## **Review** Article

## Islamization of Anthropological Knowledge

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The expansion of Western colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought in its wake the economic and political domination and exploitation of the Third World countries. Western colonialism and ethnocentrism went hand in hand. The colonial ideology was rationalized and justified in terms of the white man's burden; it was believed that the White races of Europe had the moral duty to carry the torch of civilization—which was equated with Christianity and Western culture—to the dark corners of Asia and Africa. The ideology of Victorian Europe accorded the full status of humanity only to European Christians; the "other" people were condemned, as Edmund Leach has bluntly put it, as "sub-human animals, monsters, degenerate men, damned souls, or the products of a separate creation" (Leach, 1982).

One of the most damaging consequences of colonialism relates to a massive undermining of the self-confidence of the colonized peoples. Their cultural values and institutions were ridiculed and harshly criticized. Worse still, the Western pattern of education introduced by colonial governments produced a breed of Westernized native elite, who held their own cultural heritage in contempt and who consciously identified themselves with the culture of their colonial masters.

During the nineteenth century Orientalism emerged as an intellectual ally of Western colonialism. As Edward Said has cogently demonstrated, Orientalism was a product of certain political and ideological forces operating in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that it was inextricably bound up with Western ethnocentrism, racism, and imperialism (Said, 1978).

Most of the colonized countries of the Third World secured political liberation from Western powers during the early decades of the present century. Regrettably, however, political liberation was not always followed by ideological, cultural, and intellectual independence. For one thing, most of the ex-colonial countries continued with the colonial pattern of education. Secondly, most of them were drawn into the political and cultural orbit of either the United States or Soviet Russia. A subtle but pervasive form of

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neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism thus replaced the blatant colonialism of yore. The Western-educated native elite, by and large, continued to play their old subversive role. This provides a rough picture of the ex-colonial countries of Asia and Africa, including the Muslim countries.

Since the 1970's, a strong wave of Islamic resurgence has been sweeping across the Muslim world. Certain political, economic, and cultural developments, such as the oil boom in the Gulf countries, the revolution in Iran, the proliferation and revitalization of Muslim organizations, and a growing sense of Islamic identity among Muslim intellectuals and students, have brought about this resurgence (Momin, 1987). A significant aspect of the Islamic resurgence is that a small but growing number of Western-educated Muslim intellectuals and scholars in different parts of the world have sought to bring the Islamic perspective to bear on the social sciences. A comprehensive and ambitious project relating to the Islamization of knowledge was launched by the Washington-based International Institute of Islamic Thought under the inspiring leadership of the late Professor Isma'īl al Fārūqī.

One of the most concerted attempts (though not wholly satisfactory) at the application of the Islamic perspective to the social sciences relates to Islamic economics. An incipient field of inquiry within the framework of Islamization of knowledge, which has engaged the attention of a few Muslim scholars, is Islamic anthropology. A full-length study on the subject has recently been published by Ms. Merryl Wyn Davies. Akbar S. Ahmed's book', under review here, purports to make a contribution to this nascent field of study. Dr. Ahmed is a Pakistani anthropologist who has been trained at the universities of London, Cambridge, and Birmingham. He previously had the privilege of being a scholar-administrator, posted as Commissioner of Quetta, Pakistan.

In his short but thought-provoking foreword to the book, Professor Isma'īl al Fārūqī offers a lucid exposition of the aim and scope of Islamization of knowledge. He takes into consideration the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism on the intellectual history of Muslim people, and points out that Islamization of knowledge should necessarily entail a correction and redress of the conceptual and methodological shortcomings of Western social sciences. He emphasizes that the reorientation of anthropology should be inspired by the Islamic ethos, particularly by the principles of unity and transcendence of God, reason, universalism, communitarianism, and the moral vision. He rightly points an accusing finger at Eurocentrism and cultural relativism, which have been the bane of Western anthropology, and pleads for a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Toward Islamic Anthropology: Definition, Dogma, and Directions. By Akbar S. Ahmed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Vanguard Books, 1987), pp. 79.

reorientation of the science of man within the framework of Islamization of knowledge.

Dr. Ahmed's book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the corpus of Western anthropology; Part II is concerned with the aim and scope of Islamic anthropology.

