REFLECTIONS

Refining Islamic Scholarship: Through Harmonising With Postmodern Social Sciences

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The Legacy of Islamic Scholarship

In 1377 classical North African Islamic Scholar, Ibn Khaldun, wrote *The State of Society* (Translated as: *Introduction to Universal History*). This text by many is regarded as being significant in influencing thought within the social sciences. Ibn Khaldun argues that people fall into two general categories: city dwellers, who enjoy an urban sedentary lifestyle; and those who live in harsh nomadic conditions. When looking specifically at Muslims, with Arabic being the language of Islam, Ibn Khaldun also groups Muslims into two broad camps: which differentiates individuals according to (1) linguistic and (2) cultural Arabization. Ibn Khaldun asserts that intellect, scholarship, science and refined culture (such as the arts), evolved through urban linguisticArabs—the most prominent of whom, at his time, hailed from Ancient Persia1 and Egypt. The classical period of Islam has a significant influence on Persia, which she reaped greatly. Ibn Khaldun writes, that after the Muslim conquest of Persia in 633AD, Arabs as a large extent became Persianized. Dutton (2002), comments on the early shifts in political authority, from Madina to Kufa, then to Damascus and later to the Islamic Golden Age in Baghdad. The move to Baghdad harmonised Persian influences, making the Muslim world the unrivalled centre of education, science, medicine and philosophy. At this time, the prophetic saying arguing that the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr, embodied the Muslim mind-set. Dutton (2002) also asserts that after the death of Muhammad, cultural practices became central in understanding how to derive, interpret and apply Islamic law. Ibn Khaldun (2005) and Dutton (2002) paint a picture of Muslim acculturation built around urban centres of knowledge, as opposed to the Bedouin desert plains, as is often romanticised.

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2 Ancient Persia covered modern day Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, parts of Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Also previous ancient and medieval historiographical references to parts of Iraq, such as Baghdad, Kufa and Tikrit also fall within Persia.
From these findings, the author asserts that the heart, limbs and soul of Islam were carried forward by urbanites, who sought to maintain a strong connection with nature. The concept of a nomadic existence was admired as a demonstration of an individual’s ability to tolerate austerity and detach themselves from worldly vices. However, wherever Islam spread, practically centres of development and conurbations were always hallmarks of Muslim successes. Therefore, the interpretation of Islamic texts and practices by early Muslims demonstrates the ability of Islam to work alongside progression and change. Furthermore, it appears that especially non-Arabs have played a vital role in this process.

The Postmodern Challenge

For business and management academics, in depth cultural understanding of how Islam was embraced, interpreted and practiced, offer a fertile ground for strengthening knowledge. The author argues that in Islam, whilst Bedouin culture plays a pivotal role, there has always been a movement towards economic development. Therefore the sophisticated approaches used within current thinking are very much those which can harmonise various terrains. Previous Western cross-cultural analyses have fallen foul in assuming that Muslims and cultures in Middle East and North Africa (MEANA), follow the same patterns. Evidence of this, has been observed by Wilson and Hollows (2010), when commenting on the differences between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran. Often differences have been ignored, through a painted veneer of parties sharing a faith, therefore many other things - which is not necessarily true. Furthermore, research by the advertising agency JWT (2010) highlights distinct differences in values and behaviours between Arabs across MEANA. JWT (2010) states that KSA Arabs hold business role models in the highest esteem, whilst Iranians aspire to be educators.

Expanding discussions beyond Muslim Africa and the Middle East, and moving towards the Far East - where nations most highly populated with Muslims exist, many modern day Muslims demonstrate a duality in practices. These are perhaps best demonstrated through dress codes. One day, males and females can wear modern jeans and t-shirts, whilst the next day they do traditional national dress, with effortless ease and panache. At times, they even wear both together. There is currently a purity of literature, which tackles these behavioural practices and the emotions behind them. Often bridging conclusions offered here, argue that this is simply a process of Reenactment. The author is of the opinion that this phenomenon is more complicated. Rather than representing a zero-sum gain, or process of Westernization, it is in fact a form of wealth creation and surrogate cultural hybridization; supported by the arguments outlined by Wilson (2010) and Wilson, Liu and Fan (2009). In short, people are becoming more complicated; the more they interact with each other. And here lies the postmodern argument: facets of existence are becoming more difficult
to define; data collected may be difficult to build generalisations on; and both of these may fall past their sell-by-date all too quickly. Furthermore, the argument that the West is pulling the strings of the East undervalues the significant contributions and critical balance of people from the East.

The study of these, regardless of respective faiths is crucial. Testament to this, in addition to the Islamic argument (that this is an obligation on humanity to live in such a way); is that population figures, filter projections and revenue opportunities also point towards its significance. Discussions in this reflection further highlight the burden on practitioners and academics to attain and synthesise a wide range of knowledge from cross-disciplinary fields, which is perhaps greater than in other sectors. The suggestion therefore is that more scholarship is needed in this field - where individuals seek to collaborate with academics particularly in: anthropology; Islamic theology and jurisprudence; modern and ancient languages; and geopolitical history. From Muslim consumer behaviour also going through a rapid and transformational growth, it is possible that gaps in knowledge may appear, unless these factors are remedied. Furthermore, as observed by Ibn Khaldun (2005), more Muslims exist who are Arabised through language; and perhaps have swung the balance towards -izing Islamic cultural norms and practices. Therefore, postmodern research approaches need to reflect this interplay, blending and refining concepts towards more surrogate and hybrid approaches (Wilson, 2010; Wilson, Liu and Fan, 2009).

