

Some Remarks on the Islamic and the Secular Paradigms of Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

By the time secularist thought had succeeded, at an intellectual level, in challenging the authority of the Catholic church, its roots had already taken firm hold in western soil. Later, when western political and economic systems began to prevail throughout the world, it was only natural that secularism, as the driving force behind these systems, should gain ascendancy worldwide. In time, and with varying degrees of success, the paradigm of positivism gradually displaced traditional and religious modes of thinking, with the result that generations of Third World thinkers grew up convinced that the only way to make “progress” and reform their societies was to follow the way of the secular West. Moreover, since the West had begun to progress politically, economically, and intellectually only after the Catholic church’s influence had been marginalized, people in the colonies believed that they would have to marginalize the influence of their particular religions in order to achieve a similar degree of progress.

Under the terms of the new paradigm, turning to religion for solutions to contemporary issues is an absurdity, for religion is viewed as something left over from humanity’s formative years, from a “dark” age of superstition and myth whose time has now passed. As such, religion has no relevance to the present, and all attempts to revive it are doomed to failure and are a waste of time.

Many people have supposed that it is possible to accept the western model of a secular paradigm while maintaining their religious practices and beliefs. They reason that such an acceptance has no negative

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impact upon their daily lives, so long as it does not destroy their places of worship or curtail their right to religious freedom. Thus, almost every contemporary community has fallen under the sway of this paradigm. Moreover, this paradigm has had the greatest influence on how different peoples perceive life, the universe, and the role of humanity. In addition, it can provide them with an alternative set of beliefs (if needed) and suggest answers to the ultimate questions.

Throughout this twentieth century and most of the last, Muslims have taken it upon themselves to reconcile the western vision of life, humanity, and the universe with their own, or to reconcile the Islamic vision of the same with the precepts of the western vision. As a result, many practicing Muslims have inclined toward rationalizing whatever appears to challenge their constructs or contradict their concepts of the universal nature of positivism and the secular paradigm. For example, we have seen some Muslims equating jinns with microbes, angels with electrons, or prophets with geniuses! To such apologists, Islam touches only the “spiritual” life of its followers and thus may be considered another link in the rusty chain of “religions.” For such “thinkers,” the concepts of *shūrā* (consultation) and *khilāfah* (vicegerency, stewardship) correspond with western ideals of democracy and republicanism, while socialism and social justice are represented by *zakah*!

In short, the crisis of the Muslim mind and the absence of intellectual creativity or an *ijtihād* (deduction)-based mentality have stymied the development of a contemporary Islamic paradigm of knowledge. In fact, the entire matter has been ignored, with the result that the distinguishing features of such a paradigm have yet to be identified. Moreover, in the Muslim world there are two streams of education. The first stream, which produces the Muslim world’s technical experts, scientists, social scientists, intellectuals, and public opinion makers, is based on and functions completely within the secular positivist paradigm. The second stream, perhaps more akin to a backwater, is the religious education stream. However, the sources of this stream owe more to tradition than to any understanding of the parameters of a truly Islamic paradigm of knowledge. For centuries, this stream of education has been able to do no more than repeat itself, by offering the same commentary on the same texts in the same disciplines of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *uṣūl* (the sources of Islamic jurisprudence), Hadith (the Prophet’s (SAAS)¹ actions and sayings), and *tafsīr* (Qur’anic commentary).

The Islamization of Knowledge undertaking seeks to develop an Islamic paradigm of knowledge that will serve as an alternative to the secular positivist paradigm that presently dominates the arts and sciences. Such an alter-

native combines Islamic and universalistic perspectives; addresses the intellectual and conceptual problems of all humanity, not just of Muslims; and includes a *tawhīd*-based² reconstruction of the concepts of life, humanity, and the universe. What, then, is this Islamic paradigm of knowledge, and what are its basic components?

