

The Revival of the Islamic Scientific Mindset

An Antidote and Alternative for the Political Islam and Extremism

AVERA – COMMENTARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islam and science have a troubled past and an uneasy relationship today. It is well documented that Islam has not only served as the intellectual bridge between the philosophers and scientists of ancient Greece and other parts of the world on the one hand and Western enlightenment on the other, but that it also established many of the foundations in sciences such as mathematics, astronomy, architecture, chemistry, medicine, politics, history, psychology and many others.

Much of those developments have been attributed through setting up an intellectual centre in Baghdad, called the “Bayt-ul Hikmah” or the “House-of-Wisdom”, and the translation movement (from the mid-eighth century to the late tenth century), i.e. the systematic effort to collect and translate all ancient wisdom and philosophy into Arabic and distribute it throughout the caliphate. It is what sparked the golden age of Islam. During the same time also a metaphysical and mystical approaches to

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understanding reality started to flourish, in what later became known as “Sufism” or spiritual Islam.

However even during that time there was a lot of resistance from theologians, fearing it would lead away from dogmatic religion and the path to Truth. While such opposition was certainly not in the least motivated by self-centred political motives and power plays, it also had some merit as the Islamic world-view became increasingly stretched to its limits (often also based on self-centred motives) and diverged in all kind of directions, with Islam splitting up in an increasing number of sects.

The battle between intellectual progressives and dogmatic conservatives was gradually but eventually decided in the benefit of the latter. In retrospect, there was maybe just too much innovation and diversity happening at a time when Islamic society was under multiple threats both from inside (like political corruption and the plague) and outside (the Mongol invasion).

It is reminiscent – and an important lesson - to a political trend we see throughout history and even today.

Today Islam and science are often considered contradictory, with the very few Muslim Nobel Prizes given as exemplary proof. So what revival of Islamic sciences? And what can Islam science contribute to the rest of the world that is technological

WHAT IS AN ISLAMIC SCIENTIFIC MINDSET ?

The Islamic world-view starts from a set of very different assumptions than those of modern scientific inquiry. Islam’s approach to understanding reality is rooted in Tahwid, indivisible Oneness, and therefore is per definition holistic. Mind and

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matter, metaphysics and physics, quality and quantity are just different perspectives on the same Reality, not unlike quantum states in quantum physics. It is the totality of unique perspectives that forms reality. The Islamic world-view is also teleological, i.e. it considers all of Reality and creation as having meaning and purpose and not just being random and mechanical. The goal of science (from the Latin word for knowledge) is then to find the natural and logical order of things so that life and society can be organized according to those principles. As such the approach focusses less on how to control and manipulate matter but more how to utilize it in a harmonious way, with the highest scientific achievement being the actualisation of knowledge into virtue and righteous behaviour that forms the beginning and end of a harmonious relationship with anything else. Therefore it is also subjective in the sense that each person has to find, develop and express his/her own uniqueness as the highest manifestation of God's given potential and knowledge.

Scientific enquiry, observation and testing is thereby only one mode of knowledge that is focused on understanding the purpose of our life, in addition to for example scripture, revelation, metaphysical states, rational reasoning, experience, but where all originate from the same source and therefore also must lead to the same Truth.

Such world-view may sound odd for Western scientists but it is built on and therefore largely coherent with the Neoplatonism and Peristaltic philosophy as well as many Eastern philosophies and wisdom traditions.

The Western scientific method on the other hand is characterised by empirical observation and measurement, replicability and objectivity. It starts from a world-view that is largely reductionistic (assuming that the whole of a system can be understood by studying the parts), mechanistic (where each part logically influences

another parts) and limited to empirical phenomena (and thus where anything that cannot be measured is not taking into account or is even disregarded).