Part I, which purportedly provides the backdrop for an examination of the possibility and promise of Islamic anthropology, discusses the theoretical and methodological framework of (British) social anthropology. Dr. Ahmed takes into consideration the historical linkage between anthropology, on the one hand, and colonialism and Orientalism, on the other. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical issues in social anthropology. The author then dwells on certain arbitrarily selected and rather loosely connected themes such as social structure, kinship, political organization, religion and magic, economic anthropology, and social change. He then undertakes a discussion of Orientalist anthropology ad shows how anthropological works on Islam have drawn on the distorted and biased researches and perspectives of Western Orientalists.

Part II, which is devoted to a discussion of Islamic anthropology, barely spans twelve pages. Dr. Ahmed defines Islamic anthropology as "the study of Muslim groups by scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam – humanity, knowledge, tolerance – relating micro village tribal studies in particular to the larger historical and ideological frames of Islam" (p. 56). This definition, according to him, does not exclude non-Muslims from the purview of Islamic anthropology. The author offers an exposition of the Islamic world-view, and points out that Islamic anthropology should provide a corrective to distorted views of Islam and Muslims presented by Western anthropologists. He takes into consideration the historical and cultural variations exhibited by Muslim communities in different parts of the world and criticizes Western anthropologists and other scholars for characterizing these differences in terms of Indian Islam, Moroccan Islam, Turkish Islam, etc. He points out that there is only one universal Islam, although there are many Muslim societies.

Dr. Ahmed presents a historical model or taxonomy of Muslim societies, which supposedly provides a theoretical and methodological orientation for Islamic anthropology. The five-fold taxonomy comprises the following categories: 1. tribal segmentary Islam (represented by Bedouins, Berbers, and Pukhtuns); 2. the Ottoman or cantonment model (represented by the Safawis, Ottomans, and Moghuls); 3. Great-River Islamic civilizations along the Indus, Tigris, and Euphrates; 4. Islam under Western colonialism; 5. Resurgent Islam as represented by Pakistan and Islamic Iran.

Dr. Ahmed suggests that Islamic anthropology should present an authentic picture of Muslim society during the time of the Prophet, which has provided

a viable model for Muslims all over the world during the past fourteen *Hijri* centuries. He also emphasizes the value of comparative, historical studies of Muslim communities in terms of this ideal-typical framework. In conclusion he points out that Muslim scholars need not completely disown Western anthropology. Rather, they should seek a redress of its limitations in terms of Islamic ideals and principles.

We now turn to a critical appraisal of Dr. Ahmed's contribution. It is unfortunate that he takes a rather superficial, ahistorical and uncritical view of Western anthropology. For one thing, he uncritically takes for granted the currently prevalent definition of anthropology as the study of "other" cultures. Thus he says: "The major task of anthropology . . . is to enable us to understand ourselves through understanding other cultures" (p. 13). His discussion of the anthropological method of field work is informed by the same view. It may be pointed out that anthropology emerged during the Enlightenment period and that it was envisioned by the French philosophers and the Scottish rationalist philosophers as a holistic discipline whose subject matter encompassed the whole of mankind.

Since anthropology by definition is the science of mankind, it cannot legitimately confine itself to the study of "other" cultures. The current view of anthropology as the study of other cultures emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century when an unfortunate separation between anthropology and sociology came about and when anthropology came to be confined to the study of small-scale, primitive cultures of the non-Western world. Furthermore, this view has been significantly conditioned by the Cartesian epistemology (Momin, 1984).

Dr. Ahmed's uncritical approach to the corpus of Western anthropology is similarly reflected in his acquiescence in the positivist doctrine of objectivity and value-neutrality. Thus, he states: "Anthropology is a science based on extended participant observation of (other) cultures using the data collected, for value-neutral dispassionate analysis employing the comparative method" (*sic*, p. 56). It may be pointed out that the notion of value-neutrality, which was appropriated by the social sciences from the methodology of the natural sciences, is no longer a commonly accepted article of faith among anthropologists and sociologists (Maquet, 1966; Gough, 1969; Berreman, 1981; Bernstein, 1983).