TAWHĪD

The Islamic view of knowledge takes as its starting point the concept of *tawhīd* (unicity, unity) in God's (SWT)³ divinity and attributes. In fact, the entire edifice of the Islamic paradigm of knowledge stands on the foundation of *tawhīd*. The epistemological aspects of *tawhīd* are manifested via God's attribute of absolute knowledge and His teaching humanity that which it did not know. Moreover, God created within humanity the capacity to learn, teaching Adam "the names" of things, endowing human beings with the aptitude to read and write, and instilling within them a natural sense of curiosity about themselves and their surroundings. He also sent messengers to present His revelation and explain, by means of scripture, all matters connected to the Unseen. In other words, He made it possible for human beings to expend their energies on making sense of the physical world, harnessing its power for the common good, uncovering its laws and mysteries, and developing methodologies for dealing with revelation.

REVELATION

Both the Qur'an and the Sunnah represent sources of revealed knowledge that complement the natural universe. In addition, revelation may be taken as a creative source of belief, thought, worldview, and conceptualization. Revelation also gives the necessary order to establish human concepts; clarifies the relationships between God, humanity, and the universe; and then regulates these in such a way as to develop an integrated *tawhīd*-based society. The Sunnah clarifies and elaborates on the Qur'anic epistemic methodology by linking the Prophet's example and the Qur'an's values so that these may be applied to the actuality of changing circumstances. By means of this methodology, humanity may transcend the dilemma of the relative and the absolute, and of the real and the ideal.

In addition to revelation, there are other sources and means of knowledge, such as reason, the senses, intelligence, intuition, and experience (including experimentation and observation). The Islamic paradigm of knowledge augments its sources with several principles and fundamentals that

are essential to its comprehensive and encompassing nature. Among these are *khilāfah* and *amānah* (responsibility for society) as the guiding factors in determining the meaning of life for humanity, a worldview that regards this world and the next as a single continuum, and a belief that intellectual activity is a religious and social responsibility for which the individual may be rewarded or punished. A very close relationship exists between knowledge and values, which lends the attribute of purposefulness to knowledge and, in turn, makes individuals responsible for distinguishing between useful and useless knowledge. At the same time, the Islamic paradigm of knowledge lends itself to academic activity at various levels. The Prophet, for example, once said: “Be a scholar or a student, but beware of the third category [ignorance], for that leads to destruction.” In this way, the spread of knowledge was assured, because no individual or class could claim a monopoly over it.

The Islamic paradigm enjoys a harmonious relationship with human nature (*fiṭrah*), which enables human beings to erect certain intellectual standards. It is with this context in mind that we can understand the saying: “Question your own heart [and rely on what it tells you], even if the so-called authorities tell you something else.” This paradigm also includes many fundamental characteristics that can help bring about a truly global and universalistic human outlook. Among these are humanity, utility, harmony, positivity, stability, globality, universality, methodology, intermediacy, comprehensiveness, guidance, spirituality, expansiveness, and openness.

Owing to the linkage that exists in the fine relationship between God and humanity, between this world and the next, and between the religious and the worldly life, this paradigm is not subject to closure. This explains how the Islamic paradigm can be simultaneously selective and comprehensive, and how it can adapt itself to whatever is positive and avoid whatever is negative in knowledge. Ultimately, all of this will result in the establishment of an intellectual criteria that will link knowledge with values, higher purposes, and universal principles.

The positivistic secular paradigm boasts of its analytical proficiency, which is quite impressive. However, analysis and deconstruction are not to be undertaken merely for their own sake, but rather in order to comprehend what has been analyzed and to correct what has gone wrong. Although the secular paradigm has made its analysis and deconstructed its subjects, it has proven to be extremely limited in its utility, because it has not produced a program of successful reconstruction. While it has been effective in explaining situations, the explanation is only as good as the intellectual goals that it

serves. Thus, when the goals are limited or restricted to certain parameters of inquiry, the resulting benefits must necessarily be limited as well.

