

Islamization of Knowledge: A Critique

The Islamization of knowledge, as envisioned by al Fārūqī, is a critical, revivalistic response to intellectual modernity.¹ Its objective is a timeless gift, but it can only be realized by challenging it and engaging Muslim scholars in debate over it. By so doing, we are able to refine the work plan for Islamization. The following critique is therefore presented in the hope that its suggestions will contribute toward an authentic Islamic response to intellectual modernity.

Exposition of Islamization

For al Fārūqī (1982), the source of the crisis of Muslim society lies in the modern-Islamic dichotomy of the current educational system. The colonial, and therefore alien, vision still survives and is being disseminated through educational institutions, which are the breeding ground of self-estrangement from Islam. Such early educational reformers as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muḥammad ‘Abduh did not realize the harm of modern knowledge, for they assumed that

modern subjects are harmless and can only lend strength to the Muslims. Little did they realize that the alien humanities, social sciences, and indeed the natural sciences as well, were facets of an integral view of reality, of life and the world, of history, that is equally alien to that of Islam. (Ibid.)

One of his particular concerns is the harmful influence of a university education on a Muslim student whose sentimental attachment to Islam cannot withstand the onslaught of scientific truth. After four years of alienating influence, his/her Islamic consciousness would be ravaged. The solution to this alienation is to be found in the Islamization of knowledge, an undertaking that seeks to rebuild the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences, in order to establish them firmly on an Islamic basis consistent with Islamic objectives. Every discipline is to be "recast" to embody the principles of Islam and remolded to incorporate the "relevance" of Islam along a triple axis constitutive of *tawḥīd* (unity).

¹Mohamed (1991) attempted to show that al Fārūqī's Islamization emerged as a response to intellectual modernity and that it must be situated within the revivalist context.

Islamization involves the production of Islamically relevant university textbooks for each discipline to be Islamized. After Islam's relevance to each area of modern thought is established, a creative synthesis can be established by eliminating, amending, reinterpreting, and adapting its components as dictated by Islam's worldview and values. This process will determine the relevance of Islam. Among contemporary revivalists, few have given such sustained attention as al Fārūqī to preparing a twelve-step work plan to indicate how Islamization could be undertaken.

The first step, as proposed by al Fārūqī, is to master the modern disciplines. As he was addressing himself to the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (Ba-Yunus 1988), he was dealing with modern educated Muslim professionals who already had some degree of mastery in their social science disciplines. For them, the Islamic lifestyle was an existential reality that had to be relevant to their professions and to the social science disciplines. This is why he published *The Islamization of Knowledge*, which addresses itself primarily to the infusion of Islamic concepts into the social sciences. As Muslims studying the social sciences became culturally alienated, he claimed, they grew less convinced of Islam as a source of knowledge and more unaware of the Eurocentric and provincial character of the social sciences. In their arrogant display of social science knowledge, they denigrated Islam's rich intellectual heritage as archaic and irrelevant (ibid.). Thus, al Fārūqī proposed his Islamization with the intent of injecting an Islamic orientation into the social science professions and to inculcate pride in the Islamic legacy (Davies 1986).²

As al Fārūqī was addressing social science scholars trained in western methods, he made the mastery of the modern disciplines the first step of his work plan. The mastery of the Islamic legacy appears only in steps three and four and is achieved through the help of the traditionalist scholar who has to prepare the anthologies from the Islamic legacy. Due to the traditional scholar's ignorance of modern disciplines and subsequent inability to establish "the specific relevance of the legacy to the modern discipline," it becomes the responsibility of the western trained Muslim scholar to familiarize the traditional scholar with the modern disciplines. This assumes the mastery of the modern disciplines in steps one and two. Thus, traditional scholars play a subsidiary role in preparing anthologies for western trained Muslim scholars. Without these anthologies, a modern Muslim scholar will not have "ready access to the legacy in the area of his specialization" (al Fārūqī 1982).

However, the chief task of Islamization, as outlined in steps six through eleven, is placed in the hands of a modern scholar who will

²IIIT has identified its priority to be the social and behavioral sciences.

eventually assess critically the modern discipline (step six) and the Islamic legacy (step seven). Furthermore, he/she is to undertake the all-important task of creative analysis and synthesis of the modern disciplines and the Islamic legacy (step ten).