Dr. Ahmed's survey of anthropology is rather superficial, ahistorical, and narrow. What he offers is mainly a survey-that, too, a rather uncritical one-of British social anthropology. He makes only passing reference to a couple of French philosophers and rationalist philosophers who laid the foundations of anthropology during the eighteenth century. Similarly, there is hardly any mention of the pioneering contributions of Franz Boas and the American school of historical particularism. Furthermore, his discussion

of theoretical developments in Western anthropology betrays considerable confusion and naivete. He speaks, for example, of the "holistic, analytical *(sic)* intellectualism of French social philosophy" (p. 17). Referring to Durkheim's view of religion, he says: "What he did was to raise to the level of a sociological principle the Christian maxim that all men are members one of another" (p. 43).

Now we turn to an examination of Dr. Ahmed's formulation of Islamic anthropology. In fairness to him, it should be pointed out at the outset that his endeavor is sincere and well intentioned, in that it is guided by a genuine commitment to Islamic ideals. "All actions," the Prophet (SAAS) is reported to have said, "are to be judged on the basis of intentions." Our main criticism of Dr. Ahmed's formulation of Islamic anthropology is that it is rather fragmentary and disjointed and, consequently, suffers from a lack of conceptual and methodological systematization. For one thing, his definition of Islamic anthropology is rather vague and vacuous. Secondly, the two sections of the book appear to be disjointed. There is hardly any serious attempt to bring the discussion on Western anthropology contained in Part I to bear on the aim and scope of Islamic anthropology. Thirdly, though the author states that there is only one universal Islam, and though he criticizes Orientalists and Western anthropologists for characterizing Muslim societies in terms of variants of Islam, he allows himself to fall into the same trap. This is evident, for example, when he speaks of "tribal segmentary Islam" (p. 61). It is also reflected in his recent publication, Discovering Islam (1988), wherein he speaks of Indian Islam (p. 73) and South Asian Islam (p. 84, 95).

It appears that Dr. Ahmed has not really made a serious attempt to grapple with the question of the stance of Islamic anthropology vis-à-vis Western anthropology. Thus, he states that anthropology must study (society) as it is and not as it should be (p. 60). One is tempted to ask: How does this positivist and objectivist stance of Western anthropology (with which he seems to agree) accord with the normative epistemology of Islam, which is supposed to inform Islamic anthropology? One wishes that Dr. Ahmed had undertaken a critical examination of the epistemological and ontological premises of Western anthropology, which are inextricably bound up with the world-view of Western civilization, and evaluated their adequacy or inadequacy in the framework of Islamization of knowledge.

Though Dr. Ahmed's study tends to be rather fragmentary and impressionistic, he makes a couple of valuable points that could provide a promising start to Islamic anthropology. He rightly emphasizes the need for an authentic anthropological picture of Muslim society during the time of the Prophet. It may be pointed out, however, that this kind of historical reconstruction cannot be carried out within the conventional framework of social anthropology as outlined—approvingly, one may add—by the author.

Secondly, he makes a passing reference to the holistic Islamic framework (p. 55) without realizing its import. It may be added that in retrospect Dr. Ahmed does not seem to be satisfied with his own formulation (Ahmed 1988, p. 215).

In the remainder of this paper we shall make an attempt to indicate the direction in which Islamic anthropology could profitably move and thereby make a worthwhile contribution to the discipline of anthropology, as well as to cross-cultural understanding. In our view, no discussion on Islamic anthropology or the Islamic social sciences in general can proceed without setting out the ontological and epistemological premises of Islam. The theoretical and methodological framework for the Islamization of knowledge should be informed and guided by the Islamic approach towards knowledge. It may be pointed out that Islam does not favor a dogmatic and doctrinaire attitude toward the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. The Qur'an exhorts people to ponder and reflect over the mysteries of the universe as well as those of human nature. It does not demand an unreflective and blind allegiance to Islamic principles and ideals. Rather, it appeals to the quintessentially human faculties of reason and understanding.

The Islamic approach toward knowledge is neither xenophobic nor solipsistic. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Wisdom is (like) the lost animal of a Muslim; wherever he finds it he catches hold of it." He regarded the acquisition of knowledge as not only obligatory on Muslim men and women, but also exhorted them to go in quest of it as far as China, which was the farthest-known stretch of hospitable land during the time of the Prophet. Though himself unlettered, the Prophet accorded a high priority to literacy. Thus, after the battle of Badr, he made the generous offer to the prisoners of war that each one of them could secure his freedom by teaching ten Muslim children how to read and write. Islamic anthropology, therefore, should be informed by the Islamic epistemology. In our view, three distinctive, but interrelated, dimensions of Islamic anthropology may be outlined: (1) an authentic anthropology of Islam as a living faith and culture, (2) the contribution of Muslim scholars to anthropological research, (3) the relevance and utility of Islamic insights and perspectives to a universal science of man.

