Views and Comments

A Critique of *Islamization of the Sciences: Its Philosophy and Methodology*

Aliyu Usman Tilde

I agree that all efforts should be made to deprive Science as much as possible of its present materialistic philosophy because we Muslims today are only dragged into sharing the evils of the struggle between Science and Religion which took place in Europe and in which we never participated. But in so doing we must make sure that we have not committed the same blunder as the Christians did when they sat down to write "Christian Geography" in the Middle Ages, which precipitated that harsh experience of conflict between Science and Religion and which resulted only in creating a false but sharp dichotomy between the two. It is in view of this that I hereby forward a critique of an article titled "The Islamization of the Sciences: Its Philosophy and Methodology" by Ja'far Shaykh Idrīs.[1]

It is important to realize that most of what Ja'far has written has been said earlier by other scholars. But the eleven-step methodology for Islamization of the Sciences he presented are articulated on certain points or concepts which others have earlier debated and cautioned us against.

On "Philosophical Questions"

Most of what has been said under this topic in the article seems correct concerning the components of knowledge – source, capacity, and method; acquired and inborn knowledge and their relationship, and the five listed sources of knowledge. All the statements are theoretical, so the extent to which they could be qualified as "correct" depends largely on how they were used by the author to outline the "procedure for Islamization of the Sciences" to which the second part of the article was dedicated.

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[1]This article appeared in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, Vol. 4, No. 2), pp. 201-208.

On "Procedure of the Islamization of the Sciences"

I absolutely agree with Dr. Idrīs on steps (5), (8), (10) and (11). But propositions under steps (1), (2), (3), (4), (6), and (7) need to be closely re-examined and reviewed if not discarded. Moreover, they directly contradict step (9). They read thus:

1. "Accept as true all empirically or rationally discovered facts whether they be natural, physical, psychological, social, mathematical or otherwise irrespective of who discovered them.
2. "Add to this, in respective fields and relevant places, facts stated in the Qur'an and authentic traditions.
3. "Research the Qur'an and Sunnah laws under which these facts can be subsumed and explained.
4. "Discover or develop theories which explain these laws and facts.
6. "Put all these facts, laws and theories in an Islamic framework.
7. "Since we have two sources of knowledge, the world and *waḥy* (Divine revelation) we must be very clear about the relationship between them." This point has been elaborated upon much further.

It could be clearly read from the above statements by the author that:

1. A tight association is sought between science and Islam.
2. That "truth" is the same no matter the source be it the "World" or Revelation.
3. That verses or traditions could be used to support scientific theories and the resultant is put in an "Islamic framework". And so on.

What I consider as important here to clarify are two respective characteristics of science and Islam which makes it impossible or not even advisable to forge a tight relationship between the two. These pertain to (1) *Relativity of "truth" in science* which to me differs sharply from the categorical truth in the Qur'an. (2) The relationship between reason and revelation (the former is described by the author as "World").

"Truth" in Science is Relative and Unstable

There is nothing like "truth" in science and it is not even possible to qualify even the most ascertained theories and observations as true. There are only "facts." But facts could be subjective and relative. This may sound exclusivist, but let us offer a close examination.

Science is a product of human effort to understand what surrounds us in the world. But in so doing, as Dr. Idrīs has also pointed out, man makes use of his senses, which aids his reasoning to arrive at a conclusion logical to him. In many cases, he could even convince others of the logic in his conclusion by demonstrating repeatedly his experiment to others who may also try it on their own later to confirm it further. If it is confirmed beyond "doubt," it becomes a theory.[2] But their observation, confirmation, and theory may hold only for that period in human history or even geography due to the limitations within which human reasoning operates. In fact this may be what Ja'far refers to as "the human capacity to know." The term "capacity" in my understanding is abstract and relative as much as it is dictated by factors like age, level of development in technology, abundance of resources, communication efficiency, etc.

What has been accepted as "true" yesterday may totally be rejected today as "false." It was "true" yesterday because man did not then acquire the knowledge and skill he has today.

Students of History of Science know very well the vicissitudes imposed on scientific development by technique. (2) For example, prior to the telescope of Galileo, the discovery of the compass, etc., no one in Europe could believe that the earth was round. In this particular example, consider the verse (51:48) that talks about God "spreading" the earth like a carpet or mat. What do you think was the conception of the *Ṣaḥābah* about the shape of the earth to whom this verse was revealed? Of course nothing other than "flat." The Christians, even up to the 16th century, still believed the earth was flat and clearly expressed this idea in what the church published as "Christian Geography."

At that time there was nothing more "true" than this theory, because everybody could see that the earth was flat. The same thing applies to the static position of the earth, of which some even quoted supporting verses from the Qur'an. If the "truth" in science means empirical observation and scientific theory means a logic based on demonstrated and verified observations then the whole Western world before the discoveries of the telescope

[2]It should be noted that most contemporary theories are not arrived at from verified observations but from inferences derived from non-observable supposed occurrences.

and the compass was scientific in believing that the earth was flat and static.

