

## The Full Circle: Transmission of Ideas & the Muslim Social Scientist

### Science Without Philosophy?

Many of our readers and contributors have raised questions regarding the various definitions of social science and their relation to the scope of AJISS. Definitions of social science have changed with time and place, and one of the reasons for that is not what is “social,” but what is “science”? “Science” in French, or “wissenschaft” in German, do not translate exactly the same as “science” in English. In English speaking world, “science” has an association with hard sciences while social sciences have been tacitly considered to be soft sciences, or not sciences at all. Such a distinction does not exist in other languages.

It is not our intent here to provide a mere taxonomy of the meanings of science, but to develop an understanding as well as a consensus that social sciences and their sub-disciplines are, without exception, based on certain paradigms that are philosophical in nature. Being a social scientist without the knowledge of these philosophical assumptions, upon which the paradigms of the social sciences rest, is to willingly escape the full picture. Proper philosophical training, therefore, has a deep nexus with the methods of social science, and constitutes a necessary pre-requisite of understanding the paradigms. Paradigms establish the agenda and the agenda dictates the policy. Social sciences therefore become a vehicle of understanding the society in consonance with the accepted philosophical truths.

Philosophical exposition of concepts and ideas in turn necessitates a definition of philosophy itself. All definitions of philosophy will point to certain “givens” or *a priori* assumptions that precede all scientific inquiry. If social sciences stay within the realm of the positivist paradigm, the problem may seemingly be solved, but reducing inquiry to empiricism has its own pitfalls and the atomistic division in today’s academia is a direct result of that. Further, it restricts the scope of those social scientists who also happen to be believers in transcendental Truth. Conversely, to the degree that philosophy is

the handmaiden of revelation, it poses ethical fetters on the activity of the believing scholar. Nonetheless, boundaries are necessary as well as present for everything in life, but who delineates the boundaries, and where, becomes a relevant question that ultimately shapes a paradigm.

The principles of revelation are *ahistorical* in nature, but their interpretation and understanding are not. Because many contemporary social scientists in most places are bereft of the *a priori* assumptions of the believing scientists, they can only study things associated with revelation as *a posteriori* and only as phenomena, strictly historically. The pure and pristine ideals of the believing scientist are considered to be 'subjective' and therefore not truly scientific, at least by the positivists, so much so that categories such as truth, purity and beauty for such scientists have become irrelevant.

## The Quest For Originality

Having pointed out the necessity of insistence upon the Pure and the True, the challenge for the believing scientist thus begins. One of the beneficial paths that can be taken by the researcher is going back to the original sources in an effort to do what is certain and necessary and not what is contingent and possible. To cut through the deceptive and ideological layers of historicism in modern scholarship, Muslim social scientists need to study their original texts. Unfortunately, this is a big challenge for them, as the educated elite in many Muslim states around the world has lost the ability to read philosophy and social science in the classical languages of Islam in which many of these texts were written. Unfortunately, we now rely upon commentary on these sources, produced by non-Muslims in their languages for their own purposes. For an Indian or Bengali student, for example, to read Ghazzali or Ibn Rushd in the original form, is difficult because of what the structures of education in that region have gone through in the name of modernism. Consequently, the polemical position of Ghazzali in Islamic intellectual history, and the celebrated rationalism of Ibn Rushd, come to many present-day Muslims not directly but indirectly. Insistence upon purity does not prohibit learning from outside of one's own religious tradition, but blind acceptance of someone else's view of one's own intellectual history is also unacceptable.

It is a widespread notion among many intellectuals, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, that the West borrowed from Islam and made great progress, so now the Muslims can borrow from the West and do the same. First of all, the very notion of progress itself is doubtful, given the pitiful moral condition of humanity and the degradation of clean life on this planet. Secondly, admitting



that there has been more material progress recently in the secular West does not suggest that it is an ideal society in any meaningful sense. Also, we know well that the scientific achievements of the modern West did not begin in a vacuum but are built upon the achievements of the societies of the preceding civilizations. But what is certain about the development of western science is its outgrowth from within a secular worldview. It is equally important to note that the nature of the historical transmission of ideas from the Islamic world into the West is significantly different from that of today's Muslims borrowing from the West, and because of the difference in the very nature of transmission, the significance of this transmission is also different. Even when the Muslims ruled and were considered to be the reigning civilization, they did not dominate, subjugate and humiliate their neighbors as the Western states do on a routine basis with the Muslim world.

### Rationalism: Old and New

During the medieval age of Christian European civilization, the challenge that came from the Islamic world to the West was that of rationalism. The trepidation that Christian thought experienced from Spain was the fear of rationalism, and this is really paradoxical, because it is precisely what threatened the Islamic world a few centuries later. Only this time the threat of rationalism came from the West to the Islamic world.

As the Latin Averroists attacked the Church for clinging on to faith as opposed to *la libre pensee* or 'free thinking', it was not due to reading the 'believing Ibn Rushd', most of whose Arabic work had been either burnt or lost, save some Hebrew and Latin which was later connected to justify their position, but a 'rationalist Ibn Rushd' opposed to the believing Church. The idea of 'free thinking' in the European context can be accurately thought of as thinking which is free from revelation and free from the confines of God. For centuries the secular minded people in the West took advantage of Ibn Rushd to attack the Catholic Church. It is also noteworthy for the modern *Neo-Rushdians* that the notion of a 'free thinker' has no equivalent in the classical Islamic languages.

Why Ibn Rushd and his rationalism had very little impact in the pre-modern Muslim world is not because he was unknown to the Muslim thinkers. It is because Islam never developed rationalism independent of religion. It is amusing and equally alarming to note that in today's Japan there are people who are attempting to practice California Zen, which has gone through an evolution from being Zen to Atheism to California pseudo-Zen and now has

been exported back to Japan! This is exactly what is happening to many Muslim intellectuals and social scientists when it comes to the instrumental value of Ibn Rushd for singing rationalistic tunes in an effort to mimic the West. The personification of such ideas can be easily discerned, for example, in a whole army of Turkish intellectuals whose efforts in the resuscitation of Averroism are due not to their interest in reviving the Islamic philosophical tradition, but only to their thirst for westernization. Modern interpretation and application of Averroist ideas therefore amounts to an extreme form of westernization. Transmission of ideas has indeed come around full circle.

The medieval European application of Islamic ideas therefore does no service to the contemporary Muslims, who we suggest must go back to their basics on their own for an original and pure epistemological revision. The challenge for the Muslim social scientists, therefore, is to overcome the linguistic barriers and revive, as among the primary tools of philosophy and social science, the use of Arabic as well as other classical languages of Islam in which lie embedded the great debates which must be read in the originals in a quest for attainment of purity of ideals and noble goals of research.

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