

Fazlur Rahman, Islamic Philosophy of Education and the Islamisation of Knowledge



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Rahman's Thesis on Islamic Philosophy of Education

Both Wan Daud (1997) and Ahmed (1989) consider Rahman's thesis on the Islamisation of knowledge as a "promising intellectual agenda of Islamic resurgence and one of the most controversial issues that has captured the imagination and elicited strong reaction of Muslim intellectuals and activists across the globe since the late 1970s" (Wan Daud 1997: 2). It is within the ambit of Islamic revivalism that Rahman postulated his thesis on the Islamisation of knowledge. Of course, the Islamisation of knowledge idea was most poignantly pursued by scholars like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail al-Faruqi.

The reference to Islamisation was first made by al-Attas and al-Faruqi at the World Congress on Islamic Education in 1977. To al-Faruqi (1982: 18), Islamisation represents an integration of "new knowledge into the corpus of the Islamic legacy". Al-Faruqi's (1982) proposal of Islamisation involves a detailed 12-step work-plan, which incorporates the mastery of modern disciplines, the mastery of Islamic legacy, a survey of the *ummah's* (community's) major problems, to recasting the disciplines under the framework of Islam and the dissemination of Islamised knowledge. The objective of his understanding of Islamisation is to reapproach the disciplines – such as sociology, economics and anthropology – so as to foreground Islam. Al-Faruqi (1982) defines Islamisation as an actionable theory through which the reform of education should be the Islamisation of modern knowledge itself. To him, Islamisation means the recasting of every discipline on the principles of Islam in its methodology, in its strategy, in what it regards as its data, its problems, its objectives, and its aspirations.

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Unlike al-Faruqi (1982), however, Wan Daud (2009) maintains that the theory of Islamisation has little to do with the reworking of textbooks, or the restructuring of academic disciplines, but fundamentally to do with the reconstituting of the right kind of human being – that is, a human being who exhibits just action – an idea borrowed from the Malaysian scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, which we will discuss later in this chapter. According to Wan Daud (2009: 8), Islamic epistemology recognises that knowledge – “stripped of the faulty opinions, doubts, and conjectures, as well as negative influence of the various human interests generally termed as *hawa*, is indeed universal”. Others like Halstead (2004: 521–522) describe Islamisation as a key process in countering the influence of western secularism on Islamic institutions. In turn, Abushouk (2008: 39) explains that Islamisation stems from the premise that because contemporary knowledge has been designed by western scholars who have their own cultural, historical and secular worldview, it is neither value-free nor universal. In this sense, therefore, Abushouk continues, Islamisation can be described as a revivalist response to modernity and its secular impact on Muslim society.

Yet, Fazlur Rahman’s involvement in the *Islamisation of knowledge* agenda cannot be denied as an impetus to his notion of Islamic revivalism. While al-Faruqi (1982) considers Islamisation as a direct response to what he considered as the malaise of the *umma* (community), Rahman’s (2011: 450) argument for an Islamisation of knowledge is motivated by “a feeling that the modern world has been developed and structured upon knowledge which cannot be considered Islamic”. Instead, Rahman (2011: 450) is of the view that the modern world has misused knowledge; “that there is nothing wrong with knowledge, but that it has simply been misused”. Al-Faruqi and Rahman are in agreement, however, that an Islamisation of knowledge provides a resurgent alternative to modern society and its impact on Islamic society. Rahman was critical of Muslim orthodoxy, most notably the influences of authoritarianism, and a general conservatism and uncriticality in relation to the interpretation of Islamic foundational sources. This criticism culminated in his phenomenal book, *Islam and Modernity* (Rahman 1982), in which he enunciates his understanding of Islamisation in relation to the re-education of Muslims. For him, firstly, Muslims have erroneously distinguished between religious or traditional sciences and the rational or secular sciences (Rahman 1982: 33). Rahman (1982) posits that if such a separation were to be defended, rationality would be disassociated from intuition. That is, to accept such a bifurcation is tantamount to arguing that religious sciences are not rational, and rational sciences are not religious. For Rahman (1982: 148) such a bifurcation of knowledge view is incommensurate with the unity of knowledge idea propounded by Muslim scientists who attached a high positive value to their intellectual pursuits such as the study of the universe and creation in relation to the Qur’an. In his words,

