

The Islamization Of The Sciences: Its Philosophy And Methodology

Jaafar Sheikh Idris

Introduction

The idea of Islamizing the sciences, whether they be natural or social, raises some philosophical and methodological questions which must, in my view, be settled before any serious program of Islamization can be carried out.

I shall, in this paper, do no more than give examples of these fundamental questions, give brief answers to some of them and throw out hints as to how others can be answered. In doing so I shall do my best to keep as close as possible to the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, but I cannot claim that whatever answers I give are the Islamic answers to the questions I raise.

Philosophical Questions

What does it mean to Islamize knowledge?

The elucidation of this question and the answer to it are given in the following imaginary dialogue between a Western philosopher, call him W, and a Muslim propounder of the Islamization of knowledge, call him M.

W: Is Islam compatible with all forms of truth?

M: Certainly.

W: Would you agree that if something is known, then it is true, i.e. that knowledge implies truth?

M: I agree provided that you make a distinction between knowledge and claims to knowledge and provided that you agree that there are degrees of truth.

W: I accept the qualifications, but if knowledge implies truth, and truth in all its forms is compatible with Islam, then knowledge in all its forms is Islamic. But if this is so, what does it mean then to Islamize knowledge? How do you make something Islamic which is already so? Or is it your intention merely to give each form of knowledge an Islamic flavour by injecting an *ayat* here, imposing a *hadith* there, making an opening with *bismillahi-rrahmani-rrahim* and a closing with *alhamdu lillahi rabbi-l'alamin*?

M: No, that certainly is not all that we mean by Islamizing knowledge. You don't invite chefs and gastronomes to an international conference to advise you on how to add flavour to well known dishes, but to think out new ones and give you their *chefdoevres*.

W: What then does the Islamization of knowledge consist of to which we are devoting all these seminars?

M: This is a large question but I shall attempt to give you a brief answer.

What we call knowledge today is knowledge within the framework of the atheistic materialistic philosophy now prevailing in the West. Philosophical frameworks influence our concepts of truth, of evidence, of facts, and through their values, influence our choice of fields of research, our priorities, etc. Since the materialistic atheistic philosophy is based, in our view, on false assumptions, we are endeavoring to replace it by a world-view that is based on truth and right values. We believe, and have the evidence, to show that Islam is such a world-view.

We would like thus to Islamize knowledge by, (a) resting it on the solid foundations of Islam, and thus widen its scope, purge it of falsehoods masquerading as truths, discover new facts and see old ones in the light of the new world-view; and (b) abiding by Islamic values in our search for it, in our choice of fields of research, in our priorities, and in the use we make of it. Islamized knowledge is not knowledge tinted with a prejudice that happens to be called Islamic. Nay, it is knowledge *par excellence*; it is knowledge that is conducive to man's material as well as spiritual development.

To see how knowledge is well-rooted in Islam and how the latter has its own distinct conception of it, let us review its answers to some of the fundamental questions of the theory of knowledge.

Is knowledge possible?

For there to be knowledge at all there must be (a) a source from which it is to be derived; and (b) a human capacity to know; and in some cases (c) a method by which knowledge is obtained from those sources by means of that capacity.

Many writers, old and new, have confused these three conditions of knowledge. Thus some of them speak of perception as a source of knowledge, or put revelation along side reason and the senses. But perception and reason are capacities while revelation is a source. We cannot obtain knowledge either from the world or from revelation without these capacities or means.

Is all knowledge acquired? Or is some of it inborn?

The Qur'anic answer to these questions is most clearly given in this verse:

“Allah (SWT) brought you out of the wombs of your mothers knowing nothing, and He gave you sight, hearing and minds.” [1]

The answer to the first question has vexed many Western as well as Muslim thinkers. Western Rationalists claim that man is born with innate ideas or inborn knowledge, while the Empiricists claim that the mind, at the hour of birth, is a mere *tabula rasa* on which the senses write what they wish.

The first part of our verse tells us that man is born knowing nothing. Does this mean that it supports the Empiricists view? No, because the Qur’an does not say that the mind is a mere passive blank sheet on which the senses write what they wish. Though we are not born with any innate knowledge in the proper sense of the word, yet our minds have a definite structure, called in the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*, the *fitra*. And so, just as the senses develop and thus enable us to perceive things, so does the mind develop; and as it does so we come to be aware of certain truths that do not come to us from the outside world, although that world helps us in becoming so aware of them. These mental truths, in their turn, help us to understand the world; in fact no such understanding is possible without them.

