

ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE: THE PRIORITY OF CONTENT OVER METHOD

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In a lecture entitled *Islamization of Knowledge: a Psycho-Pedagogical Approach*¹, Professor Hasan Langgulong² attempts to explore the possibility of the Islamization of psychology and pedagogy in educational context. His main focus is the Islamization of the curriculum, and the methods of verifying levels of knowledge and knowing. This approach is based upon the assumption that the pertinent issue with regard to Islamization is “how to implement it” as opposed to “*what* Islamization of Knowledge (IOK) is all about and *why*”—resulting in a fixation with the method. In this article, we venture to maintain the opposite position: that the questions of “*what*” and “*why*” are *prior* and of paramount importance because: (i) naturally and logically we need to know not only the *substance* of the idea that we want to implement, but also the *reason* why it is relevant, valid, and worthwhile; and (ii) practically, the preoccupation with “*how*” and hasty implementation of IOK in educational process has led to a blatant disregard of the “*source*” and “*content*” of *what* to be inculcated in the students through the process. That being the case, the Islamization of the curriculum would be a pointless effort.

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The Issue of “what” and “why” of the Islamization of Knowledge

We disagree with Langgulgung's opening statement that since the IOK has already been “accepted” by many, the issue at hand is “how” it is to be implemented. Nobody can successfully implement an idea until he has a complete grasp of its true meaning and significance. To implement an idea means to execute what is in one's mind, therefore, it is important that he conceives the idea correctly because if he gets it wrong the result would be disastrous. IOK, by the way, is not a simple idea. It requires a profound understanding of our religion and civilization in order to appreciate the true worth of the idea. There is no denying that there have been bitter disagreements among those who claim to subscribe to the very “same idea”, not to mention the oppositions³, which means there have been a great deal of confusion with regard to the “what” and “why” of IOK.⁴ A careful reader would not fail to notice that Langgulgung himself cannot avoid the question of “what” and “why” because he has to provide the framework in which the problems are being conceived and formulated; hence, justifying the proposed solution. So, before putting forward what he called psycho-pedagogical approach to IOK, he has to explain, albeit briefly, the nature of the problem faced by the Muslims today, i.e., *why* they are so and so, and *what* is the solution to the problem. Furthermore,

3 For a brief survey of the attitudes of some of the modern Muslim reformers towards contemporary knowledge in general, and IOK in particular see Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998) 371-422.

4 Disagreements and differences would not necessarily lead to general confusion provided there is sincerity and ardent desire to know and uphold the truth. Unfortunately, there have been some academicians, when asked about their position with regard to a particular issue, idea, or opinion, refuse to make any judgement under the pretext of ‘impartiality’ and ‘open-mindedness’. There is no virtue in such an attitude, on the contrary, it betrays ignorance and insincerity. And for the very similar reason IOK has become such an ambiguous and elusive concept, after decades of ‘implementation’.

later in the article, Langgulung emphatically observes that “in our effort to Islamize Western or modern knowledge, **we are not at all clear** whether to Islamize *knowledge* or to Islamize *knowing*.”⁵ This question obviously belongs to the category of *what* and *why*, and it indicates that *we*—i.e., the people to whom Langgulung referred above—are still groping with the very idea itself.⁶ Thus, it is not true that the problem is just a matter of implementation.

Since Islamization has become such an ambiguous concept, it is rather misleading, to my mind, to say without qualification that al-Ghazali “attempted to Islamize” Aristotelian concepts.⁷ A reader who is not familiar with al-Ghazali may take it to mean that al-Ghazali had brought in Aristotelian concepts and attempted to legitimize them (i.e., making them *Islamic*)! Al-Ghazali had never