But who is foolish enough today to accept that the earth is flat? Even the dogmatic church has dropped the idea. The spherical and revolutionary nature of the earth has today been proven by astronomy, navigation, and other sciences as the "truth," and what was accepted as "true" yesterday (the earth as a static and flat planet) is today regarded by all as absolutely "false."

Before the middle of this century was the atom not considered the smallest indivisible portion of matter as described in Bohr's theory? Wasn't the entire atheistic materialistic philosophy of the West and communism built on matter as the sole source of life? But do scientists themselves accept Bohr's theory as "true" today? Has our conception about matter not changed sharply after the fragmentation of the atom? Life itself does not exist in the atom and we stand today bewildered and confused. What therefore makes the "truth" so mutable in science? Of course nothing other than time, which offers opportunities of development of technique. It is possible that with progress in technique development, tomorrow we may term as false the helical nature of DNA discovered by Watson and Crick of which we were so sufficiently convinced to honor them with a Nobel award and on which the entire field of genetic engineering is based? It is possible that someone will convince the world that our assumption today of the cell as the structural and functional unit of life is false.

Certainly, 'Abbās al 'Aqqād was right in asserting that "human sciences change with time in a progressive form. They are between something awaiting completion, or comprehension, or convergence of divergents, or mistakes awaiting correction, or a guess developing into reality. It is not rare for scientific foundation to collapse after being solid, or to shake vigorously after affirmation. Researchers may question their validity after regarding them as "real" for many centuries. . ."[3]

Glyn Ford once asserted: "Developments within science and technology emerge from an adversary process in which hypotheses compete for intellectual dominance. But the judging is rigged."[4] This is the "truth" in science if it ever exists. It keeps on changing.

"Truth" in Revelation is Firm

Truth in science changes, as we have seen above, owing to the shortcomings and weaknesses of man. But when considering anything whose Divine

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[3]Abbās Maḥmūd al 'Aqqād, *Islāmiyyāt*, Vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al Kitab al Lubnānī, 1975), pp. 19.

[4]Glyn Ford, "Liberating Science With Islamic Values", *Inquiry* Vol. 1 (2) pp, 50.

source is affirmed, the question of contemplating its truth or otherwise does not even arise. It is true to the core. It is the truth, firm and unflinching, whether on earth or on the moon. It has come from Allah who has no scholastic shortcomings. He does not need the telescopes of Galileo nor the lenses of Leuvenhook. He has the key to the unseen and knows what tránscends human perception or observation. Above all He is the Creator: "Should He not know He that created? And He is the One that understands the finest mysteries (and) is well-acquainted (with them)" (Qur'an, 67:14).

So if the Qur'an tells us that the function of the mountains is to provide topographical stability to the earth, we do not have to wait for the Russians to demolish their mountains by atomic bomb and see the topographical effect. That is why matters raised by the Qur'an are considered on the basis of *belief* not as something whose authenticity requires verification. The Qur'an is different from the Bible in this respect.

The only thing that matters here is our interpretation of the Qur'an. Our understanding of any verse largely depends on the level of our knowledge of physical and natural sciences as well as scientific technique. The best example we can cite here is the verse in *Ankabūt* which commands mankind to travel on earth to see how life was started. Here, though the wisdom behind the command is clear, the method of seeing "how Allah started creation" is left to the dictates of technique. Does it mean mere study of morphological characters of organisms or the vestiges of past civilizations or a palaentological study of fossils? This particular example has been elaborated by Sayyid Qutb in *Fī ẓilal*.

The "truth" in the Qur'an therefore varies sharply from the "truth" in science. Oddly put, while there is one truth in the Qur'an, there are many "truths" in science.

Reconciliation Between Science and the Qur'an or Reason and Revelation

Does it then mean that the two, Science and the Qur'an, or Reason and Revelation are irreconcilable or mutually exclusive? As Dr. Idrīs said, much has been written on this issue. But surprisingly, instead of highlighting the most recent developments in the field and proposing a methodology of Islamization based on these developments, what he has presented is an approach reflective of the approaches of ancient writers, like Ibn Taymīyah.

Though he laboriously tried to show the superiority of *waḥy*, it is clear that his perception of the relationship between it and reason is 'Abduhist (in line with the thought of Muḥammad 'Abduh). The understanding is that the

two are not exclusive but compatible, "since the world" as he stated, "is the creation of God, and religion is the word of God, genuine empirical statements describing the world, and authentic religious statements must necessarily be true and cannot therefore contradict one another."