We acquire knowledge of the natural world, of society, of history, of revealed truths, and of any other type of external facts or truths through the medium of the senses as well as the mind. Perception in which the mind takes no part—if that is at all possible—does not supply us with knowledge but with mere sense data. Condemning the unbelievers for not comprehending the words of Allah (SWT) conveyed to them by His Prophet (SAAS), the Qur’an likens them to a herd which understands nothing of what the shepherd tells them but hears only voices. [2]

The senses mentioned in the above quoted *ayat*, and in many other *ayats* of the Qur’an, which speak about the acquisition of knowledge, are the most important senses, hearing and sight. The other senses are mentioned in other *ayats*. [3]

This illustrates that the Qur’an recognizes the authority of the senses in bringing to us knowledge from outside ourselves. This means that everything which is empirically proved becomes a fact which is un-Islamic to deny. One cannot therefore be a Muslim and a complete sceptic about the authority of the senses. We should therefore forget about those doubts which Al-Ghazali cast on the authority of the senses, and which he himself never took seriously any way. This does not of course mean that our senses never err; they do; but it is through them that we discover and rectify those errors.

What are the sources of our knowledge?

Our knowledge has two main sources: The world and revelation. I must repeat here that these are sources from which we obtain knowledge and are not

to be confused with our senses and our minds which are our means for obtaining knowledge from those sources.

The world, as a source of knowledge, can be divided into the following subsources:

1. The natural or physical world.
2. Our internal states; pain, pleasure, envy, etc.
3. Human beings, as physical objects, as informants, etc.
4. Dreams: As Muslims, we have no doubt about the fact that some dreams come true and that as such they are sources of knowledge, but since we human beings—excepting God's Prophets—can never be sure about the truth of our dreams, we cannot take them as independent sources of objective knowledge neither in the field of religion nor in that of the world, but we may benefit from them personally.
5. Minds: The mind has three functions.
 - a. it is a means for acquiring knowledge.
 - b. it is also a store of knowledge.
 - c. but is as well a secondary source of knowledge, [4] and it is in this respect that we are considering it here now.

The main types of knowledge which come to us independently of the external world, but are confirmed by our knowledge of it and of revealed knowledge, is based upon the fact that there is only one God and that He alone is worthy of being worshipped. This is the essence of our *fitra* (original nature), but it is also the basis of our religion; hence Islam is called the religion of human nature.

Besides this nucleus of our *fitra* we have other forms of a priori knowledge which are consistent with it and which confirm it. These include the laws of thought, basic moral values, and aesthetic values.

The fact that these latter three are considered Islamically to be *a priori*, can be seen in the fact that the Qur'an assumes that the people it is addressing are thinking moral beings in possession of aesthetic taste, and hence it condemns any of them who shows signs of intentional deviation from the requirements of these natural endowments. But the Qur'anic teachings which are based on these natural endowments, help, in their turn, to strengthen and develop them. Hence being a good Muslim consists, among other things, in being thoughtful, morally upright, and aesthetically refined.

What is a scientific method?

A scientific method would be that which links our means of acquiring knowledge (the mind and the senses) to the sources of our knowledge (the world and revelation). The nature of the method depends therefore on the

source and perhaps also on the nature of the knowledge to be obtained from that source. Thus if I claim to have discovered a fact in the physical world, I must be able to show others a way, either of observing that fact, or of deducing its truth from the truth of other well known facts; that is because these are the only ways by which we ordinary folk can discover physical facts. But if I say that it is obligatory on a Muslim to do thus and so, then I must be able to support my claim by Qur'anic or Prophetic texts, or show that it can be deduced from such texts. I must also be able to show that my understanding of the text is a correct one, that, in case of Prophetic traditions, they are authentic and, if my argument was based on a deduction from texts, that I have followed the right procedure.

Just as there are scientific ways of ascertaining the truth of our claims to knowledge of nature or society, there are ways of ascertaining the truth of religious knowledge. Scientific method is not therefore confined to the so-called empirical procedures followed by the natural or social scientists. This is as it should be, if our claim is true that the Qur'an is the word of Allah (SWT) and that Muhammad (SAAS) is His Prophet, because given this belief, religious knowledge has objective sources, and hence there must be objective ways of obtaining it from those sources. It is of paramount importance for everyone interested in the Islamization of the social sciences or in the relationship between Islam and the natural sciences, to be aware of these procedures if he wants to be sure that what he attributes to Islam is valid or most probably so.

Procedure Of The Islamization Of The Sciences

Equipped with the kind of background knowledge that was our concern in the first part of this paper, we can now go to the main business of showing how our program of Islamizing the sciences can be realized. Here are some of the steps which we, as an Islamic scientific community, must take to reach our goal:

- (1) Accept as true all the 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 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.
- (5) Beware of the non-Islamic philosophical assumptions and statements of Western scientists that might come to us in the cloak of scientific facts or theories.

(6) Put all these facts, laws and theories in an Islamic framework. This will enable us to see them in a new light and infer from them new facts which otherwise would have no relevance within the prevailing Western materialistic and atheistic framework. The Qur'an says that the unbelieving Arabs who passed by the town of Sodom did not perceive the lesson to be gained from its destruction. Why? "Did they not actually see it?", asks the Qur'an, and it answers, "Nay, but they expected not the resurrection." This shows that a number of people can be aware of the same empirical facts and yet differ in the conclusions they draw from them because of the differences in their world-views.