5 IOK: PPA, 5; emphasis in bold is mine.

6 The question betrays a dualistic view of life that is characteristic of a Western mode of thought. It betrays the questioner’s confusion regarding the true nature of knowledge, and of man, the substratum of knowledge. He does not seem to be aware of the difference between **knowledge** and the **objects of knowledge**, thus conflating them. Objects of knowledge subsist ‘outside’ the knower whereas knowledge subsists ‘inside’ him because it is his **attribute**. Islamization of Knowledge means to *Islamize* this attribute, which is the property of human soul, and that is necessary because knowledge is not neutral. Contemporary knowledge has been conceived and conceptualized within a worldview that is alien to Islam (i.e. Western worldview); therefore, it is natural to call for a critical attitude towards it. ‘Islamization of contemporary knowledge’, as originally conceived and elaborated by al-Attas is an intellectually creative effort towards it. It means to liberate man “first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language”. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (first impression 1978; Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993, second impression), 44. This liberating process cannot be carried out unless the *Islamizer cum liberator* profoundly understands his own worldview and that which he is confronting. Thus, it is imperative that the basic elements of Islamic worldview and that of the West be properly outlined and elaborated, and the most important one is the concept of knowledge because of its tremendous implication upon our conception of science and education. For a comprehensive exposition of the fundamental elements of Islamic worldview vis-a-vis that of the West see Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995); based upon these fundamental elements of Islamic worldview al-Attas has formulated an Islamic concept of education, and upon which he has developed the concept of Islamic university, see al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (first impression 1980; Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991, second impression).

7 IOK: PPA, abstract.

attempted to Islamize *their* concepts, if that means to concede to their erroneous metaphysical ideas by giving Islamic terms that would legitimize their inception into the Muslim minds. He was aware that due to the introduction and rapid dissemination of Greek philosophy, some of the concepts that are essential to the worldview of Islam had been confused with that of the Greeks. Thus, he took into task the study of Greek philosophy, and after a complete mastery of their methods and doctrines, al-Ghazali wrote a book (*Maqasid al-Falasifah*), describing their aims and objectives, followed by the other (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*), where he refuted their erroneous ideas. So, what he had actually done was to carefully and diligently analyze them and clarify the distinctions between what is acceptable and unacceptable to the worldview of Islam. That was Islamization, but it would not have been possible without a profound knowledge of Islamic metaphysics, which is the basis of Islamic worldview. And Islamization as conceived and practiced by al-Ghazali gives weight to our claim that the content must be given the priority over the method.

Langgulong's Attitude towards Knowledge, Truth, and Islamic Tradition

The Muslims today continue to face the challenge posed by the West, but in a much greater magnitude and intensity. Western modernity and the worldview projecting it, has been systematically proposed and disseminated to undermine the fundamental elements of Islamic worldview, at every domain and level of engagement. The greatest challenge for contemporary Muslim thinkers is to engage modernization without losing the tradition that has been

8 In response to modernity and modernization some Muslim modernists and reformists believe that Islam must be given a new interpretation according to modern criteria of rationality, and that must begin with the interpretation of the Qur'an. For a critical discussion about the main feature of their discourse, particularly that of Muhammad Abduh and his student Rashid Rida, and those associated with their ideas, see Aziz al-Azmeh, "Muslim Modernism and the Text of the Past", in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 391-428. See also Mehmet Aydin, "An Islamic Evaluation of the Modern Concept of Rationality", in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 73-94.

the basis of our identity and culture.⁸ Langgulong maintains that modernization is not westernization.⁹ Nevertheless, he reminds the Muslims to avoid two errors: blind copying of the West or outright rejection of anything Western. The Muslims, he advocates, must acquire Western science and technology selectively, creatively and critically.¹⁰ With regard to their attitude towards their own tradition¹¹ Langgulong suggests the Muslims to learn from the West the principle that everything that is said by a human being is relative and conditional, thus, susceptible to criticism and revision.¹² This principle, which he calls the “major truth about humanity”, when applied to traditional interpretation of the Qur’an, conveys the following message:

“...although it is God himself who dictated the Qur’an, it is nonetheless humans who read, understand, and comment upon it. Their words can never be of the same status as His word. Humans are the products of history, of their problems and needs, of their time and environment. It is therefore always a difficult task to distinguish what is divine and eternal from what is human and relative.”¹³

9 IOK: PPA, 2.

10 IOK: PPA, 1.

11 For a study on the impact of modernity on modern Muslims thinking about their religion see Jacques Waardenburg, “Some Thoughts on Modernity and Modern Muslim Thinking about Islam” in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 317-50, see also Marcia K. Hermansen, “Modernity and Religious Worldview—The Challenge of Classical Islamic Religious Thought for Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals”, in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 509-34.

