

Comments on “Teaching Programs in Islamic Economics: A Comparative Study”*

Abdul Rahman Yusri

In “Teaching Programs in Islamic Economics: A Comparative Study,” Iqbal introduces excellent ideas that demonstrate his knowledge of both Islamic economics and the problems of teaching it. He exposes the hiatus between secular social sciences and traditional education in Muslim societies by following the usual interpretation; that is, describing the rift within the educational system between ‘traditional’ education which is devoted to the religious sciences while ignoring the modern sciences, and secular education which is devoted to modern sciences, accepting it in blind faith, while showing no interest in the religious sciences. However, within the educational institutions there exists a more fundamental problem.

Many Muslim countries such as Egypt have introduced modern sciences into the curriculum of institutions of traditional education. For example, al-Azhar University restructured itself, mixing traditional shari‘ah education with the modern sciences. Even so, the gap between the two systems did not disappear, rather, it became even more pronounced. Iqbal indicates his awareness of the problem but does not express it as succinctly and clearly as he should. The gap between traditional and modern education in our societies is reflected in the hearts and minds of our teachers, educators, and intellectuals who believe that integration does injustice to one or the other educational system. A deep-seated belief among some religious leaders is that modern science contains the seeds of evil thought and that the introduction of modern sciences into traditional Islamic education will have a negative effect on the faith. Clearly, mixing the modern and the Islamic sciences alone will not solve the problem facing our schools and universities. Rather, the problem will only be solved when educators expand the traditional curriculum so that it absorbs new branches of knowledge, while at the same time, establishes a

* Translated from Arabic by the editor.

discriminating filter to sift out what is not in accord with Islam. Only when we have developed a methodology to ascertain whether a modern scientific development is in line with the values inherent in our shari'ah will the blind imitation of the West stop. The moment Muslim intellectuals attain this is the moment the imaginary hiatus between the two systems vanishes. Vital to teaching Islamic economics is the knowledge that the real gap to be bridged is the one between the knowledge based on true faith revealed to our Prophet, the Seal of the Prophets, blessings and peace be upon him, and the sciences that do not pay attention to such faith, and may even run counter to it.

The early steps taken by some Muslim educational institutions to establish specialized departments with full curricula for the teaching of Islamic economics encountered the question of balance between shari'ah and secular sciences. The problem was not only how much of each to give the students but also who among the faculties was qualified to teach these subjects. The professors of fiqh saw themselves as the most qualified to teach Islamic economics as well modern economics. On the other hand, the professors who studied economics in the West or in the Muslim countries whose universities followed Western standards and were unconvinced of the relevance of Islamic economics, understood the problem of teaching Islamic economics as no more than modifying the economic theory within ordinary secular economics courses to accord with Islamic ethics and values. What concerned most professors of economics was how to analyse problems and pass them through theoretical studies within a general framework of basic assumptions deduced from the shari'ah and the ethics of Islamic societies. Economics professors concentrated on learning the details of some rather general principles of the shari'ah or considered the shari'ah outside their field of competence. Evidence of this situation was revealed in conferences, seminars, and workshops conducted in many countries since 1971, and is reflected in the curricula of many Islamic universities.

Iqbal analyses the curricula of four leading Islamic Universities, highlighting the balance between the shari'ah and modern econom-

ics in each. He finds traditional shari'ah subjects are prominent and receive higher intensity in Muhammad bin Saud and al Imam Sadiq Universities; whereas he finds modern economics more dominant in the curriculum of the International Islamic University in Malaysia. Iqbal does not explain the reasons behind the curricula differences. I may safely say that the differences in the curricula lie in the fact that at those universities where the shari'ah specialists had the upper hand, the shari'ah subjects dominated the curriculum and vice-versa. At the International Islamic University in Islamabad he found a more balanced curriculum. And reflecting his wide experience at the University of Islamabad, we find that Iqbal, in his proposed curriculum, judiciously mixes shari'ah science and modern economics to produce a balanced curriculum at the undergraduate level.

With care, Iqbal addresses the question of what is the proper mixture of shari'ah and modern economics in the university curriculum. Certainly, the question is not easy to answer and may not be answered until Islamic economics is well established in Muslim countries. Professors of shari'ah, and *fuqahā* in particular, are not economists. This fact does not reduce in any way their prestige—Islamic scientific methodology was developed centuries before the Western system. The Islamic system respects specialization. Professors of modern economics in Muslim universities have to begin economic analysis within the Islamic perspective. Of course, this will need more than a general knowledge of shari'ah principles, it will take a deep and searching exploration of the shari'ah, Islamic economic history, and the contribution of Muslim scholars to economics.

But the problem is not merely deciding the proper mixture of shari'ah and modern economics courses, the problem is how to facilitate the amalgamation of shari'ah and modern economics. The amalgam will not occur unless the hearts and minds of the teachers of both shari'ah and modern economics change. Then and only then will we have a unified concept of Islamic economics and no longer need to divide our courses into shari'ah and otherwise.

Iqbal's work is excellent as is the program he presents as a B.A. degree in Islamic Economics. Those who have studied modern economics and then devoted their time and energy to research in the field of Islamic economics are in complete agreement with him. However, even though a large portion of Iqbal's proposed curriculum contains study of the shari'ah, his proposal will still not be acceptable to most shari'ah specialists.

The fundamental question is how to eliminate the existing gap in the hearts and minds of those who teach. I suspect that, for a long time, there are going to be graduates from our leading universities who have B.A. degrees in Islamic economics but who have different backgrounds. Some will be well-versed in shari'ah principles and codes with little training in economics while others will be well-trained in modern economics but possess very superficial knowledge of the shari'ah.

In Iqbal's examination of Islamic universities, he ignores developments in three leading Islamic universities—al Azhar in Egypt, Um al Qura in Saudi Arabia and Omdurman in Sudan. Neglecting to mention these universities is unfortunate for they are instructive examples. In particular, al-Azhar, which has ambitiously pursued the integration of modern sciences with traditional religious teachings has been a target of criticism from different quarters. Al Azhar is worth evaluating and should have been included in this paper. The other two universities have identical programs of teaching Islamic economics. In these programs, there is a clear attempt to integrate modern economics and the shari'ah. There seems to be no particular reason why these universities were not included in this paper.

From my own experience at Um al Qura University, I know that within two years it is possible to present a substantial portion of the shari'ah of economics to graduate students from secular universities. At the same time, it is also possible to present a substantial portion of modern economics to graduates of shari'ah institutions. Within this program, a student who has passed his preparatory studies is in a position to choose his Master or Ph.D. thesis under the supervision of two professors, one specializing in the shari'ah and the other in mod-

ern economics. The program has resulted in important research and the completion of many theses in different branches of Islamic economics.

Some of the students who finished their Ph.D.s became part of the teaching staff at the university and will have an important role in furthering research in Islamic economics. They are well prepared for the task. They went through a program of balanced education in both economics and shari'ah. Some may wonder how it is possible to develop postgraduate programs where there is no undergraduate teaching of the subject? We should not forget that Islamic economics is not a new science. Its roots extend into history and we are only reintroducing it in the modern context.

The last point which I would like to raise is the importance of offering complementary subjects to students of Islamic economics. The job market is not yet ready to offer employment opportunities to its graduates. In fact, society may demand skills and training not developed by its courses but by the complementary courses. The complementary subjects such as accounting, business administration, foreign language, and quantitative studies, though not part of the study of Islamic economics, will enhance the opportunities of its graduates. This is very important, especially in the beginning. Certainly, students will not specialize in this science if there are no jobs for them.