology can tend towards reductive absorption into the social scientific perspective (*Ernst Troeltsch*)*; third, the theologian may draw upon and use sociological categories as part of his or her essentially theological project* (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, H. R. Niebuhr*)*; fourth, theological and sociological categories can be regarded as coinherent aspects of an integral 'form of life', 'life-world' or 'phenomenology of tradition'* (*Edward Farley*) *which subsists at a remove from the question of modernity; fifth, the theologian may repudiate sociology as heretical secular thought and posit the persuasive option of commitment to the Christian cultural-linguistic practice* (*JohnMilbank*). [1]

After a survey of the five mentioned types, Roberts observes that Christian theology's engagement with modern sociology has been marked by discontinuity, if not incoherence. To the five views mentioned, we might also add Roberts' own view, although he describes it as closest to that of Bonheoffer, which emphasizes that the social sciences should be counted among the human sciences, and as such are to be engaged in by the theologian with the aim seeking a "new and active fusion of the human sciences together with the articulation and admission of the human right, following the example of Bonhoeffer, to express a self-transcending identity."[2]

The project of developing Islamic social sciences cannot succeed unless it is understood that this project will have at least as much of an effect on Islamic theology as it will on the social sciences. Roberts writes:

The fact that theology or metaphysical philosophy may once have provided the basis of coherent identity and legitimation does not now sanction regressions into a mythic past or the invocation of a utopian futurity when we are faced with the challenge of secularisation and modernity. On the contrary, other means have to be found through which tradition(*s*)*, Enlightenment and critical reflexivity may be creatively coordinated anew.*[3]

There are various dangers associated with the project of the Islamization or sacralization of the sciences, only some of which are suggested by Roberts' discussion. If beginnings are made toward Islamic social sciences, regardless of how exactly such sciences are understood, these beginnings will be followed with the erroneous idea that it is these new Islamic social sciences that should be studied in the universities of the Muslim world and not the secular atheistic social sciences of the corrupt West.

This would be a grave error because it will be essential for any Islamic or sacred science to stand in a dialectical relationship with the secular sciences. Islamic social science will not be able to flourish without the study of secular social science any more than Islamic philosophy would have been able to flourish without the study of the Greeks. By relying on an Islamic hermeneutics as sketched above, however, it may be hoped that a suitable foundation for Islamic social sciences may be nurtured that will contribute to a sacred science that has sufficient confidence to engage with the modern sciences in fruitful

dialogue.

1. Roberts (2001), 194–195.
2. Roberts (2001), 211.
3. Roberts (2001), 210–211.

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