(7) Since we have two sources of knowledge, the world and wahy (Divine revelation) we must be very clear about the relationship between them. What should we do if an empirical statement about the world contradicts a religious statement about it? Which of the two should we put before the other? Early Muslim theologians and philosophers made extensive discussions of this problem. What I take to be the right position can be summarized in the following points: [4]

- a. There can be no contradiction between true statements.
- b. Since the world 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.
- c. The contradiction between religious and rational or empirical statements cannot therefore be real; it is always only apparent, and it is due either to the fact that what we thought was a religious statement was not in fact an authentic one (such as a weak or fabricated *hadith*) or because the meaning we attributed to it was not the correct one. Or perhaps because what we thought was an empirical or rational statement was in fact not so. But how do we resolve this contradiction even if we take it to be only apparent?

Since the contradiction is not real, it cannot be between two statements known for certain to be true. It can therefore be only be between statements, one of which is known for certain to be true (*qat'i*), and a statement whose truth is only probable (*zan-ni*), or between two *zan-ni* statements. If this is so then we should, according to Ibn Taymiya:

- d. Give priority to what is known to be absolutely true, (the *qat'i*) irrespective of whether it is the religious or the rational or empirical.
- e. And in case of two probable statements (the *zan-ni*) give priority to whichever has the stronger evidence behind it, again irrespective of whether it is the religious or the rational or empirical.

(8) We should endeavour to give our science strong roots in the Muslim society by acquainting ourselves with the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* and the history of Islamic thought and by choosing areas of research that are more

pertinent to the intellectual and practical needs of the Muslim *Ummah*, while at the same time keeping abreast of world developments in our respective fields of specialization.

(9) Since we have two sources of knowledge for our science, we should accept as true any fact which we are sure to be in either of them. We should not make it a methodological rule to look for empirical facts supportive of religious statements, or religious texts which support empirically established facts, though we may sometimes do so (especially to show the miraculous nature of the Qur'an or to prove the authenticity of Muhammad's (SAAS) claim to Prophethood). I say we should not make it a methodological rule because it is a rule which it is impossible to apply in practice; and because trying to do the impossible is sure, in this case, to put us in one of two equally dangerous positions: Either to give scientific statements far-fetched meanings in order to make them suit religious claims or twist religious statements to force them to lend support to scientific facts.

(10) We should not put the ideas of human beings, even if they be the greatest of our *ulamah*, on par with the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, especially in regard to worldly matters which are our concern here. The writings of al-Ghazali, of al-Muhasibi on psychology, of Ibn Khaldun on sociology and history, or of al-Mutakallimun (Muslim theologians) and so-called Muslim Philosophers on reason, epistemology, morality, etc., should be considered as human endeavours, not to be accepted on trust, but only to the degree they are supported by rational or empirical evidence, or evidence from the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*.

(11) To admit something as a piece of knowledge, either in the field of religion or of the world, we do not have to be absolutely certain of its truth. For practical purposes, knowledge based on strong probability is as good as knowledge based on certainty; and most of our knowledge, even our religious knowledge, is of the first type. We know for certain that the book we call the Qur'an contains the words that Allah revealed to His Prophet Muhammad (SAAS); we know for certain that whatever Allah says is true; we know for certain concerning some *ahadith* that the Prophet (SAAS) uttered them, and we know for certain that whatever the Prophet (SAAS) said is true. But our knowledge of many of what we consider to be authentic *ahadith* is not based on certainty, neither is our knowledge of the meanings of all the Qur'anic *ayats* and Prophetic traditions. But rationality and prudence demand that we act upon them. This should not be any cause for misgivings regarding religious knowledge because the same applies to what we call scientific knowledge and to the knowledge on which we act in our daily life. If someone who is not known to be mad enters a crowded hall and shouts: Fire! Fire! the people surely will not sit by calmly until his claim is empirically proved.

We should not therefore expect our Islamized sciences to consist of absolutely true statements. There can be, on the same issue, different Islamic points of view and different Islamic scientific theories. The one nearest to Islam will be the one with the stronger evidence behind it. Some Islamic theories or views advanced by honest, learned and intelligent Muslim scientists, and some facts accepted by them as true, can often be proved to be false. This has happened in the field of purely religious matters whose sole source is revelation and it will *ipso facto* happen in the fields of the worldly sciences.



*God Most Gracious.
It is He Who has taught the Qur-an.
He has created man.
He has taught him speech and intelligence.*

[1] xvi: 78.

[2] ii: 171.

[3] See for example vi: 7 for touch, vii: 22 for taste, xii: 94 for smell.

[4] I am here almost paraphrasing Ibn Taymiya's position, especially in his, *dar'u ta'arudhi-l'aqli wa-nnaql*, edited by Dr. Muhammad Rashad Salim, Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1399 AH-1979 AD, vol. 1, pp. 4-8, 78-80, 86-92.