... the Quran, has a special point of view on the ultimate nature of studies of the universe (as it has on the studies of [wo]man and history), but the fact that it encourages these studies is important. As such, they are to be regarded in general as an integral part of Islamic intellectualism. (Rahman 1982: 148)

In other words, for Rahman, rational thought impinges heavily on religious thought and vice versa. Thus, for him Islamic philosophy of education is synonymous with a notion of “Islamic intellectualism” constituted by an analysis of the Quran and its responsiveness to moral, religious, social, historical, judicial and theological concerns and/or problems (Rahman 1982: 5). Put differently, for Rahman (1982: 7) an analysis of Qur’anic meanings – what he refers to as intellectual *jihad* (literally, striving) – is an effort to understand its implications for societal and historical practices, concomitantly with an examination of the latter (i.e. socio-historical situations) and its influence on Qur’anic interpretation. To Rahman (2011: 449–450), the fact that human beings have been granted the capacity to use their ‘*aql*’ (intellect, reason) means not only that they can discover knowledge, but that they have a responsibility to continually discover knowledge.

Inasmuch as an analysis of Qur’anic meanings impact socio-historical conditions, so does an interpretation of such conditions influence an understanding of Qur’anic texts. What this means is that an Islamic philosophy of education is at once concerned with connecting Qur’anic analyses (hermeneutics) with socio-historical situations and vice versa. In sum, Rahman’s (1982) philosophy of education is constituted by at least three dimensions: first, (Islamic) education is enframed by intellectual efforts to analyse Qur’anic meanings and its relevance to socio-historical conditions; second, an examination of the socio-historical contexts in which Muslims find themselves ought to be constantly re-examined so as to rethink the guiding rules of the Qur’an vis-à-vis such situations; and third, any attempt at finding meanings responsive to particular situations should be looked at without erroneously separating what is considered as religious or traditional from what is rational or secular. In the next section we examine as to how such a Rahmanian understanding of Islamic philosophy of education has framed the Islamisation of knowledge debate.

Islamisation of Knowledge as Enframed by Rahman’s Islamic Philosophy of Education

Elsewhere, we have argued that Islamisation of knowledge offers a paradigm of knowledge construction in terms of which knowledge is conceived within an Islamic worldview (Waghid and Davids 2016: 220). Now, although Islamisation had been articulated in opposition to the secular, Rahman (1982) argues for a contrary position whereby all forms of knowledge are considered as integrated, including the secular, which in his view should remain subjected to Qur’an (re)interpretation and an Islamic metaphysics (Waghid and Davids 2016: 221). Put differently, all forms of knowledge should be regarded as Islamised if subjected to both Qur’an (re)interpretation and a metaphysical perspective of Islam. When conceived through the lenses of Rahman’s notion of Islamic philosophy of education, Islamised knowledge (including secular knowledge) is open-ended in the sense that knowledge does not have to attain the level of finality or certainty (Wan Daud 1997: 15). Although

Wan Daud (1997: 15), drawing on the ideas of Islamisation of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, argues against Rahman's open-ended view of knowledge, namely that "[k]nowledge of the fundamental credal matters such as the nature of God, revelation, religion, [wo]man and his destiny, of ethical and legal matters, are not open for further revision and correction ...", he posits that knowledge is subjected to "further elaboration and application" (Wan Daud 1997: 15). In other words, Islamised knowledge, following Wan Daud, is certain and final but its elaboration and application remain open to intellectual scrutiny. We surmise that Rahman himself would take issue with such a criticism in the sense that an interpretation of religion itself (which includes elaboration and application) cannot be closed on the basis that socio-historical situations vary as new meanings are construed. By implication, interpretations of religion cannot remain absolute, Rahman posits (1982: 145): "It is obviously not necessary that a certain interpretation once accepted must continue to be accepted; there is always room and necessity for new interpretations, for this is, in truth, an ongoing process".

