

Views and Comments

Islamization of Knowledge: A Response

It is customary among the Muslims in this nation to criticize abstractly those who have accepted the burden of *da'wa* and the program they implement. The most vocal opposition, and the most unreasonable and, therefore, destructive, comes from other Muslims who have not themselves consistently put forth the effort required of those involved in *da'wa*. There is in this nation a tradition of catcalls from the sidelines of any struggle. We have a historic love of castigating moving targets as we sit on our doffs. This nation is a place where the concept of fan (derivative of fanatic) has grown to mean non-participative critic. I know that this is the case because I have been the moving target of this criticism and, at other times, the critic who sits.

This is why your request that I read and critique *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought has made me somewhat uneasy. What would validate my criticism? The fact that for nearly ten years I have been disassociated from those who have dedicated themselves to the Islamic movement? The fact is that I would like to reengage myself in the struggle without false portrayals of the last ten years. The fact that you asked me in such a kind and understanding way to express myself in the context of the International Institute of Islamic Thought's primary document is the only reason for my composing the following comments.

I have paralleled the outline of the book in the presentation of these comments and notes.

Preface

I was surprised that the preface was written by one of my former teachers because when I was a student, he impressed upon me the need for precise language. To translate *maa biquam* as "fate" instead of "condition" may seem minor but within the context of a text discussing the Islamization of knowledge it is not a small matter. "Fate of a people" is not really an Islamic concept. Fate is generally understood to mean an inevitable and often adverse outcome. This is certainly not what the author intended, especially in the context of the ayah referred to.

The crux of the preface rests on the non-neutrality of the sciences. It is important to realize that the sciences are, in fact, value-laden and that

they were constructed to rationalize the dominant views of the cultures from which the nation-states emerged. All expressed knowledge has purpose and that generally is to strengthen the position of those who express it.

Muslims have always integrated knowledge from other systems. The difference between the past and the present is that in the past Muslims perceived themselves as leaders, while today they perceive themselves as the victimized followers and subjects of an ill-defined "Western Society". The Muslims of today do not, therefore, integrate knowledge anymore. They receive it as value-laden sciences by the operatives of universities which are inextricably tied to the mission of the nation and the corporate "super-states" from which they derive not only their financial support but the vehicles necessary to promulgate their knowledge throughout the world.

The author should have used another textual style to highlight the definition of Islamization of knowledge. It is somewhat of a struggle to see how the definition is articulate in the preface and that, after all, is its purpose.

So far, I have avoided the main problem I found with the preface because it is a problem endemic to the entire piece and, furthermore, it provides a convenient transition for the presentation of my thoughts. Structural anthropologists, apotheosized by Levi-Strauss, have led us far astray from the correct view of social systems by insisting that we could effectively isolate a social subsystem and manipulate it without substantially altering other social subsystems. As a matter of fact, the defeat of the imperialist French in Algeria represented a historic denial of what Levi-Strauss had articulated about human societies. Nevertheless, some of us still assume that by isolating a particular system or subsystem and manipulating it, we can predict with some certainty the outcome.

This approach leads us to the error of mistaking a subsystem for the process. In other words, when we think of education, we may think of schools and what transpires in those buildings as education. Of course, to some extent, that assumption is valid. However, the process of education finds many expressions outside of the formal system and prepares the objects of education (that is to say, students) for the formalized process. Those most prepared to enter the educational subsystem are identified by I.Q. tests and other measures of their socialization. The elements that are somehow fused into the social experience of a people are obviously value-laden and so difficult to manage that they may be avoided by the analyst-worker. But they are insidious and may undermine or mitigate whatever modifications are put in place within the formal system. The analysis of formal and informal structures is a necessary departure for those who want to design successful interventions or, in a larger sense, redefine the subsystem.

The racism that all Americans, white, red, black, and brown, are heir to only very subtly finds its expression in the educational system. Of course,

it is still there but it is not one of the subjects taught in any of the schools accredited in this nation. But racism is very much alive and well. How is it learned? Well, racist concepts exist within the language, both its deep structure formation and its lexicon. Within the lexicon, color concepts are value-laden. For examples, white knight as heroic, black hats as bad guys, yellow streak for cowardice, black as death, etc. These lexical expressions of preference connect in the mind as the learner associates meanings and integrates those meanings into his cosmology.