12 IOK: PPA, 2.

13 IOK: PPA, 2-3

Based upon this principle Langgulong criticizes the Muslims and their tradition. The Muslims today, he says, do not need to produce a new philosophy which would require them to integrate into Islamic view foreign ideas—either of ancient or modern origin—because, in his opinion, that was the reason why the Muslims in the past were swayed from the right path. There is also no need for the Muslims to produce one commentary after another on books of law that was meant to solve the problem of that particular time. What the Muslim thinkers need instead, according to Langgulong, is to learn from Western philosophy their “critical methodology”. They also need to go back to the period of the first “secession” of the West (the sixth century B.C.), to discover the answers to the *fundamental issues of life*¹⁴—when revelation was still an integrated element of Science, Philosophy, and Wisdom. This is necessary, as far as Langgulong is concerned, if the Muslims do not want to succumb “to a false sense of self-sufficiency, of triumphalism, or self-isolation”, which would entail their conviction of the truth out of their ignorance of others. For the *da’wah* to succeed, according to Langgulong, two conditions must be satisfied: first, Muslims should “impart to each an awareness of this continuity of divine revelations and religious life” so that “a non-Muslim convert to Islam will not feel a lapse from his past religious development but a culmination of it.”; and second, they must prove that they are capable of solving the problems that the West is incapable of solving, which entails them (the Muslims) discovering “new forms of growth and development, a culture that does not lead to human

14 By that he means: “1) the relation of man to God, to other man, and to nature; and 2) the meaning and purpose of life, of death, of history, of the necessary significance that attaches itself to them because they are the acts and dispositions of Allah (s.w.t.). IOK: PPA, 4.

15 IOK: PPA, 4

destruction but to the *flowering* of humanity.”¹⁵ And, to be able to do all that, he believed, the Muslims must free their selves from the bondage of tradition, by renouncing the interpretations of past scholars of Islam, to give way to new interpretations that may solve current problems. Thus, he suggests:

“...it is of capital importance not to read the words of Allah in the Qur’an with the eyes of the “dead”, that is to say, with the eyes of those who may have found the straight path but went no further than to solve the problems of their own time and localities. We must read the Qur’an with the eyes fixed on the solutions of our problems and with the minds and wills determined to discharge our responsibilities as the vicegerents of Allah (s.w.t.) on earth. We must, in short, find answers to our own problems in the light of the eternal message of the Qur’an.”¹⁶

3. Analyses and comments

The principle: *that everything said by a human being is relative and conditional, thus susceptible to criticism and revision*, betrays a peculiar attitude towards knowledge, truth, and objectivity. Rendering the above-mentioned principle “the major truth about humanity” as Langgulong does is tantamount to holding that there is no permanent and established truth, or even if there is, man can never objectively know it. This is, to my mind, the casualty of ignoring what the “dead” has told us. What has been said by Langgulong above was nothing but an old wine in a new bottle. The very first thing that al-Imam al-Nasafi (d. 537/1142) mentions in his famous *Aqa'id* is

16 IOK: PPA, 4

the possibility and objectivity of knowledge, and that is something very significant for us to understand and appreciate because Islam, as al-Attas rightly points out, “is a religion based upon knowledge, and a denial of the possibility and objectivity of knowledge would involve the destruction of the fundamental basis upon which not only the religion, but all the sciences are rooted.”¹⁷ It was a matter of common awareness to our past scholars that there have always been people who, in one way or the other, deny the possibility and objectivity of knowledge, thus, it was deemed necessary for them to remind the Muslims not to be misled by their deceiving arguments. In that light al-Nasafi makes a reference to a group of people known as the Sophists (*al-Sufasta’iyyah*). Among them a group called *al-’indiyyah* (the subjectivists), who hold that there is no objective truth in knowledge; and all knowledge, according to them, is subjective, and the truth about anything is only one’s opinion of it. And let us not forget that the basic ideas promoted by the Sophists are continuously upheld by a great majority of modern thinkers in varying forms and degrees.¹⁸