Rahman (1979a, b: 186–187) couches Islamic philosophy of education as a discourse that should not privilege religious sciences over rational sciences. In other words, following Rahman, there is no justification to consider theological or religious sciences as more important than philosophical or rational sciences and vice versa. Rather, all forms of knowledge are organically related and any claims to exclusive self-sufficiency or absolutism, and "blind imitation" undermine the possibility of thinking and creativity (Rahman 1979a, b: 187). In other words, any defensible notion of an Islamic philosophy of education cannot be subjected to a fractured understanding of tradition as it has nothing to do with reason (Rahman 1979a, b: 191). Hence, for Rahman, a philosophy of Islamic education remains subjected to a non-separationist view of knowledge and that religious sciences or traditional sciences and rational or philosophical sciences are intertwined. More poignantly, a philosophy of Islamic education is aimed at counteracting "blind adherence" to "the basic ideas of Islam in such a way as to open the door for the influence of new ideas and for the acquisition of modern knowledge in general" (Rahman 1979a, b: 217). Instead, he avers that a philosophy of Islamic education ought to encourage Muslims "to accept the intellectualism and the humanism of the modern West as a genuine development from the apogee of Islamic civilization itself ..." (Rahman 1979a, b: 220). By implication, a philosophy of Islamic education, following Rahman (1979a, b: 215) draws on multiple strands of education with the intent to rethink Muslim intellectualism progressively according to the demands of what it means to achieve justice in societies. Put differently, a philosophy of Islamic education involves a rethinking of knowledge in an integrated way that can be responsive to the just concerns of any given society.

Islamisation of Knowledge in Practice

Understandings of an Islamisation of knowledge have taken different forms in different contexts. As noted by Shaw (2006: 48), curriculum reform integrating the Islamic epistemic traditions within the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, for example, has yet to be devised imaginatively in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the Islamisation of the curriculum in schools and universities after the Cultural Revolution in Iran (post-1980), on the basis that Western curricula alienated students from their Islamic roots (Levers 2006: 159). In this instance, an Islamisation of knowledge was interpreted and implemented through a renewed focus on Islamic identity, and concepts such as, “justice, equality, morality, devotion to family, absence of malice and avarice, and cooperation with the state ... advocated as attributes of an Islamic society” (Levers 2006: 166). Yet, although Islamic texts on themes such as the family in Islam, psychology from an Islamic viewpoint, Islamic economics, Islamic law and Islamic political thought were introduced in specific faculties in universities to supplement the existing curriculum in the social sciences, university textbooks for scientific and technical subjects remained unaltered (Levers 2006: 161). By implication, the envisaged Islamisation in the aftermath of the revolution has not had the desired consequences, more specifically at the levels of fusion between the traditional and “modern” curriculum (Waghid and Davids 2016).

While the example of the Islamisation of knowledge in Iran might be best described as a supplementary position, a more maximally integrated approach is encountered in Malaysia. The Islamisation agenda in Malaysia, pioneered by the Muslim Youth Movement (*ABIM*) in the 1970s and 1980s, was influenced primarily by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s intellectual, academic and historical aspirations to transform the lives and thoughts of the majority-Muslim Malay community and had a strong sociocultural impetus. During this phase of Islamisation, *ABIM* strongly advocated a discourse of Islamic universalism and its significance for a pluralistic Malaysia, which involved adhering to the democratic teachings of Islam, promoting equal and complementary roles for men and women and promoting social justice for all, irrespective of ethnic and religious affiliation (Bakar 2009: 38). The main focus of *ABIM*’s Islamisation programmes was education through their nationwide network of kindergartens and schools (and later Islamic teacher training colleges and universities) through which they advanced the idea of the Islamisation of modern knowledge (Waghid and Davids 2016). For the majority-Muslim Malays, Islamisation meant that the curriculum in secondary schools and universities was organised to produce citizens who were intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, with a strong belief in God (Hashim 1996: 8).

