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Science

LEIF STENBERG

Science in the Service of God: Islamizing Knowledge

On the London subway a passenger recites verses from the Quran. He does so in a low voice and smiles as he recognizes the divine words of his faith. The verses were reproduced in a book, entitled *The Bible, the Quran and Science*, a pseudo-scientific work claiming to examine the Holy Scriptures in the light of modern knowledge. This book by the French convert to Islam, Maurice Bucaille, is popular in Muslim countries as well as among Muslims in Europe and North America. It is commonly referred to and even recommended by Muslims almost anywhere in the world when discussing matters concerning Islam and science. However, in most cases, the person recommending it has not read the book him or herself. Instead, someone he/she trusts, at the local mosque or at the university, has told him of its content.

atized way, totality under the unity of 'Islam'. Firmly rooted in an organic world picture, the participants criticize science and social structures in Europe and North America and contrast them with an idealized 'Islam'. They believe there is nothing wrong with Islam, but that the problem is that Muslims do not practice it. Islam is understood as an objective reality. Through a correct interpretation of the revelation (the Quran), human beings can gain understanding of the true meaning of the world. Hence, the work of interpreting the Quran is seen as an ongoing activity.

The idea that existence has a meaning (a teleological dimension) influences the participants' view of history. They all turn to history to find the true norms and values of Islam. The idea is to return to the early history of Islam and interpret it (allegorically) with the 'Muhammadan' society of Medina as the norm. The aim is not to establish a copy of the so-called Medina State, but to transfer the conditions, the norms and values of the state to the present time. The result is an anachronistic projection of contemporary conditions and problems onto history. In their perspective, the conditions of post-modernity are assimilated and internalized in the framework of Islam. At the same time, their contrasting views of how to interpret the early history of Islam, as well as their interpretation of Islamic terminology and its Quranic grounding, reveal their differences.

In the practice of science, a Muslim scientist should strive towards Islamization. The stress on this obligation links the performance of the individual to the greater jihad, the endeavour of every Muslim in the service of Islam. The participants use the principle of *ijtihad* (reinterpretation) to the extent that the discourse can be characterized as a struggle concerning the meaning of Islamic terms. All participants strive to appropriate the vocabulary of the Quran and they all use a form of realism in the philosophical sense of the word. Words in the Quran are dealt with as if they had an objective and eternal meaning. The basic idea in using Islamic terminology is to evoke 'Islamic' feelings, associations, and memories, in order to make Muslims support that particular form of Islamic science and knowledge. At the same time, a scientific vocabulary is appropriated and mixed up with the Islamic terminology.

Tradition

Most of the participants do not have a formal religious education. Their loose connection to established scholarly traditions makes room for relatively independent interpretations of the sacred sources. They also hold a trump card by their ability to print and distribute their books through international publishing houses or through their own organizations. In order to spread their message, they all utilize the means of consumer culture – a culture they paradoxically often criticize. All of them share a fierce critique of the traditionally educated religious scholars, the *ulama*. Their attitude can be designated as anti-clerical. The religious scholars are stereotyped as a negative and reactionary force within Muslim society.

Their conceptual innovations not only affect Islamic but also scientific terminology.

The meaning attached to the term 'the West' has a similar purpose. This stereotype is strongly emphasized. The aim is to fabricate a dichotomy between the culture (and science) of Europe and North America and the culture and science of Islam. Contemporary science is seen as a 'technocratic wasteland', a phenomenon that has nothing to offer humanity but alienation and enslavement.² That science is perceived as provisional, temporary, questioned, re-examined and forwarded by a multitude of methods and theories, all of which is regarded as weak and unstable. 'Science' is objectified in the sense that a specific Islamic science means a divinely ordered activity founded on a variety of interpretations of the word *tawhid* (unity). Disciplines cannot, therefore, ideally contain a set of different methods. There has to be one method that can be utilized to arrive at definitive answers. The 'single method of science' is based on the Quran, and as a consequence science that contradicts the word of God will not be tolerated. However, the question of determining which research goes against Islam is not settled, i.e. judgements and agreements on which research may be seen as Islamic varies over time and space.

Alternatives

The construction of an Islamic alternative to modern science is characterized by an arbitrary use of a variety of sources and an appeal to the ideas of such disparate thinkers as the American philosopher Paul Feyerabend and the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb. Often, a writer will back up his or her views by restricting the references to other people who share the same idea and belong to the same ideological position. This is an important strategy because it reveals the artificiality and pseudoscientific character of the discourse as well as the nature of the basic struggle to authoritatively define Islam.