This principle has been applied by Langgulong to generate doubt pertaining the validity and objectivity of Muslims understanding of the Divine Revelation (*al-Qur’an*), thus, to justify his call to reject traditional interpretation of religion. In opposition to Langgulong, we maintain that as a matter of common sense, no Muslim has ever confused the status of the word of God (*al-Qur’an*) with that of others—even with that of the Prophet—because they are not like the Christians, who have doubt with regard to the authorship of their Holy Scripture, the Bible. They also know that *al-Qur’an* is meant to be read, understood, and commented upon, and

17 Al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Translation of the ‘Aqa’id of al-Nasafi*, 47.

18 *Ibid.* 47-48.

since they never have problem with regard to the authenticity of the Book, they (we mean, the people of discernment among them) can always be able to *verify* and know, according to the criteria outlined by Islamic epistemology, the correct reading, understanding and commentary of the Book. They are well-aware of the fact that there might be mistaken or wrong interpretations, but it does not make them doubt and relativize all interpretations. They also know that some verses of the Qur'an, namely the *mutashabihat*, contain a variety of meanings, yet it does not permit arbitrary interpretation because those meanings are subject to the established and clear-cut verses (*muhkamat*).

Langgulung, seemingly oblivious of this basic fact, has committed a grave error on this important matter. The fundamental elements of Islamic worldview, namely the nature of God, of His creation, of man and the psychology of human soul, just to mention the salient ones, are not and must not be changed by history, which means, a person's understanding and interpretation of these matters, then and now, is either right or wrong. A truly learned man knows that these are matters of **truth**, not matters of **taste**. Only those who have been confused by Western way of thinking would think that they are relative and conditional, thus, subject to revision, and only the ignorant would have the difficulty distinguishing what is divine and eternal from what is human and relative. The failure to recognize and acknowledge this basic principle of Islam betrays the confusion brought about by Western modernity which preaches the view that change is not only inevitable but also synonymous with progress.

Langgulong has actually gone too far to say that the Muslims in the past—for the reason mentioned above—had been swayed from the right path.¹⁹ But let us suppose that, for the sake of argument, he was right on that, still, we need to know why must he propose that the Muslims *go back* to the 6th century B.C.? Does he mean that the Muslims, having lost their true identity, must employ Western critical methodology and go back to some ‘ancient religio-intellectual tradition’ (whatever he meant by that) and from that to find the *true* answers to the fundamental issues of life—the answers that would bring them back to the right path? Critical methodology as advocated by the Western thinkers, to my understanding, is a result of confusion brought about by opposing systems of thought that advocate different interpretation of worldview and value-system, which is a peculiar feature of Western religious and intellectual tradition. The worldview projected by such a tradition admits no permanent reality because the only thing that is permanent for it is *change*. As such, it is natural, as far as they are concerned to revise what was previously held as the truth, including the concept of God.²⁰ Such a call is perhaps justified in view of their religious and

19 Perhaps we could still agree with him if he were to say that *some* Muslim philosophers or thinkers were influenced by the erroneous Greek metaphysical ideas, thus, swayed from the right path. But the majority of Muslims, however, were not influenced by those ideas; as matter of fact, they did not even have access to them. Furthermore, through the works of scholars pioneered by al-Ghazali those ideas had been systematically exposed and refuted.