In this regard, the power of myth must not be overlooked or underestimated. For example, all American children learn the Superman myth. This myth, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, is laden with information about the origin of Europeans, their preeminence in the world in the same manner that Nietzsche intended. Thus, when we encourage our children to this world view (we buy them Superman pajamas, comic books, take them to the movies), as they evolve their cosmologies using the codes already extant in their lexicons, they will integrate racist concepts unknowingly. Imagine the harm this causes a child otherwise predisposed to justice. Imagine the harm this causes the child who is the target of the racism. That child will necessarily hate himself until someone is able to articulate a pathway out of the malaise.

This example holds for Muslims as well. The portrayal of Muslims in the popular culture of the United States is very negative. I imagine the same negativity exists in the Muslim countries. How this may be addressed there as well as here is something I will discuss later.

Islamization of Knowledge

I. The Problem

The problem is clear although its presentation sometimes lacks a focus or apparently is not consistent with the basic principles elucidated in the preface. This is quite understandable and represents the kind of change called for in the premise. I hope that the following comments are not hurtful because they are not intended to be. I know that I have a sharp way of presenting my thoughts and from this sharpness I hope to engage you and others in a dialogue which will allow us to grow mutually.

A. *Malaise of the Ummah*

I wonder whether nationalism is the proper context for comparison of the Ummah with other peoples. The concept of Ummah is, to my mind,

more cultural than political although the political nature of cultural groups cannot be ignored. It is possible, as Hasan Turabi indicates in his brilliant piece for the AMSS journal (Vol. 4, No. 1), Sept. 1987, for the Ummah to express itself in multiple nation-states, at least in a transitory stage headed toward its realization. As a matter of fact, the destruction of the integrity of the Ummah was foreshadowed by its fractionalization into nation-states unsupported by a oneness of vision for the Ummah by the leaders and, probably, the people as well. So, there is some relative value associated with the concept of nation on strictly Islamic terms; but, that does not mean that we should idealize the Ummah for it is not a nation in a strictly political sense.

What the Western world did to the Muslims is what the Western world does to its enemies. It is simply a necessary part of its conquest that the West dehumanize its enemy in order to rationalize the victimization. As long as the Muslims have something that the West values, the dehumanization will continue.

B. Major Effects of the Malaise

The focus of this section is too external. The Muslims must accept responsibility for the decline of the Ummah, for the misappropriation of its resources, both human and material.

The rise of military-based governments is simply another manifestation of the influence of the West. These governments represent the fragments of Western power in the sense that the Western nations wanted to leave some trusty guardians of the exploitive industries they turned over after the dawn of the neo-colonial states. I believe that Muslims are ruled by military governments as a matter of convenience.

I have some difficulty with defining people as "backward" because ordinarily this term is used to imply that the West is forward and that Western-style development is, therefore, positive. One of the most difficult tasks facing Third World nations is the creation and implementation of development plans that do not mimic the West. Those that do end up in the same hazardous landscape that many Western nations find themselves today, totally out of sync with the Sunnah of Allah. The environment reacts to every action of man. A great example is the Aswan Dam. United States engineers refused to build the dam due to obvious environmental hazards so Nasser had the Russians do it and the Egyptian people have been paying for that blunder ever since. We cannot segregate the development plans of the West from the problem of the non-Islamic sciences they promulgate. I believe that if the task that this paper identifies is really undertaken, we will develop science and ways of mobilizing the fruits of science that are consistent with the

environment. It is a much more complex question than how to manufacture finished goods—the question goes to the purposes and practical bases of industry.

The development of fundamentalism can be associated with the general confusion of the spirit and the concomitant hopelessness people feel when they are overwhelmed by social circumstances. They want answers now and they have been told that the answers are within a fundamentalist approach. After all, did not those who led them astray interpret allegorically all that they could in the Quran and the Hadith before totally abandoning them in some mad rush toward modernization? The natural response is to flee and attempt to create something that sadly never was.

C. The Self-Perpetuating Core of the Malaise

I agree that the educational system may be at the core but I must reemphasize the points I have raised earlier concerning the social context from which the educational system emerged and the socializing systems, formal and informal, which ready the students for their formal indoctrination. Consciousness is molded initially in the womb, then at the mother's/father's lap, then in the play with siblings and neighborhood children, cousins, etc. Long before the child attends school, the consciousness and its personal expression (that is to say, the child's personality) is formed. As you know, this point of view finds its rationalization in the Hadith which describes the angelic visitation to the fetus in utero and its consequences.