The above statement is similar to what Shaykh Muammad 'Abduh said: "Revelation by way of divine message is a trace among the traces of Allah. And human reasoning is also a trace from the traces of Allah in the universe. The traces of Allah should harmonize among themselves, not contradict one another."[5]

But where Dr. Idrīs is mistaken, as was his predecessor 'Abduh, (names like Ṭāha Ḥusayn could also be added to the queue), is where he showed equality or even preference of Reason over Revelation. He said: *"Give priority to what is known to be absolutely true, (the qat') irrespective of whether it is the religious or the rational or empirical."*

In his critique of 'Abduh's stand on the relationship between Revelation and Reason, Sayyid Qutb said: "One of them (i.e., Revelation) is more encompassing than the other; the former has come to be the basis which the latter can be referred to, and a yardstick for judging the other (reason) as it relates to its decisions, understanding and conception. It corrects the latter's deviations. There is, therefore, undoubtedly harmony between them but only on this basis not on the basis that they are equal opposites . . . moreover a reason devoid of shortcoming and whim does not really exist, it is only 'abstract'".[6]

Sayyid Qutb even rejected interpreting the Qur'an in a way that will conform to human reasoning, which at least is less risky than using the Qur'an to support reasoning or using reasoning to dispute a possible Divine source. After giving examples of the reflection of this methodology in the commentaries of 'Abduh's students (Riḍā and al Maghribī), Qutb said, ". . . the interpretation of Qur'anic texts was given to conform to reason. This is the basis of the error. Mentioning the word "Reason" returns the issue to something unreal. . . . There is my reason, and the reasons of so and so person. There is no reason which is not imbued with shortcomings, whims, desires and ignorance. If we therefore subject the interpretation to make the text conform to many 'reasons', we are then going to end up in anarchy."[7]

Imam Ḥasan al Banna has been reported as saying to Ṭāha Husayn: "You call for religion to be in the service of science. It is an opinion based on the present civilization in the West. This is a wrong opinion because it means that if there is a conflict between science and religion on a particular issue,

[5]In Sayyid Qutb, *Khaṣā'is al Taṣawwur al Islāmī wa Muqawwamatiḥ (Beirut: Dar al Shurūq)*, p. 19.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

religion is discarded and science takes its position. It is necessary to differentiate between science and religion. Religion is firm reality whereas science is comprised of theories which undergo change. If we clothe science with the garment of religion, we make it static; and if we make religion subservient to science we then philosophize it and, by so doing, deny its nature such that it is no longer religion."[8]

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, the relationship between Revelation and Reason remains important and should be given all the attention it requires by students of Islamization of knowledge. I am glad to state that al Fārūqī has made the stand clear by saying: "The separation of *waḥy* and 'aql is utterly unacceptable. It is inimical to the whole spirit of Islam, opposed to the central appeal of the Qur'an to reason, to weigh rationally all matters, to favour the more reasonable, the more median course."[9] The views of Dr. Idrīs upon which he proposed his steps toward Islamization of Sciences need to be strongly reviewed in light of what has been said above about the instability of science and its relationship to religion.

This is necessary if we intend to save Islam from the embarrassment incurred by Christianity in the last four hundred years.

Remember the precarious situation in which the Church found itself in the mid-sixteenth century. Russell said: "When Galileo's telescope revealed Jupiter's moons, the orthodox refused to look through it, because they knew there could not be such bodies and therefore the telescope must be deceptive."[10] That was the implication of rushing to forge a bond between religion and reason.

I do not at all agree that we separate science from Islam as it is practiced today in the world. But we have to be cautious about the dynamics of their co-existence. We must accept revelation in the Qur'an as truth to the core but consider its interpretations as opinions of jurists. We must regard science as a human endeavor to understand the creation of Allah and find a means of exploiting better His bounties which He put at our disposal. We may even consider scientific research as *'ibādah* because the Qur'an has always urged us to use our reasoning and energy in this direction. We can even seek direc-

[8]Maḥmūd 'Abd al Ḥalīm, *al Ikhwān al Muslimūn, Ru'yah min al Dākhil* (Dār al Da'wah, Vol. 1), p. 232.

[9]Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982) pp. 18-19.

[10]Bertrand Russell, *The Impact of Science on Society*, (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1953) p. 19.

tion and priorities of scientific research from the Qur'an. But we should not consider our findings as "absolute truth" because the power of our judgment is restricted by our development in knowledge and the technological resources available.

Thus al 'Aqqād said: "The Qur'an is sufficient for the Islamic community from the perspective of belief. It does not prevent them from the path of knowledge and progress. By this virtue it has fulfilled the necessity of belief and prevents the evil which afflicted those whose beliefs blocked them from freedom of thought and conscience. . . . It is not becoming for both scientists and philosophers to seek from religion anything other than this."[11]

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[11]'Abbās Maḥmūd al 'Aqqād, *Islāmiyyāt*, Vol. 3, p. 14.