The oneness of humanity enables the Islamic paradigm of knowledge to effect constructs. God states in the Qur'an: "O people! Verily, We have created you from a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in God's sight is the one who is most heedful among you" (49:13); "He has created you out of a single soul, and from it He fashioned its mate" (39:6); and "Nor have We sent you (O Prophet) save as [an evidence of Our] grace toward all the worlds" (21:107). Moreover, the Islamic perspective on the essential oneness of the universe further enables its paradigm to develop constructs.

PURIFYING METHODOLOGY FROM NEGATIVE ELEMENTS

The Islamic paradigm of knowledge protects methodology from speculation and whim. As a result, the Islamic creed can serve as a protection from all such elements, for it leaves no scope for accepting anything that originates outside the ecclesiastically established sources. This is important, for even up until our own time humanity has been unable to rid itself or move beyond speculation, whim, caprice, and the like.

According to the Islamic paradigm of knowledge, human knowledge is enriched by knowledge of the divine, so that people are always aware of God's assistance and never have the sense of being left entirely to their own devices. Therefore, the attitude so haughtily touted by the secular paradigm, that the Unseen has no epistemological value, is rejected by the Islamic paradigm. Instead, Muslims are fortified by the confidence coming from their reliance on the two most important sources of knowledge: revelation and the universe.

The Muslims' association with prophecy and its revelational legacy adds a dimension of universality, humanity, and ethics to their intellectual orientation. In addition, *tawhīd* and the acceptance of the divine as a source of knowledge prevent Muslims from placing undue dependence upon the self (with its vain and overweening tendencies) and from seeking to hide knowledge from others. A further benefit of *tawhīd* is that it purifies epistemological issues through the constant scrutiny and revision demanded by the dynamic of *ijtihād* and the *tawhīdī* rejection of any ultimate other than God. Thus, whatever is considered final by an individual or an entire generation of Muslims will not necessarily remain the final word for another

individual or a following generation; others will always have the right to open or reopen any issue for further consideration, refinement, or rejection.

Tawhīd also averts the misuse of knowledge as power, for the paradigm includes the concept of a participatory and sharing community of knowledge that, by its very nature, precludes any such monopolization and elitism. The fundamental sources of knowledge are available to everyone, as are the methodological steps necessary for dealing with them. Furthermore, the connection between knowledge and values precludes any notion of a need to adhere to established epistemological norms, and thus opens the door to continued examination and analysis. All of this, in turn, ensures that people will not live under the impression that they have found all of the answers, when, in fact, they possess knowledge of little more than the outward aspects of the life of this world.

The paradigm's religious aspect also ensures that knowledge is linked with every aspect of human life, be it past, present, future, or in the Hereafter, and that it can contemplate eternal truths and endow them with a greater, purer, and more comprehensive relevance. It is this aspect that ensures that knowledge remains elevated and never succumbs to the baser inclinations, artistic or otherwise. All of this springs from humanity's role as *khalīfah* (steward), and from its natural dignity, humanness, trust, and responsibility for improving society.

The above should be viewed as no more than brief preliminary remarks intended to explain the differences between the Islamic and the secular positivistic paradigms of knowledge. It should be possible, however, to base more intensive, comprehensive, and detailed studies on what has been outlined here.

NOTES

1. *ŠAAS* (*Šallā Allāhu ʿalayhi wa Sallam*): May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. Said whenever the Prophet's name is mentioned.
2. *Tawhīd* (adj. *tawhīdī*): Attesting to Allah's unity and uniqueness, and affirming that Allah is the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master of all that is. Traditionally and simply expressed, *tawhīd* is the conviction and witnessing that "there is no god but Allah" – the essence of Islam that gives Islamic civilization its identity, binds its constituent parts together, and thus makes of them the integral, organic body that we call civilization.
3. *ŠWT* (*Šubhānahu wa Taʿālā*): May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed. Said when referring to Allah.