The Islamic faith and Islamic civilization have attracted the attention of a large number of Western Orientalists, social scientists, and other scholars. By and large, their approach to Islam has been conditioned by a combination of historical, cultural, and psychological factors, including the legacy of the Crusades. Consequently, they have tended to present a biased and distorted picture of Islam (Said, 1978; Daniel, 1960; Asad, 1954; Southern, 1962; Abdul Rauf, 1985; Fazlur Rahman, 1985).

There is a need to offer a corrective to the distorted view of Islam presented by Orientalists and Western social scientists. Three distinct but interrelated dimensions of the problems may be noted: 1. the distortion and misrepresentation of Islamic principles and doctrines through textual studies (Goldziher, Schacht); 2. the distortion of Islamic history (Bernard Lewis, von Grunebaum, Montgomery Watt); and 3. the biased and distorted accounts of Muslim communities and the contemporary Muslim world by Western social scientists, literary writers, and journalists (Daniel Lerner, V.S. Naipaul).

Genuinely committed Muslim scholars, including historians, anthropologists and sociologists, can make a valuable contribution to the presentation of an authentic picture of Islam. The life and works of the eminent, Indian-born scholar, Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah, should provide an inspiring model of commitment, dedication and scholarship in this connection. The factor of personal commitment to Islam on the part of Muslim scholars cannot be over-emphasized. It is a sad commentary on the Western-educated Muslim elite that many of them made the grievous mistake of looking at their own faith and culture through the (blinkered) eyes of their European mentors. Consequently, many of them developed a jaundiced view of Islam and Muslims.

Islamic anthropology can make a significant contribution to the study of Muslim communities in a historical and comparative framework, as Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper (1987) suggest. There are significant historical and cultural variations among Muslim communities in different parts of the world. However, these variations are overshadowed by the universality of the great Islamic tradition. As Ernest Gellner has observed, among all the world religions only Islam survives as a serious faith pervading both folk and great traditions (Gellner, 1984). Comparative studies of Muslim communities, therefore, should be rooted in the universalist context of the Islamic Great tradition. Needless to say, such studies have to be historically informed. It may be pointed out that comparative studies of Muslim communities, informed by Islamic epistemology, should not be the exclusive preserve of Muslim anthropologists. Islamic anthropology should guard itself against the danger of cultural and academic solipsism, and this can be done by including within its fold the researches of non-Muslim anthropologists as well, provided their researches are not colored by prejudice against Islam and Muslims. We should not lose sight of the fact that at least some anthropological studies of Muslim people undertaken by Western anthropologists are sympathetic in intent.

The second theme in Islamic anthropology relates to the contribution made by Muslim scholars to cross-cultural and comparative studies. The contributions of Al Birūnī and Ibn Khaldūn are of seminal importance, not only to Islamic anthropology but also to the history of anthropological thought. It may be pointed out that Western accounts of the history of anthropology hardly take into account the contributions of non-Western people to the development of comparative studies. Regna Darnell, for example, has observed that the inspiration for ideas and methods of an anthropological nature in Europe was rooted in Judaeo-Christianity and classical antiquity. She states that "non-European folk have had no part in their formulation. Buddhist ideas, Muslim ideas, East Indian or Chinese ideas on cultural problems are unrepresented" (Darnell, 1974). Regrettably, this statement does not take into account the role of Muslims in transmitting the classical heritage of Greece and India to Europe during the Middle Ages, nor does it consider the contributions of Muslim scholars such as Al Birūnī.

The Renaissance in Europe paved the way for the emergence of anthropology. It is significant to note that the intellectual stimulus to the Renaissance was provided by the rediscovery of Latin and Greek manuscripts on science and philosophy. Muslim scholars played a significant role during the Middle Ages in passing the Hellenic heritage to Europe through translations (Voget, 1975). The Latin translations undertaken by Ibn Sīna (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) between the 12th and 13th centuries introduced to Christian theologians the philosophical heritage of ancient Greece (Hayes, 1983).

During the Enlightenment, the philosophers repudiated Christianity and drew inspiration from classical antiquity, and in doing so they relied on the translations of Muslim scholars, Frank Manuel has observed that "the anticlerical philosophers would naturally see the new millennium come from Islam than from Christendom" (Manual, 1962).