I do not doubt the harm that modernist and secularist schools have and continue to wreak on the Muslim people.

While the portrayal of "the highest model of Muslim university teacher" may, in fact, describe some, it is essentially the straw man argument which many use to illustrate the point. There is a level of dishonesty within that argument because the question looms as to who has defined this model as the highest? And for what purpose?

As for the matter of "Islamic vision", I am not certain as to what the concept means and I found no definition within the text. The problem that it presents to the reader is obvious: if we are uncertain as to the definition of that vision, how do we know that the vision is our vision and, furthermore, how do we know that we maintain the correct vision? These are real dilemmas especially sensitive to the premise of this paper. After all, we, as readers, may have integrated into our consciousness a non-Islamic vision passed off on us by Muslim orientalists as the correct vision. Therefore, as we seek to fulfill this misapprehended vision, we are actually working against the cause of Islam and its correct vision.

II. The Task

The task presented here is consistent with the statement of the problem and many comments that I would make would be redundant.

With the educational system as its focus, the recommendations are well thought out and well presented. The degree of modesty I found in the presentation was welcomed because the task is immense and does require much work from the ground level. How do we develop a self-perpetuating core of thinkers and teachers committed to the Islamization process? This is a difficult task and perhaps the collaboration between the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and the Islamic University of Islamabad is the important first step.

III. The Methodology and IV. The Workplan

The presentation on *Fiqh* is very refreshing and mirrors many of the discussions I have had over the years since my student days. I have a strong suspicion that Faruqi had a great deal to do with this section because it reminds me of some of his best lectures. This, to me, is the most exciting and rewarding aspect of this treatise. The mobilization of Muslims toward the realization of the principles enumerated here is an honorable and noble struggle worthy of the highest honors from the Ummah. Although the path is found only through the process of protracted struggle, the direction is clear. This, in effect, could represent the finest struggle of our times.

Other than this endorsement, there are few comments I would offer other than editorial emendations.

There are some bold and innovative concepts presented here and I personally have no qualms about endorsing the work they call for. The concept of excellence in thought and action as a defense against corrupting influences, from within and without, is refreshing and necessary.

In fact, these views are precisely what mobilized my consciousness when I was studying with Faruqi at Temple. However, the recalcitrance I found later so disappointed me that I felt quite justified in departing. Where was this vision then? I guess to everything there is a season . . .

Summary Comments

The stress placed on the educational system early in this treatise does not do adequate service to the premise upon which it is based. The vibrancy of the later sections is not foreshadowed in the statement of the problem.

It is, in some ways, provincial because many Muslims cannot identify with the problems of the Muslim world because of our rather tangential relationship with it; whereas, the problems of Muslims as presented in the later sections are close to all of our hearts.

The IIIT should also consider the role of the other socializing processes and events which set the stage for the introduction of Muslim youth to the formal system.

If we were to design a comprehensive program of Islamic education, it would include some objectives which address the following:

The preparation of Muslimahs for motherhood. This would include prenatal care. By this I mean more than nutritional concerns. We know now that the fetus learns while in utero. We should suggest activities for mothers and fathers which help them bond with the baby and create a calming environment . . .

The creation of learning activities such as games, using various media, which stress the Islamic perspective. Video games, group games, crossword puzzles, children's books, videotapes and films, outdoor activities such as scouting, hiking, sailing, etc. presented in a manner in which children will learn to look at the environment and their relationship with it from an Islamic perspective.

The children must be led to the realization of an Islamic identity that stresses the same basic goals we know that the Prophet (SAAS) stressed for children. We must enable them to be strong both in body and mind. They should be accomplished in all of the arts and they should be required to not just survive but to be leaders in their communities and schools.

We need to examine what it means to give our children a "good name". Superficially, this could mean one of the names of the Prophet (SAAS) or his companions. But it can also mean a name in the community that is respected because the people know what is behind it.

In short, we must prepare them for success within an Islamized world including all of the social systems. The question is, of course, how to do these things! Selective *da'wa* could be used to gain the support of those who you feel could best aid in this endeavor. In regard to this last point, please let me know of anything that you feel I can do to aid in this work. Your brother in Islam,

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