

## **Islam, Modern Scientific Discourse, and Cultural Modernity: The Politics of Islamization of Knowledge as a Claim to Dewesternization**

Thank you for sending me Bassan Tibi's paper, entitled "Islam, Modern Scientific Discourse and Cultural Modernity: The Politics of Islamization of Knowledge as a Claim to Dewesternization," which was presented at the 1990 MESA conference. I read it with great interest and would like to make the following observations.

The main focus of this paper is the presentation of a critique of the Islamization of scientific thought adopted by contemporary Muslim intellectuals, with special attention paid to its reliability for the establishment of an authentic Islamic sociology. A comparison is made with the so-called European project of cultural modernity, a project based on the purely secular concept of knowledge.

While engaging in this comparison, Tibi raises a number of issues that are strongly related to the influence of various partial truths and secular ideological perspectives prevalent in the modern West. However, in his methodological approach, the author is basically ignoring, either consciously or otherwise, the viewpoint of history and the philosophy of human civilization. These factors dictated my choice of the following three points for discussion.

The first point relates to the so-called "Weberian demagnification of the world," a concept developed in Europe during the seventeenth century that rests on the modern understanding of objectivity in the sciences. However, this statement is completely false, for the earliest claim of demagnification of the world dates back to the emergence of Islam. The first divine command from Allah to His Prophet Muhammad and to all humanity was:

Read in the name of your Lord, the Creator . . . Read, for your Lord is the most gracious. He taught the art of writing. He taught man what man never knew before (Qur'an 96:1, 3-5).

Many other Qur'anic and prophetic texts prompt Muslims to accumulate positive knowledge and to make the acquisition of scientific comprehension part of the community's life. The Qur'an emphasizes the superiority of scientists

and urges scientific research in various fields of knowledge (Qur'an 39:9; 35:27-28). The Prophet exhorts Muslims to make the best use of reason in their search for the ultimate and emphasizes that the quest for knowledge and sciences is obligatory for every Muslim, male and female.

Thus, Islam necessarily releases the mind to think and discover the facts of the universe and life, freeing it from idols and other constraints. In addition, Islam recognizes the roles of the senses and the mind which, when combined, enable individuals to acquire objective knowledge of nature or society. Observation, experimentation, experience, and scientific hypothesis, which are all fundamental features of *ijtihad* (self-exertion in the quest for knowledge), are essential steps in Islamic methodology, itself based mainly upon induction, deduction, and analogy (*qiyās*) (i.e., Qur'an: 17:36; 16:78; 6:7; 7:22; 12:94). Consequently, everything that can be empirically proven becomes a scientific fact that would be un-Islamic to deny. This does not mean that our senses never err; they do. But it is through them that we discover and rectify those errors.

All of this means nothing vis-à-vis Islamic methodology without the related concept of *tawhīd* (unity), for it is this concept which constitutes, both epistemologically and methodologically, the fundamental premise of scientific knowledge which is at the root of any thought in Islam. It is *tawhīd*, and *tawhīd* alone, which makes humanity capable of discovering the knowable facts of the seen world and of believing in the unseen world beyond the reach of the human mind. Without *tawhīd*, it would be very difficult to believe in the uniformity of nature and the causality of events in natural and social phenomena, not to mention the revelation of new facts in the future. Thus, *tawhīd* opens the way for the mind to increase its discoveries and its development (Qur'an 67:34; 41:53). When an individual recognizes Allah's action in every object and event, he/she follows the divine initiative because it is Allah's. To observe it in nature is to engage in the natural sciences, while to observe it in one's self or in one's society is to pursue the humanities and the social sciences.

The conscious following by the Muslims of these injunctions made it possible, for the first time, for the religio-mythopoetic mind to outgrow itself. After achieving this, the Muslims then made it their task to master the then-known sciences and to erect thereby a civilization based on the blessings of the authentic Islamic worldview, a worldview which had renounced once and for all any link between superstition, magic, and irrational fears and the knowledge of nature or society.

On the other hand, it should be remembered that, in much of modern Western thought, religion is associated with the lack of knowledge and evils such as magic, sorcery, and mysticism. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals, coming from the perspective of an enlightened vision of Islam as a religion,

reject such irregular associations. The Prophet of Islam commanded his followers to seek *ilm* (knowledge) even if they had to travel to China to find it. Clearly, in the context of “China,” he was emphasizing the objective sciences and not religious knowledge and was also pointing out the international nature of the scientific quest.

The second point relates to the misleading Weberian concept that “science, in its state of development which we acknowledge as the valid standard, exists in no cultural area other than the occident.” In refuting this allegation, one may again resort to the facts of history and the philosophy of human civilization, where nearly all historic-scientific knowledge, like the history of all civilization, has gone through cycles, and all humanity has participated in it. Regarding the cycle of Islam, the outstanding achievements of Muslim scholars in developing science and methods of scientific research are there for all to see. Brieffault, in his book *The Making of Humanity*, said:

The Greeks systematized, generalized and theorized, but the patient ways of detailed and prolonged observation and experimental inquiry were altogether alien to the Greek temperament. . . . What we call science arose as a result of new methods of experiment, observation and measurement, which were introduced into Europe by the Arabs; . . . Modern science is the most momentous contribution of the Islamic civilization . . .

These thoughts are also echoed by George Sarton, the famous historian of science:

The main, as well as the least obvious, achievement of the Middle Ages was the creation of the experimental spirit and this was primarily due to the Muslims down to the 12th century.

Linking past with future, Islamic civilization rescued much of the legacy of pagan antiquity from near oblivion and helped pave the way for the European Renaissance.

The third point relates to the allegation that the project of the Islamization of knowledge is a claim to dewesternization, and hence nothing but a defensive response to modern Western science’s claim to universal validity. The relation between cause and effect is completely reversed in this formulation. In erecting such an inverted picture, one must be aware of the history and nature of the crisis of Islamic thought.

In short, the Muslim world, like Western Europe prior to its Renaissance, experienced “dark ages” for several centuries before its reawakening. Muslims in the nineteenth century began to be conscious of their own existence and

started the search for self-identity. Some Muslim countries tried to salvage themselves from their decadence and backwardness via the perspectives envisaged by traditional thinking. Other Muslim countries tried to imitate the technical, organizational, and intellectual styles of foreign countries, basing their political constitutions on concepts such as nationalism and secularism which they then imposed by state intervention.

However, it is clear that both types of traditional and imitative experiments have ended in failure. It is imperative, then, that reconstruction requires an original redefining of the ummah's intellectual and sociocultural potentialities on the basis of its values, principles, and historical perspectives, while keeping its doors open to the suitable contributions of others. It is now commonly accepted, as a matter of fact, that it is a combined past and present which gives rise to the future – a future in which the Islamic ummah will once again be able to speak proudly of its achievements as one of the great contemporary civilizations.

Accordingly, a redefinition of knowledge should be the starting point for the ummah's reconstruction. It was in this spirit that proponents of the Islamization of knowledge as a pioneering project within the whole integrated program of the contemporary Islamic awakening was made. It is a matter of course, within the framework of these Islamic epistemological foundations, that contemporary Muslim intellectuals must contest both traditional and secular perspectives of knowledge and the resulting worldviews based on them. This may logically lead one to emphasize that the Islamization of knowledge, in its essence, is an initiative and not a defensive response, as it is alleged by Tibi in his paper.

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