The task of assessing the Islamic legacy's contribution in each field of human activity must therefore fall upon the shoulders of the experts in that activity. They are the monitors of Muslim needs in that field and they are the masters of the modern discipline studying that activity. Certainly, they should be assisted by the experts in the legacy in order to guarantee the most adequate and correct understanding of it possible. (Ibid.)

Since a modern scholar is schooled in scholarly research, he/she is able to analyze, criticize, and initiate alternative paradigms in a language that can be understood by the modern mind. Al Fārūqī had faith in this type of training for the creative synthesis and for the preparation of Islamized university textbooks. A traditionalist scholar is not equipped for this task, for he/she is trained not to assimilate critically but to imitate. And since traditional subjects are presented ahistorically, the great classical Muslim figures are viewed as the final authorities (Moosagie 1989).³

Critique of Islamization

As the first step in al Fārūqī's work plan is mastery of the modern disciplines, we need to question whether the sequence of steps posited by his work plan is warranted.⁴ Since al Fārūqī was addressing western trained Muslim scholars, it would appear that he had little choice but to make mastery of the modern disciplines the first step. By entrusting a western trained Muslim scholar with the task of developing a creative synthesis between the Islamic legacy and a modern discipline, al Fārūqī not only limits a traditional scholar's role but also the full impact of the Islamic legacy, which should be the starting point for Islamization. How

³Moosagie critiques the traditional system of education (*dār al 'ulūm*) and argues that the approach to storing and recollecting information is bound to "induce a passive and receptive, rather than a creative, mind."

⁴Although we do not fully agree with his work plan, we accept the reality of an educational dichotomy. Islam does not conflict with established facts, but with the secular worldview underlying the social sciences. And herein lies the essential dichotomy. For example, the crude Marxist view that one's consciousness is predetermined by material causal relations conflicts with the Islamic view of an individual's *fitrah* (innate spirituality) and thus the ability of his/her consciousness to transcend material conditions.

can psychology, for example, be Islamized without investigating the corresponding content of psychology in the Islamic legacy? The basis for an Islamic psychology should have been worked out from the Islamic legacy before assessing the value and the validity of modern psychology.⁵

The method of working first from the modern discipline has led to the production of apologetic literature. This genre, with its typically defensive posture with respect to western cultural imperialism, takes great pains to prove that what is progressive in the West was taught by Islam fifteen centuries ago. This encourages a sense of self-glorification of the past. What is urgently needed is a critical understanding of the Islamic heritage in order to appreciate its variant legal, philosophical, Sufistic, and theological positions.⁶ It is precisely this apologetic attitude to modernity that caused many nineteenth-century revivalist and modernist scholars to attempt a superficial synthesis between Islam and democracy, Islam and socialism, or Islam and evolution. Much of this syncretism is not even based on a proper investigation into the Islamic legacy. The same goes for the many attempts at Islamization of the social sciences.

An authentic Islamic response to modern knowledge must make the Qur'an and the Islamic legacy its point of departure. No Islamic assessment of any modern discipline is likely to come about without it. To begin with the modern disciplines is to be content with half measures in an attempt at integration. Modern disciplines are embedded in western secular epistemological paradigms,⁷ and their Islamization cannot be realized unless they are integrated into Islamic epistemological frameworks derived from the Islamic legacy. In fact, al Fārūqī's Islamization process seeks to Islamize a body of knowledge that has non-Islamic elements. This presupposes that it is a non-Islamic domain of knowledge and, therefore, one that has to be critically examined, purified of its secular elements, and reconstituted with Islamic elements. The point of departure outlined by al Fārūqī is "from" a condition that is un-Islamic "to" one that is Islamic. Thus, the modern discipline as such is not refuted

⁵For a comparative analysis of variant perspectives concerning human nature in the Islamic legacy and the broad principles of an Islamic psychology, see Mohamed (1986).

⁶Smith (1957) illustrates this kind of apologetic approach to modernity by citing an article from the al Azhar journal. He argues that instead of urging Muslims to action on the basis of Islamic teaching, the editor apologetically attempts to show the superiority of Islam to the West.