20 Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, faithfully upheld and promoted this kind of belief. He wrote:

“The words of the Apostles’ Creed, and its later expansion known as the Nicene Creed, were fashioned inside a worldview that no longer exists. Indeed, it is quite alien to the world in which I live. The way reality was perceived when the Christian creeds were formulated has been obliterated by the expansion of knowledge. That fact is so obvious that it hardly needs to be spoken. If the God I worship must be identified with these ancient creedal words in any literal sense, God would become for me not just unbelievable, but in fact no longer worthy of being the subject of my devotion”.

John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1999), 4. Such a call is no longer alien to the Western world today. Spong is just one of so many Christian thinkers—Protestants and Catholics alike—who seek to revise Christian theology in order to reconcile it with the main secular intellectual currents of our age. For a historical survey of this intellectual movement, see Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966). For an exposition of what constitutes a new theology see Paul M. van Buren, *Theological Exploration* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). For a historical and philosophical background of contemporary Western Christianity and the effect of secularization to their culture and civilization see al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (first impression, 1978; Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993, second impression), 1-49.

intellectual experience, but we, Muslims, have never had the same experience, so, there is no reason to adopt their approach in order to understand our own culture and identity.²¹

Islam, by the way, is not just a **continuation** of the previous message brought by ancient prophets but also a **break**—by which we mean the culmination of what have been brought before in the form of a **new** and **perfect** universal religion called Islam. And the Muslims, from the very beginning, can adequately and confidently understand their religion from within, and they do not need the unfolding of history to realize their identity and to know their role in this world.²² It is through the worldview of Islam—as projected by the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition (*Sunnah*)—that they see and judge if there is any truth in the others (ancient or modern), not the other way round. The truth of Islam is not subject to revision pending scientific findings or philosophical speculations, and to maintain this principle does not mean to impose self-isolation from the rest of the world—it is just a true statement of the permanent nature of Islam.²³

21 See Mehmet S. Aydin, "An Islamic Evaluation of Western Concept of Rationality", *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 91-2.

22 Islam, as profoundly described by al-Attas: "is not a form of culture, and its system of thought projecting its vision of reality and truth and the system of value derived from it are not merely derived from cultural and philosophical elements aided by science, but one whose original source is Revelation, confirmed by religion, affirmed by intellectual and intuitive principles." Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 4.

23 Self-isolation, by the way, is neither possible nor desirable. Considering the recent development in communication and information technology nobody can practically live in isolation. Furthermore, it contradicts the very character of Islam as a universal religion, which is meant to be an eternal guide to all. Thus, we can see how the Muslim scholars of the past have shown a remarkable capacity to respond to foreign ideas, based upon a systematic articulation of Islamic metaphysics that provides a comprehensive understanding of man and the world.

Concluding Remark

Langgulong's conception of IOK, let us reiterate, has been founded upon: (i) a wrong priority, where he has overemphasized the *method* over the *content*; (ii) an erroneous conception of knowledge based upon a relativistic conception of truth and reality, which gives rise to (iii) a prejudicial attitude towards Islamic religious and intellectual tradition, if not total rejection. The question now: can a Muslim who is cut off from his tradition be entrusted with the task of Islamization? If the answer is in the affirmative, *what* would be the *substance* (i.e. content) of the process (i.e., Islamization)? Or to put it in a crude manner: *what kind of Islam* then would project and drive the process? And with regard to the application of IOK in educational process upon *what* basis would we develop the curriculum?

We have, through and through, maintained that the "what" and "why" of IOK being given priority, for a very practical reason indeed. And consistent with that position, the emphasis should be given to the *content* and substance, based upon a critical, yet constructive attitude towards our tradition and the sciences that have been developed within that tradition. Our history is rich with examples of thinkers and scholars who have dealt with the problems that are eternally relevant to mankind, in an unsurpassed manner of creativity and criticality. To seek their opinions does not mean to read the word of God with the eyes of the "dead" as Langgulong put it, because to be creative and critical one does not have to ignore others' contributions, let alone to disparage those who have served knowledge with signal merit. On the contrary he should be diligent enough to benefit from their wisdom and to learn from their mistakes. He can agree or disagree with them as long as he has fully understood their opinions and arguments, and he can provide valid reasons for his agreement or disagreement.