Zain et al. (2016: 20) explain that an Islamised curriculum at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) follows two concurrent processes: ‘omitting’ the western-based curriculum and ‘infusing’ with Islamic inputs – as shown in the example below:

Omitting process	Infusing process
Eliminate the philosophy from western view	Remember the Islamic history and civilisation
Eliminate non-Islamic values, e.g. Darwinism, nature	Instil Islamic values and good ethics
Eliminate destructive knowledge (e.g. the making of nuclear bombs)	Infuse knowledge that will increase <i>Tawhid</i> (Oneness) and bring human beings closer to Islam
	Infuse constructive knowledge (for the sake of being beneficial to mankind)

Zain et al. (2016): 20

The Islamisation agenda has not been limited to Muslim-majority countries; it has also been attempted in Muslim-minority countries, such as South Africa, specifically in privately managed, Muslim-based schools. As Waghid and Davids (2016: 232) observe, the idea of Islamisation has been familiar to Muslim schools since the 1970s and took root at a number of schools when a Cape Town-based school hosted the Sixth International Education Conference on Islamisation of Knowledge in 1996. Discussions and ideas from this conference led to a number of schools agreeing, in principle, to implement an Islamised curriculum. The Islamised curriculum, however, needed to be integrated with the South African national curriculum, which at that time was grounded on an outcomes-based approach to education, leading to various interpretations and adaptations of an ‘Islamised’ curriculum. While certain schools changed their names to reflect a more pronounced Islamic identity and ethos, and introduced Islamic subjects, others changed the routine and structure of their school day to incorporate daily prayers and the recitation of the Qur’an. Waghid and Davids (2016: 234) maintain that although private Muslim schools in South Africa advocate an allegiance to an integrated Islamised curriculum, in reality, their curricular changes are commensurate with that of a supplementary approach to Islamisation. There are a number of possible reasons for the lack of consensus on an ‘Islamised’ curriculum or the implementation thereof. On the one hand, teachers have not been trained in teaching an ‘Islamised’ curriculum. On the other hand, the educational qualifications of teachers are varying and, at times, non-existent. While some might have a formal qualification in education, others might have a qualification as a *madrassah* teacher or a certificate in Arabic or *fiqh*, or others may be teachers by virtue of being *hafiz* (one who has memorised the Qur’an) (Waghid and Davids 2016).

Of course, as hinted at earlier in this chapter, Rahman had his critics, and one of his most vehement opponents in advancing a philosophy of Islamic education vis-à-vis the practice of Islamisation of knowledge was the Malaysian scholar, Syed

Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. We now turn to a discussion of al-Attas's notion of the Islamisation of knowledge concept and his alternative view of Islamic philosophy of education.

Towards a Critique of Rahman's Islamisation Approach: An Analysis of al-Attas's Islamisation Agenda

Western civilisation, according to al-Attas (1991: 43–44) “has recast the knowledge and rational and scientific spirit to fit the crucible of Western culture”, and as a result, have become fused and amalgamated with all the other elements that form the character and the personality of Western civilisation. This fusion or amalgamation states al-Attas (1991) has produced a dualism that has, in turn, produced a disunity. In other words, because there exists conflicting cultures, values, beliefs and philosophies, harmonious unity within Western culture is not possible. By contrast, from an Islamic worldview, where there is no separation between the social, intellectual and the physical, there is therefore, as al-Attas (2005: 33) contends, “no conflict between societal and individual aims because there is unity of purpose”. And unity, according to al-Attas (2005: 33) has two facets – external unity, which discerns itself in the form of community and cohesion, and internal unity, which reveals itself in the form of spiritual lucidity, way beyond the confines of communal or national identities.

Hence, following on the above, and contrary to Rahman's recognition of secular knowledge as an integrated aspect of Islamic knowledge, al-Attas (1991: 45–46) couches Islamisation as

... the liberation of [wo]man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition, and then from secular control over his [her] reason and his [her] language.