⁷The modern disciplines are not value free, but are embedded within western secular and epistemological paradigms. The secular tendencies that accompany them hold that religion is irrelevant to academic pursuits and, therefore, a Muslim secularist would want to relegate religion to the private domain. Thus, al Fārūqī's Islamization, in its typical revivalist tradition, wants to infuse Islamic concepts into modern disciplines so that Islam can be more relevant and more meaningful to Muslims living in the contemporary world.

but is Islamized; it is not replaced by an alternative Islamic discipline but is modified to be more in congruence with the Islamic outlook. This approach is understandable, due to the type of audience that al Fārūqī was trying to reach, but whether his work plan is conducive to an authentic Islamic response to modern knowledge is another question.

As pointed out earlier, the conflicting philosophies underlying modern and Islamic disciplines may result in an Islamization that amounts to no more than casting an Islamic veneer over modern disciplines. What is needed is an independent approach to a given discipline. Although psychology as a discipline may not have existed in the Islamic legacy under the same name, but it has a corresponding content within the Islamic legacy. Thus, there is no reason why a legacy-derived Islamic psychology cannot be formulated.⁸ This is an important step for assessing the value and validity of a modern discipline from an independent Islamic point of view. In this way, the Islamic discipline will be enriched by the modern discipline without the latter conflicting with the Islamic outlook.

It therefore appears that al Fārūqī's restrictive procedure of making the modern disciplines his point of departure is not conducive to creating alternative Islamic social science disciplines. The subsequent exclusion of traditional scholars from the process of creative synthesis, a major side effect, ignores the fact that alternative Islamic paradigms and the reconstruction of Islamic disciplines can only emerge out of those very traditional Islamic disciplines. Then, and only then, can university textbooks reflect a more authentic Islamic response to modernity!⁹

To be sure, such an authentic Islamic response must have its point of departure in the Islamic legacy, which has its own views of God and humanity, society and history. No independent or critical Islamic evaluation is possible without a corresponding content of the discipline in the legacy. Moreover, without first reconstructing the Islamic discipline out of the legacy, the so-called creative synthesis will amount to a superficial, apologetic, and a syncretistic product that is not Islamically authentic.

There is a need to study the legacy in order to develop Islamic social science disciplines. These can be enriched by recasting them according

⁸Once the discipline or the framework for the discipline is developed, it would leave open a wide arena to assess the value and validity of modern psychology.

⁹An example of the Islamization of knowledge attempted by IIIT is Ahmed (1986). As president of IIIT, al Fārūqī wrote the book's forward. Although Ahmed says that his book is an exploratory exercise, one would have liked to obtain some insight into Islamic anthropological principles according to such scholars as al Birūnī and Ibn Khaldūn. Instead, the book has two parts. The first and major part is essentially an exposition and partial analysis of western anthropology. The second part deals with Islamic anthropology. Ahmed claims that there is a rich heritage of Islamic anthropology that preceded western anthropology, but only nine pages are devoted to an exposition of Islamic anthropology!

to the modern system of categorization, thereby making them intelligible to a western educated person and relevant to the modern world. This can be done, provided that the relevance is determined by seeking the relevance of the modern discipline for Islam, and not the relevance of the Islamic legacy to the discipline. Sardar (1985) states that al Fārūqī is putting the cart before the horse, for "it is not Islam that needs to be made relevant to modern knowledge," but modern knowledge that needs to be made relevant to Islam. Thus, the mastery of the Islamic legacy becomes imperative as the first step of Islamization.

Al Fārūqī's Islamization serves a functional role of providing immediate relief from the anguish experienced by western trained Muslim graduates. But his pragmatic work plan does not represent a convincing Islamic response to intellectual modernity, for it does not deal with the fundamental problem. To paper over the cracks of secularism through a taint of Islamization is to be mentally chained to the West. Such mental imprisonment is bound to weaken the Islamic self-image, which is in need of self-determination. In this regard, Rahman (1982) states:

The most important and urgent thing to do . . . is to disengage from the west and to cultivate an independent but understanding attitude toward it . . . because it is the source of much of the social change occurring throughout the world. So long as Muslims remain mentally locked with the west in one way or the other, they will not be able to act independently and autonomously.