Outcome

These ideas constitute the basic core of the project known as the Islamization of science and knowledge. They constitute a foundation for understanding modern science, and they create a framework for comprehending research on phenomena like DNA and post-modernity. But what has come out of more than 30 years of discussion on the establishment of a specific Islamic science? In Muslim countries, a number of Islamic universities have been established. In most cases, 'Islamic' signifies a university founded on a model containing religious education, on the one hand, and technology and the natural sciences, on the other. In more repressive countries, an 'Islamic' social science seems to be unwanted. In contrast, within the European and North American contexts, one finds a number of educational institutions focusing on religious education, while attempting to establish 'Islamic' social sciences.

On a more abstract and global level, the result of the discourse is a huge mass of literature. But the ideas put forth have little substance and the critique expressed concerning the content of, for example, an 'Islamic anthropology', offers little to distinguish it from any other anthropology.³ It appears that in the social sciences, but especially in

natural sciences, the Islamization process has to do with ethical perspectives, the use and abuse of research results, the role of the scientist in society, choice of research area, etc., and not so much with research methods and theories. Moreover, Western Creationists have influenced the Muslim discourse to the degree that some Muslim organizations have more or less cooperated with Christians representing a Creationist view. For example, in Turkey one can find authors who claim to be 'Muslim Creationists'.

The discourse on the meaning of Islam in relation to science and knowledge has also created a group of free-floating intellectuals. Muslims like Sardar, Nasr and representatives of the International Institute for Islamic thought (IIIT) belong to an international Muslim jet-set going from conference to conference or government to government presenting their form of 'Islamic' science. Somewhat humorously, they can be seen as prolific individuals parading on a global 'Islamic' catwalk constructing a Muslim intellectual fashion of the day. And it comes as no surprise that Nasr, Sardar and the IIIT have all been to Malaysia as advisors of some sort in the build up of Malaysian Islamic institutions.

One of many conclusions regarding the pursuit of these individuals and institutions concerns their interpretations of Islam, especially how they produce and communicate 'Islam'. Their activities suggest that the idea of a geographically located Muslim world, or of a centre and periphery, becomes obsolete. It is therefore better to regard the Muslim world as one of practices, ideas and thought, a discursive world constantly in flux, changing through interpretations and reinterpretations of Islam. In addition, in spite of the fact that the discourse on the Islamization of science and knowledge has not been successful in terms of building clearly 'Islamic' educational institutions or research facilities, the discourse has filtered down to the local level and become internalized among Muslims all over the world. Perhaps it is more important that the discourse serves Muslims, like the man on the subway, with a confirmation of their religious identity than viable new educational institutions. ◆

Notes

1. Stenberg, Leif (1996), *The Islamization of Science. Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
2. Elzinga, Aant and Andrew Jamison (1981), 'Cultural Components in the Scientific Attitude to Nature: Eastern and Western Modes?', *Research Policy Studies, Discussion Paper no. 146*, Research Policy Institute: Lund, p. 9.
3. Tapper, Richard (1995), "Islamic Anthropology" and the "Anthropology of Islam", *Anthropological Quarterly*.

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Two girls at the Department of Chemistry at Aleppo University in Syria.

The book by Maurice Bucaille belongs to that apologetic genre of literature that attempts to Islamize knowledge, science, technology and education. In contemporary European and North American Muslim environments, more or less apologetic literature on the relationship between science, knowledge and Islam is flooding the market. Literature and pamphlets on the Islamization of these phenomena are present in almost every Muslim bookshop. In general, the literature is written in English and the authors are primarily Muslims from Europe, North America, Malaysia, India and Pakistan. The fact that these discussions are mainly carried out in English points to it as the language of communication among Muslims worldwide.

Since the 1960s, discussions of Islam and science in the European and North American contexts have been dominated by the Iranian-American scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Malaysian academic Sayyid Muhammad Naguib al-Attas (who claims he was the first to introduce the concept of 'Islamization of knowledge'), the American-Arab scholar Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (d. 1986), the British-Pakistani author Ziauddin Sardar, the Iraqi-American scholar Jabir al-Alwani and the Pakistani Nobel Prize laureate Abdus Salam (d.1996). Yet they represent a variety of ideological and philosophical outlooks that have different aims.

In the study of the many relationships between Islam and science and knowledge, it can be suggested that we are witnessing an evolving 'discourse'.¹ That is, if discourse is seen as a constantly changing practice that redefines basic terms primarily concerned with power relations, a number of presuppositions that constitute the foundation for a new discourse on Islam and science and knowledge can be found. Of course, there are differences, but the common premises are focused upon here.

Interpretation

The participants in the discourse imagine the contemporary world as fragmented. The world needs to be put together in a system-

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