Whereas Rahman recognises secular knowledge as rational knowledge and hence important to Islamisation, al-Attas is fundamentally critical of secularism which he considers as alien to Islam in the sense that it belongs and is “natural only to the intellectual history of Western-Christian religious experience and consciousness” (al-Attas 1993: 25). Although al-Attas does not misrecognise the integration of rational and religious sciences, for him, Islamisation of knowledge “means the deliverance of knowledge from its interpretations based on secular ideology; and from meanings and expressions of the secular” (al-Attas 1991: 43). Consequently, he calls for an extension of knowledge that includes comparative religion from an Islamic perspective; an understanding of other religions, cultures and civilisations in relation to Islam; Islamic languages; and Islamic history, such as to desecularise knowledge and by implication enacting its Islamisation (al-Attas 1991: 43). To al-Attas, explains Hashim and Rossidy (2000: 25), knowledge is not totally and purely the product of the human mind and experience but is also based on revealed truth. For this reason, continues Hashim and Rossidy (2000: 25), knowledge continuously

requires direction, supervision and confirmation from the revealed truth – “This is so because the metaphysics of Islam is not only based upon reason and experience but also firmly grounded upon Revelation” (Hashim and Rossidy 2000: 28).

Moreover, whereas a Rahmanian conception of an Islamic philosophy of education advocates for a rethinking of knowledge in response to societal injustice, al-Attas (1991: 34) makes a case for *adab* as the “the capacity for discernment of the right and proper places of things”. Unlike Rahman, al-Attas (1991: 34) blames injustice in societies on a loss of *adab* that resulted in “confusion and error in knowledge of Islam and the Islamic vision of reality and truth ...”. Rahman, on the other hand, attributes societal injustice to the impotence of traditional Muslim education and its failure to recognise the secular (Wan Daud 1997: 18). Both Rahman (1982) and al-Attas (1991) seem to concur that the problem in societies involves a lack of a plausible conception of knowledge, although al-Attas’s (1991) position is to deny the secular and Rahman’s (1982) thesis is to invoke secular knowledge and understandings. Of course, Rahman was not uncritical towards secular knowledge on the basis that such knowledge can inhibit the modernisation of a philosophy of Islamic education (Rahman 1982: 134). His claim that such knowledge should be integrated into a comprehensive understanding of knowledge suggests that he is remiss of its potential to corrupt an Islamic conception of knowledge.

Implications for Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Education

As Waghid and Davids (2016: 220–221) argue, Islamisation, as both an ideological and epistemological construct, has undoubtedly assumed its forms in relation to the (de)secularisation of knowledge. One of the key concerns that the propagation of the Islamisation of knowledge raises is whether the modernisation of Islamic knowledge necessarily needs to be couched within the debate of a secular/religious dichotomy. And following on this, an extended concern might be to ascertain what exactly is understood by a secularisation and desecularisation of knowledge, and indeed whether an Islamisation of knowledge might yield the intended Rahmanian results of providing a resurgent alternative to modern society and its impact on Islamic society. In this regard, we echo the concern of al-Attas (1991), that an Islamisation of knowledge cannot simply mean the transplantation or extrapolation of secular knowledge into Islamic sciences and principle. Practices such as these, argue Hashim and Rossidy (2000: 30), “will only yield perpetual conflicting results and meaningless efforts because the essence of foreign elements or disease remains in the body of knowledge that makes it impossible to recast it in the crucible of Islam. Moreover, they contend, that transplanting between two distinct and contradictory elements and key concepts will produce neither secular knowledge nor Islamic one” (Hashim and Rossidy 2000: 30).

On the one hand, therefore, we would agree with Hashim and Rossidy (2000: 22) in their contention that the phrase “Islamisation of knowledge” is to a certain extent misleading “because it gives the connotation that all knowledge, including Islamic traditional knowledge based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which were developed by Muslim scholars over the millennium are not Islamic and therefore, needs to be Islamized” (Hashim and Rossidy 2000: 22).