This is precisely what we are suggesting. An independent response to modern knowledge cannot come about by following the Islamization work plan. There is a need to disengage from the West and to turn to the Islamic legacy so that Islamic disciplines can be developed first. Rahman even goes so far as to suggest the reconstruction of the Islamic sciences. Needless to say, this effort assumes the mastery of the Islamic legacy. It seems that al Fārūqī is content with infusing Islamic concepts into modern secular disciplines. If by this is meant the grafting of Islamic elements onto a body of existing knowledge, while leaving its philosophical foundations intact, then we have to disagree.

Manzoor (1986) shares al Fārūqī's insights into the dichotomous educational system and the perpetual erosion of Islamic identity in the universities, yet he is boldly critical of al Fārūqī's Islamization:

To call for the Islamization of secularized disciplines is indeed to be content with half-measures. Islamizing disciplines that are infused with a materialistic metaphysics and secularistic ethics is

tantamount to plastic surgery, a cosmetic epistemological face lift and nothing more. If it may accomplish anything at all, it would be the perpetuation of secular and Islamic knowledge. Moreover, the task of Islamizing so many disciplines, especially if you follow al Fārūqī's scheme in its execution . . . is hardly likely to harvest anything beyond a few half-baked monographs.

For us, genuine Islamization entails the elaboration of earlier constituted Islamic conceptual frameworks to convincingly meet the challenges of intellectual modernity. These frameworks must emerge, first of all, from the Islamic legacy before the relevance of the modern discipline in question can be determined for them.

Another important argument of Islamization is articulated by Rahman. He views Islamization as a reformist approach to education that accepts "modern secular education as it has developed generally speaking in the West" and then attempts to Islamize or to inform it with key Islamic concepts (Rahman 1982). This Islamization has two distinct goals: to mold the students' character with Islamic values and to enable students of modern education to "imbue their respective fields of learning at higher levels, using an Islamic perspective to transform, where necessary, both the content and orientation of these fields" (ibid.). Rahman opines that these two goals are interconnected, for the molding of an Islamic character is inevitably undertaken at the primary level of education.¹⁰ But the argument is that if nothing is done to imbue higher learning with an Islamic orientation, then young students who reach the higher levels of education are bound to be secularized. Moreover, the effort to inculcate an Islamic character in young students is not likely to succeed "if the higher fields of learning remain completely secular." In the West, religious indoctrination of young impressionable students is bound to lead to disillusionment among those who grow up in a completely secular world. In most cases, these children grow up to be more secular than their parents. Rahman argues that this is also true for the Muslim child, although he/she is more subject to social constraint from deviation.

Rahman is therefore skeptical of an Islamization that does not entail a full investigation of what Islamic educational reform means. He argues that Muslims have for the past century been increasingly aware of "the dichotomy of education" and the need to reform traditional education and to integrate old knowledge with modern knowledge, but that all efforts

¹⁰According to Ba-Yunus (1987), al Fārūqī did not emphasize children's education, as he was primarily concerned with university level education. The American Islamic College in Chicago proved to be ineffective because it depended on feeder Islamic schools that were not given any attention.

at integration have been "largely unfruitful" (ibid.). Genuine integration can only come about if there are

first class minds who can interpret the old in terms of the new as regards substance and turn the new in the service of the old as regards ideals. This then must be followed by the writing of new text books on theology, ethics and so forth.¹¹ (Ibid.)

But this integration can only occur if historical Islam is distinguished from normative Islam. Furthermore normative Islam, as rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, must become the criteria to assess the value and validity of the Islamic legacy, which is a product of historical Islam:

If the spark for the modernization of the old Islamic learning and for the Islamization of the new is to arise, then the original thrust of Islam—of the Qur'an and Muhammad—must be clearly resurrected so that the conformities and the deformities of historical Islam may be clearly judged by it.¹² (Ibid.)

The Islamic legacy must be subject to critical scrutiny on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. However, those who know this legacy, the upholders of Islamic learning, are supposed to be in the best position to assess it. Moreover, they should be responsible for Islamizing modern secular disciplines. There is no possibility of genuine integration without the primary role of traditional scholars. Rahman (ibid.) states that "it is the upholders of Islamic learning who have to bear the responsibility of Islamizing secular knowledge by their creative intellectual efforts."