Figure 1. Influencing factors in agenda setting for Islamic social sciences
Muslim Consumer Behavioural Patterns – Consumption Driving Islam

A good example of modern-day challenges can be seen when analysing Muslim consumerism and consumption. Theologically, halal (the permissible) is more abundant than the impermissible/haram or non-halal. This is because the general principle is that everything is halal unless stated otherwise, according to Islamic law. However, more and more products are not taking their halal self-evident status for granted, and are being branded as being halal. Therefore, in some industries it appears that Muslim behaviour is being reversed – in that everything appears to not be halal, unless stated otherwise. Wilson and Liu (2011) proposed the following model as a basis for understanding Muslim consumption (Figure 2).

Figure 2. (taken from Wilson and Liu, 2011)

The key things in this instance to observe are as follows:

- Belief is a rational and emotional process.
- Halal here represents that which is permissible, praiseworthy and pure.
- Islamic understanding draws from emotions, rationality and interpretations of the environment. Therefore, it is subject to change and time.
- To stabilise behaviour, these things have to come together in a moulding, or fusion.
- This moulding may be instantaneous, or longer lasting; and it provides the platform for action.
• Resolving actions may tend towards being either more rational, or
  emotional
• The entire process is driven by a desire to minimise risk in thoughts,
  feelings and actions

Postmodern Islamic Scholarship in the Social Sciences – A Spatial
Process Approach

Following the observations made earlier, the author argues that Islamic
business and management academic research requires its own conceptual
frameworks for analysis and interpretation. Therefore within this new
paradigm, it is proposed that analyses of worth can be achieved using the
model below [Figure 3].

![Diagram of the 3 C's process model]

Figure 3. Hermeneutical Islamic social sciences process model – The 3 C’s

The model draws from traditional approaches to Islamic jurisprudence in
that concepts (in Arabic), such as (in no order): jima’, qiyas, ijihad, ‘urf,
ikhlas, and hifdh are embraced. Building on these and in contrast, the model
impresses the importance of cyclical harmonisation. Where possible the
following elements should be brought closer together and fused: Cultures,
classic and contemporary norms and values, contention and consensus, and
collaborative communications and contributions.

The means by which these can be achieved, are through a deeper
understanding of the fact that everything has a context and for that context
to remain of relevance, this necessitates constant situation-specific re-
evaluation. Findings suggest that more traditional Islamic approaches follow a linear unidirectional pathway.

An example of this new approach would be to analyse problems as follows:

Can Social networking, Peer-to-Peer and other emergent technological trends be used by Public Relations practitioners — to disseminate religious instructions? Furthermore, can they legitimately allow consumer-collaborative religious verdicts, based upon knowledge-sharing? In addition, how should laws of copyright and competition operate internationally on matters of religious faith?

The short answer to these would be, as long as a cyclical step-wise process is followed, the opportunity and propensities to experiment, remains relatively low-risk — and therefore desirable. And so, more traditional methods of passive listening to talks, or writing letters, can be supported by more cost-effective, interactive, and instantaneous ones.

The future suggests that mobile hand-held devices, with increased storage and connectivity, will be able to join more information — using concepts such as fuzzy logic and algorithms. Therefore, social sciences research will also benefit directly, as ‘soft variables’ and data mining will support the unique and valuable positions adopted. In takaful, the more that for example verses of the Qur’an are used, the more commonly they can be mapped to business research meta-methods, and be documented, using technology.

Summary Conclusion

Findings suggest that a hermeutical cyclic process, which champions culture, content and context — provides a platform for adjusting and melding Islamic principles with postmodernist ‘ecumenism’ of generalisable frameworks. The essential elements of Islamic scholarship in the social sciences are three-fold:

i. Faithful preservation and contextualisation of ancient sources of information (the they historical accounts, religious texts, schools of philosophy etc.)
ii. Importing, refining and blending with modern contemporary models and advances
iii. Decision-making risk management and balancing of rationality and emotions

These form the basis of an eight-caps cultural model – the 8 C’s:

i. Content gathering
ii. Context mapping
iii. Classical convention
iv. Contemporary convention
v. Consensus evaluation
vi. Concretion identification
vii. Clarification refinement
viii. Communication contributions

The author asserts that innovative and valuable research, to some extent, has to take risks. Whilst this is understood and accepted as a key component of business, it may not be as well received from religious quarters. However, in remit to this challenge, the author argues that (1) correct intentions and endeavours to glorify the faith of Islam, through (2) purification of the mind, heart and spirit and (3) adherence to academic professionalism and business practice frameworks – provide a platform for increased risk-taking and creativity.

References


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