

# The Problem of Bias: An Epistemological Approach and Call for Ijtihad

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The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) is pleased to sponsor this important seminar, as its topic and objectives, the nature of the issues to be raised, and the points of view represented by the scholarly participants and their papers are of vital concern to the Islamic world. Through its participation, the institute has opened a new chapter for academic activity and intellectual jihad, particularly in Arabic and Islamic cultural circles.

As the institute joins the Union of Egyptian Engineers (UEE) in this pioneering intellectual effort, it seeks to articulate its third objective as regards the reform of the methodology of Islamic thought: the Islamization of knowledge in order to build a new Islamic cultural order and lead the ummah to the most beneficial ways of overcoming its backwardness.

Moreover, as the IIIT joins the UEE in this undertaking, it seeks to exonerate itself from the charge that it is biased in favor of theoretical thinking and thus insensitive to the applied sciences. While this is the impression that might be given by the institute's publications and statements, the truth is that these are indicative only of its priorities and have nothing to do with bias.

Contemporary Western thought and culture have begun to cast their darkness over everything in a way that obliterates, or nearly so, all non-Western thought and culture by weakening established concepts and detracting from the importance of their sources. The West has done this under the guise of academic objectivity, by endowing its own social sciences and humanities with an assumed universality that makes of their dubious disciplines not only a virtue, but the authoritative last word. In fact, however, the West's "universality" is little more than its own self-centeredness and the stripping of others of all vestiges of their own civilization and culture.

The universality of Islam, however, is another matter entirely, for it includes and integrates every people and every culture. Yet the West, more by means of its influence than its supposed universality, insists on popularizing slogans like "knowledge for knowledge's sake" and "art for art's sake" in a less-than-subtle attempt to persuade others to renounce their own traditions, thought, and culture as a prelude to plunging headlong into their supposedly universal counterparts in the West. Indeed,

Western culture is based on a set of contrasting opposites that by nature either refuse to accept others or, at the very least, insist on their acquiescence to Western superiority.

On the basis of this mistaken supposition of universality, the West is now seeking to endow its thought and culture with an international legitimacy. In other words, the West is portraying anything outside its own culture, ideas, and values as opposed to the consensus of humanity, to which it can affix the label of "perverse" or "deviant." Thus the West's claim to universality amounts to little more than an attempt to recast the entire world in its own image by immersing it in Western culture and civilization, pouring them into the hearts and minds of all people by every means possible. Thus the West's ideas about knowledge and ignorance, subjectivity and objectivity, progress and backwardness, development, democracy, freedom, and human rights—all of these have now become dominant and leave no room for other interpretations. It is as if the West has subjected the world to an order of cultural domination as a prelude to creating a new world order in which it will be the absolute ruler.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that there are elements in the West for whom this situation is intolerable and who are themselves trying to reassess the entire matter. Every day, in fact, Western institutes and academies publish something new on the subject. The fact remains, however, that such people and institutes reveal their bias and their inability to escape its influence. Even though there is little hope for the success of such efforts, Muslim scholars must keep abreast of them. Even though it is inconceivable that these efforts will lead anywhere, given the exclusionistic nature of Western culture itself, it is essential that the Islamic consciousness be directed towards the need to reconsider it and its epistemological values. The value of this exercise will depend on how far it progresses towards reestablishing those paradigmatical foundations that: a) affirm the oneness of truth and reality from within the framework of revelation and divine guidance; b) link knowledge to divinely inspired values; c) consider revelation a legitimate source of knowledge; and d) view knowledge as a gift from Allah to humanity rather than as something stolen by a mythological Prometheus from the gods.

The Islamization of knowledge may be seen as a global imperative expressed by various attempts worldwide to reconsider and reform culture and thought. It seeks to separate advances in the social and the physical sciences from all forms of positivistic philosophy so that the sciences and disciplines may benefit humanity by being used within a framework of divine revelation and guidance. Moreover, if these attempts have international significance for world culture in general, then the Muslims need to play a major role, for the work done in this field will eventually benefit all of humanity. Moreover, if this work represents an article of faith for Muslims, for the rest of humanity it represents a living, civilizational necessity. If it is not undertaken by Muslims, the likelihood is that humanity will spend yet another century in the darkness of positivism:

We shall turn their hearts and their eyes to confusion even as they refused to believe in the first instance: We shall leave them to their trespasses, to wonder in distraction. (Qur'an 6:110)

The Islamization of knowledge does not, therefore, represent merely a difference of perspectives between Muslims and the West on certain academic issues in the social sciences and humanities. Nor does it represent an empty framework supported by a few verses from the Qur'an or a few hadith of vague relevance to the subject of knowledge in general. On the contrary, the Islamization of knowledge is a recasting of an existing methodology and paradigm so that they will be governed and regulated by principles based on divine revelation.

Likewise, the fears of those who consider the Islamization of knowledge an attempt to extend the influence of religion are completely unfounded. It is also not an attempt to transform every subject and civilized accomplishment into grist for the mill of fiqh and legalistic rulings. Rather, the Islamization of knowledge represents a new role for Muslim scholars, one in which they bring Islamic thought to bear on issues lying at the heart of the problems presently besetting humanity.

The difficulty, as explained earlier, is that the dominant Western paradigm did not develop in a vacuum, but was the result of a specific set of circumstances belonging to a particular civilization and historical experience grounded in struggle and the unceasing conflict of opposites. The particulars of that framework, then, were naturally reflected in the Western paradigm of knowledge. Thus no study of that paradigm is possible without a thorough understanding of the civilization and milieu within which it developed.

This is why we must strive to differentiate between the paradigms of knowledge and civilization . . . and that is the reason for this seminar.

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