Thus, Rahman is not opposed to Islamization in principle, but rather disagrees with al Fārūqī's work plan, for it builds bridges but does not move toward genuine integration. True Islamization cannot be realized unless Muslims fulfill certain preconditions:

However, to resume what I was saying about the Muslims' aim of Islamizing the several fields of learning, this aim cannot be really fulfilled unless Muslims effectively perform the intellectual

¹¹While al Fārūqī seems to have seen the need to build bridges to fill the gap between modern disciplines and the Islamic legacy, Rahman sees no point in this kind of reform. Genuine reform involves creating first class minds able to interpret the legacy in terms of intellectual modernity. Modern disciplines must serve the ideals of Islam. Scholars must master the legacy before reinterpreting it and before reconstructing Islamic sciences.

¹²Rahman wants to create first class minds that can assess historical Islam according to the Qur'an and Sunnah. If this cannot be achieved, no integration is possible.

task of elaborating on Islamic metaphysics on the basis of the Qur'an. An overall world view of Islam first, if provisionally attempted, [must be constructed] if various specific fields of intellectual endeavor are to cohere as informed by Islam. (Ibid.)

Contemporary Islamization attempts have been marred by an apologetic attitude precisely because these conditions have not been fulfilled (ibid.).¹³ Furthermore, creative traditional scholars must begin to reconstruct some of the nuclear Islamic sciences, even though this presupposes a critical attitude to the Islamic legacy itself. A critical attitude is essential, for the Islamic legacy is not a monolithic system but rather contains variant perspectives that often emerge out of conflicting schools.¹⁴

This critical attitude must be based on the Qur'an. Such nuclear Islamic sciences as theology, law, and philosophy must be reconstructed, not discarded, for they provide "continuity to the intellectual and spiritual being of the community" (Rahman 1982). This means that a "historically systematic study of the development of Islamic disciplines" must be undertaken. More attention has been given by Muslim scholars to the history of Islamic literature than to a historical study of this literature. The point is that all of this must finally be judged according to the criterion of the Qur'an itself (ibid.). Thus, unlike al Fārūqī, Rahman calls for a radical critique of the Islamic legacy with the Qur'an as the criterion.¹⁵ He wants us to question the extent to which the Islamic legacy is in conformity with the Qur'an, because not everything in the Islamic legacy is necessarily Islamic (Rahman 1988).¹⁶

¹³According to Rahman (1982), in contemporary times there have been attempts to invest factual knowledge with Islamic values: Islam and economics or Islam and psychology, which have been the themes of several conferences and seminars held in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Unfortunately, although they contain valuable insights, they have been "essentially marred by an apologetic attitude."

¹⁴The fact of doctrinal conflict, first among the early *fuqahā'* and later among the *mutakallimūn* in the eighth century, clearly disproves the rival claims of infallibility. These conflicting claims are rooted in conflicting interpretations which must be distinguished from the Qur'an itself.

¹⁵Although al Fārūqī includes a critical assessment of the legacy (step seven) in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, he does not make it, as does Rahman, a prerequisite for a critical assessment of modern disciplines. In fact, a critical assessment of modern disciplines is preceded by it in step six of the work plan.

¹⁶Rahman calls for a reexamination of the Islamic legacy. It must be determined if the teachings of Ibn al 'Arabī, al Rāzī, and al Ghazālī conform to the Qur'an. These were all great men, yet they differed and sometimes disagreed. The Islamic legacy is not a monolithic system having one standard viewpoint, for there are conflicting schools of thought (Rahman 1982). Rahman argues that although Islamic philosophy was rejected

Rahman suggests that one has the right to criticize those assumptions of western thinkers that appear to be incompatible with Islamic principles. He also maintains, however, that this be done with the Muslim thinkers of the Islamic legacy. Thus, Islamization must presuppose a critique of the Islamic tradition, for without a critical look at the legacy, one cannot develop an Islamic critical response to intellectual modernity:

I have, then, submitted that unless we have examined our tradition very well, in the light of the the Qur'an, we cannot proceed further with Islamic thought. This is because we must have certain criteria to go by and criteria must obviously come initially from the Qur'an. First, we must examine our own Islamic tradition and then critically study the body of knowledge created by modernity.¹⁷ (Ibid.)