Because it's hard to argue with the fact that the technological and material achievements of this approach has been short from astonishing, it has become the dominant paradigm for knowledge acquisition and understanding. However it does not come without costs or problems. Its reductionistic approach breaks down the world into quantifiable and measurable attributes, ultimately ones and zeros so to say, at the expense of the essence of it, and thus gradually squeezes the essence and mystery of life and human experiences such as love, beauty, diversity, morality etc. It also leads to a fragmented, disconnected and transactional view of the world and the way people experience it. And since there is no inherent order in science or in reality, the value of science and knowledge is based on its practical application to influence the physical reality. It is therefore instrumentalistic and materialistic by nature. If it cannot be measured then it is discounted and if it does not have materialistic use than it has no value.

In recent years much of those assumptions have been come under fire from two different angles. The first are the findings of quantum physics, that is threatening our whole scientific and physical understanding of the universe. Quantum physics for example mathematically proofs additional dimensions outside our common perception of reality; that time and space in essence do not exist; that the universe is one holographic undivided field where everything not only connect with everything else but also holds in itself infinite potential; and that objectivity is not possible but instead that we understand reality according to our observation or measurements of it. There are also epistemological issues, in particular the fact that any science always relies on unprovable assumptions as proven in the Gödel-theorem. In other words, it is not value-free at all but instead also dogmatic in part of its approach.

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The second issue is the failure of modern science to address many of the issues of today, ranging from climate change and ecological issues, over auto-immune disorders and mental health, materialism and loss of a sense of purpose and meaning in life, to polarisation, inequality, extremism, radicalisation and world peace. It is this increasing imbalance between the enormous technological and material progress achieved and the stagnation in life quality for more and more people that is largely eroding the trust in the scientific discourse as the way for human progress. Indeed for an increasing amount of people the cost of conformity to the highly specialised machine society has become, running faster and faster, has lead to a sense of alienation with themselves and others with averse effects on personal general well-being as well as harmony and prosperity in society.

It is in this respect that according many philosophers we have entered the post-truth or post-conventionalism era, with a world-view that leaves room for more subjective personal experience and expressions, and an awareness and exploration of our metaphysical and spiritual nature, i.e. an inherent connection with a hidden force of nature and life. Values, ethics, social justice and diversity are becoming more important than mere facts, quality more important than quantity, wholes more important than parts, systems more important than elements and with science not longer merely a means for materialistic progress but also as support for achieving social goals.

Simultaneous we can observe a paradigm shift in science itself, with more focus on holism, system approach and integration instead of reductionism; probability instead of causality; relativity instead of absolute reality; wonder instead knowing; subjectivity versus objectivity. There is again increasing room for teleological concepts. And under impulse of quantum physics science has entered a whole new era of speculative philosophy about reality. With it seemingly a whole new curtain of reality is opening up that marvels and wonders at reality, trying to make sense of it all and combine it into a unified theory.

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It is here that Islamic science can fill in a gap and make a meaningful contribution, as holistic thinking is part of the intellectual DNA in Islam, integrating the physical, epistemological and metaphysical realities into one; as well as mankind in its relationship with reality. Combined with insights of modern science, this could help shape the debate and the progress of humanity to live in harmony with itself, others and nature.

ISLAMIC SCIENCES REVISITED

Ironically enough, the rediscovering of the richness of Islamic thought and knowledge is mainly led by western scholars (non-Muslims and Muslims alike). In many cases they saw some of the flaws in the rather one-sided approaches of western philosophy and science, finding a more comprehensive view in Islamic text written almost thousand years ago. An interesting illustration that this is not limited to just a few eccentrics is the exploding interest in Islamic based spirituality, with for example the great mystic Jalalludin Rumi being the most read poet in the United States today, demonstrating a longing to the richness and profoundness for an experience that has been lost.

Despite the sometimes violent differences between the jurisprudence (fiqh), theological (kalam), philosophical (falsafa) and metaphysical (Sufism) approaches to understand the cosmos and the place of man in it, they are in essence all different languages (each with many different variations) to understand the same Islamic world-view. Together they combine revelation, reasoning, mystical experience, observation and others in one more or less coherent but multi-dimensional view of the world, all with the focus of understanding the what and why of Reality, Self, and the relationship between the two; and the implications of how to develop and organize ourselves and society to achieve harmony with God and therefore also with

each other and creation. These are subsequently translated and detailed into morality, law, psychology, economy etc.