If one considers societies in which attempts have been made to implement an Islamisation of knowledge, then often what one sees is a supplementary curriculum, rather than an integrated curriculum, which takes into account an embedded Islamisation of knowledge. Levers (2006: 159) reports that with the cultural revolution in Iran (post-1980), instigated by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the emphasis on Iranian nationalism and identity in school textbooks was minimised. Instead, explains Levers (2006: 166), attention was focused on “concepts such as justice, equality, morality, devotion to family, absence of malice and avarice, and cooperation with the state ... advocated as attributes of an Islamic society”. Despite the Islamic Republic of Iran support of an Islamisation of knowledge, Levers (2006: 172) maintains that the education system continues to offer a lack of space for individuality, self-expression and critical thinking in the school curriculum, coupled with an overemphasis on overtly ideologically driven curricular content that undermines creative thought.

Despite concerns being raised by non-Muslims regarding their own religious rights and cultural values, as discussed by Bakar (2009: 41), the Islamisation of knowledge in Malaysian educational centres seems to have enjoyed the greatest impact. The Malaysian example according to Hwang (2008: 159) represents a maximal form of Islamisation. In this regard, sufficient emphasis has been placed on an integrated Islamised curriculum in schools and universities under the auspices of a government intent on promoting the idea of Islamisation of knowledge. In the 1990s, the government initiated curricular reforms and launched an integrated curriculum for secondary schools in order to inculcate universal religious values in all young people (Hwang 2008: 159). Through the educational efforts of the Muslim Youth Movement (*ABIM*), continues Hwang (2008: 160), the state’s curriculum for Malay Muslims became integrated with an Islamic philosophy of education in schools. (Hwang 2008: 160). Likewise, at the higher education level, members of the Muslim Youth Movement (*ABIM*) became influential in the development of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), which largely influenced by the Islamisation agenda of Ismail al-Faruqi, as well as the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) under the then directorship of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (Waghid and Davids 2016: 230).

While the aforementioned examples are located in Muslim-majority countries, attempts at an Islamisation of knowledge have also been made in Muslim-minority countries, such as South Africa – specifically in private Muslim-based schools. These attempts have taken the form of sporadic supplementary programmes, to changes in the daily routine of learners, which might offer more spaces for prayers

and devotional activities. At this stage, there seems to be little consensus among schools and teachers what an Islamised curriculum might look like, or might achieve (Waghid and Davids 2016).

What interests us, and might hold particular implications for contemporary debates in philosophy of education, is Rahman's open-ended approach to knowledge construction, as encapsulated in his statement that an individual can "discover knowledge and can go on discovering knowledge" (Rahman 2011: 450). Such a view of knowledge presents particular spaces and opportunities not only for the pursuit of knowledge but the interpretation and reinterpretation thereof. And if knowledge is continually being discovered and rediscovered, then it means that knowledge is perpetually open to critical engagement, deliberation and dissent. Such an understanding of knowledge might be better placed to address issues of social injustice, marginalisation, discrimination and humiliation, not only in relation to Muslims but to all people. To this end, if the discovery and rediscovery knowledge does not lead to renewed forms of meaning-making, then it would seem that not only are human beings guilty of misusing knowledge but of neglecting the knowledge that ought to lead to and cultivate humane forms of thinking, being and coexisting.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have mainly been concerned with Fazlur Rahman's exposition of an Islamic philosophy of education that accentuates the significance of rethinking knowledge for the purpose of being responsive to societal injustices. Similarly, we have shown that his Islamisation of knowledge idea primarily revolves around establishing an integrated conception of knowledge. Yet, seems to be remiss of the potential harm secular knowledge can cause to a comprehensive Islamic conception in the sense that secular knowledge per se misconstrues knowledge of Islam itself. Finally, a Rahmanian philosophy of education can address issues of societal injustice around the modernisation of knowledge idea. However, it seems to have fallen short from addressing issues of desecularisation and corruption of knowledge in Muslim societies in particular. However, we cannot deny his tremendous contribution to a theory of knowledge vis-à-vis a philosophy of Islamic education.

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