The sense of practicality that drove al Fārūqī to undertake the Islamization of modern secular disciplines is obvious. Rahman, however, posits that such an Islamization is futile without a prior critical assessment of the Islamic tradition on the basis of the Qur'anic criterion. The issue we wish to raise with regard to this insistence of returning to the original thrust of the Qur'an is: While it is significant that the Qur'an be made the criterion for critical assessment, he seems to forget that it is subject to human interpretation. Who is to judge what is Islamic in the legacy? While it is meritorious to adopt a critical attitude to the legacy, one cannot escape the inevitable human bias brought to bear in assessing it. While we agree that the Qur'an should be the ultimate criterion, we cannot escape the element of subjectivity in its interpretation.¹⁸

Rahman appears to overlook the reality of this hermeneutical dilemma. While it is humanly impossible to read into the legacy without preconceived notions, this does not mean that a) interpretations cannot be

as heretical by Muslim orthodoxy, philosophical thought has impinged quite heavily on orthodox religious thought. Thus there is a need to examine the fairness of the orthodox judgment and the extent to which its criteria conforms to the criteria of the Qur'an.

¹⁷Rahman argues that Muslims must first judge their own tradition to determine what is right and what is wrong. Only after doing this can they judge the western tradition. There is no mechanical way of Islamizing western disciplines, although one can superficially determine aspects of agreement or disagreement. However, this will not amount to creative knowledge, for that can only be achieved by being imbued with the Qur'anic attitude that forms the basis for judging both the western and the Islamic traditions.

¹⁸For example, Nasr would want to interpret the legacy in terms of Sufism, 'Abdūh would approach it from a modern scientific bias, and Rahman would do so in terms of the bias for the Qur'an's social thrust. We do not imply that the element of subjectivity is inherently evil, only that we should admit to its bearing on the Qur'an's interpretation.

made, b) that variant interpretations of the Qur'an or apparently conflicting schools undermine the reality of the Islamic legacy, or that c) the reality of an Islamic worldview is questionable. To be sure, the Islamic legacy is not a monolithic system. While it is correct that the Islamic legacy should be viewed on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, one cannot ignore the particular bias from which the Qur'an is being approached. However, such an inevitability does not always make the interpretation invalid, which, in any case, may be used to validate a particular tendency that may claim to have its roots in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Conclusion

Al Fārūqī's excessive exposure to the disease of modernity, rather than an attempt to work toward alternative Islamic disciplines, is characteristic of the revivalist reaction to the West. Davies (1986) states:

This plan for the Islamization of knowledge has [a] clear perception, has a clear sense of the problems. But it offers a remedy which is determined by overexposure to the disease . . . should not an internalized Islamic perspective create its own disciplines of knowledge and structure the relationships between spheres of knowledge according to its own requirements?

This accords fully with Rahman's call to disengage from the West in order to develop an independent and understanding attitude toward it. A critical approach to the legacy is imperative, not only for the reconstruction of Islamic sciences but also for constructing Islamic social sciences out of it. Although the social sciences are young disciplines in the West, they play a significant role in shaping views of humanity and society, religion, and history. While the social scientific approach can play an important role in investigating social manifestations of the Islamic tradition, its support for the relativization of moral values in an essentially western liberal society is a serious limitation. Muslim social scientists ought to investigate the Qur'an's psychological, sociological, and historical insights, as it has its own view of human nature, the rise and fall of nations, and of those who sow corruption on the earth. They should bring these insights to bear upon their support for stable socioethical values in society and upon a critical analysis of the legacy, as well as in their critique of western society and its disciplines. In this way, they can lend support to the struggle to maintain stable ethical values in society.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, al Fārūqī's significant contribution to educational reform must be acknowledged. The foregoing arguments

are intended not only to stimulate ideas for the revision of the Islamization work plan, but also for developing an alternative and more authentic Islamic response to intellectual modernity.

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