Many questions and concepts currently being explored by modern science today have long been embedded in such endeavours. For example the concept of man as steward for creation is central to the Islamic world-view as is cyclical evolution, the principle of the gift-economy, preservation of resources, 'spiritual' growth and personal potential, interconnectedness, matter as manifested potential, etc. Even puzzling discoveries of modern physics do have a logical (but not essential) place in an Islamic understanding of the world, things such as dark matter, quantum entanglement and quantum states.

Islam is also in the Islamic tradition, the story of the Prophet Mohammed, who was able to unify a backward, lawless and rivalling number of tribes, in less than two decades, into a disciplined, virtuous and righteous society that would set new levels of intellectual and cultural achievements for centuries to follow. What were the values and principles behind it? An interesting element for example was the ability to fight (make Jihad against) inequality and poverty during part of the history through Zakat and voluntary charity and care, finding an integration between individual goals through free entrepreneurship and markets on the one hand and social welfare on the other. It was reported that at certain years there was too much Zakat money available (a tax of only 2,5%) with no further people in need or even wanting to accept state well-fare. What could we learn for society today, where any form of charity is seen increasingly as transactional, about the mindset of people that cared as much (and sometimes even more) about their neighbour as themselves?

As such the revival of Islamic sciences can help the Youth for living together, far away from Extremism and does hold a lot of promise and potential. It is able to integrate a large diversity of knowledge into a coherent world-view of Reality,

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Mankind and the place of Mankind in Reality. It can help make sense of many new scientific findings and discoveries. It can direct technology towards the benefit of humanity in harmony with nature. It can provide practical solutions towards the most important issues and challenges of the 21st century, including ecology, individual alienation and meaning, happiness and felicity, personal empowerment and growth, leadership, inequality and poverty reduction, monetary reforms and debt reduction etc.

Moreover it can give a common purpose and inspiration to much of the Muslim world, and put them as an equal partner at discussions about the future of humanity. However there are two conditions in order to succeed in this.

The first is that Islam must open its thinking to knowledge and influences outside its traditional field of attention, in a similar way as the openness to new ideas and hunger for knowledge during the golden age and translation movement. It must also be open for contributions from non-Muslims. History has already proven that Islam does not have to worry too much about losing its identity: the Quran and Islam can be stretched in all directions, as many as there are people on earth, but will sooner or later always return to its core. Tensions and disagreements within the different approaches and interpretations should be the source of healthy dialectical discussions, aiming at increasing levels of integration and consistencies between all of them and a better multidimensional and perspective understanding of Truth. Similarly Islam in its search for knowledge, understanding and organizing self and society should focus on similarities with other scientific and epistemological approaches outside Islam. Aligning and integrating those within its own world-view Islamic science should humbly aim to give everything its place, with the final Truth and argument belonging to God.

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The second condition is that the goal of science/knowledge is not theory but practice, in particular in the embodiment of exemplary universal virtues (not dissimilar as “just man” in Plato’s republic or the “perfect man” as the manifestation of all God’s attributes in Ibn Arabi’s philosophy) in the character of people and groups/society. This is particular important for leaders – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – as modern leadership theory has proven that the limit of virtue and righteousness in a society will always be limited to that of the leader.

Only then does it also provide an antidote for political Islam and extremism, both rooted in their approach to knowledge in narrow-mindedness and self-centredness. No matter how well-intended, those who reduce God and Islam (or anything else for that matter) to a narrative that fits their arrested personal construct of the world and their personal ambitions (or opposite reduce Reality and the world to a narrow minded construct of God and Islam) are per definition unable to provide sustainable answers to the global challenges of today.

In a previous article, “Five Pillars of a European Islam”, we also argued that this will facilitate the integration of Muslim in Europe, not just a citizens, but also a role models for Islam and humanity.

As Brussels International Center for Research , we are keen to support and facilitate such initiative.

Adopting such a mindset and setting up institutes to cultivate this will maybe not lead to a Nobel Prize in physics, but for sure enhances the probability of winning the one for Peace.

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About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.


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