Finally, Islamic anthropology can make a worthwhile contribution to a humanistic and genuinely universal science of man. Since the eighteenth century, anthropology, as well as the other related disciplines, has been dominated by Cartesian-Newtonian cosmology. Consequently, they unreflectively appropriated the concepts and methods of the natural sciences. The notion of objectivity and value-neutrality, which is one of the cardinal principles of the methodology of the human sciences, was influenced by Cartesian epistemology. Human society was considered a mechanism or an organism, which was supposedly governed by invariant principles or laws. The same mechanistic principle was applied to the study of human nature and behavior.

In recent years there has come about a reaction to the dominance of the natural science model in the human sciences. Significantly, this reaction has been influenced by the emergence of a post-Cartesian, post-empiricist conception of science (Tudor, 1982; Bernstein, 1983; Giddens, 79; Geertz, 1983). The notion of value-neutrality and objectivity has been subjected to a searching criticism. There is now serious concern with the bearing of moral responsibility on social science research. The view of society as a natural system has become one of the most contentious and debatable issues in the contemporary human sciences. Similarly, there is growing dissatisfaction with the reductionistic and deterministic view of human nature. There now seems to be a virtual swing from a positivistic to a humanistic orientation in anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Islamic anthropology can significantly contribute to this emerging postmodern paradigm in anthropology:

1. Islamic anthropology, which is informed by Islamic epistemology, can contribute to the emergence of a genuinely universal science of man. It can assist in the process of de-westernization of anthropology which is under way.

2. Islamic anthropology can lend its illuminating insights to what has come to be known as indigenous or native ethnography, and thereby offer a much-needed corrective to the currently prevalent, but constrictive, view of anthropology as the study of "other" cultures.

3. The ethical dimension of Islamic ontology can further illuminate certain significant developments in the human sciences. Mention may be made in this connection of the emergence of the symbolic or moral view of man in psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, and anthropology. The eminent American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1967) has proposed the view of moral man as a model for the human sciences. The Islamic conception of moral man (Davies, 1988) has a significant parallel with this view. Similarly, the emerging view of society as a symbolic or moral system has a close affinity with the Islamic world view.

4. Islamic anthropology can make a significant contribution to the reinforcement of the holistic perspective that is now emphasized by a growing number of anthropologists (Berreman, 1981).

5. Islamic anthropology can contribute its special insights to the debate on the psychic unity of mankind and thereby provide a corrective to extreme cultural relativism, which is implicit in functional anthropology.

6. There are scores of themes of an anthropological nature in the Qur'an and in the Traditions of the Prophet, believed by Muslims to be divinely inspired. Islamic anthropology can examine such themes in a comparative and cross-cultural perspective and bring out their scientific validity and import. What has been attempted by Maurice Bucaille (1982) in regard to a substantiation of Qur'anic data on the natural sciences and by Keith Moore (1982) in respect of embryological data in the Qur'an, can be done in relation to anthropological data.

So what should be the status of Islamic anthropology vis-a-vis Western anthropology? Is it to be considered a significant theoretical perspective within the broad stream of Western anthropology, as Dr. Ahmed seems to imply? Or is it to be offered a radical alternative to Western anthropology, as Ms. Merryl Wyn Davies (1988) seems to suggest?

This question should be necessarily considered in the context of the close

linkage between Western anthropology, on the one hand, and the ontological and epistemological premises of Western civilization, on the other. Since Islamic epistemology, which informs Islamic anthropology, is at variance with the positivist epistemology of Western anthropology, Islamic anthropology cannot legitimately and authentically function within the ethnocentric and positivist framework of Western anthropology. On the other hand, since Islamic anthropology is to be necessarily informed and guided by the universalistic framework of Islamic epistemology, it has to guard itself against the danger of cultural solipsism. In our view, both the extremes are avoidable.

Anthropology has to hark back to its original and genuine calling by reaffirming its commitment to the wholeness and unity of mankind, which constitutes its subject matter. In other words, anthropology needs to rediscover that it is a universal, or a potentially universal, science. Consequently, it encompasses the totality of man and the wholeness of mankind. Undoubtedly, anthropology bears the unmistakable imprint of Eurocentrism, but that can be corrected. With the emergence of indigenous ethnography and national traditions of anthropology in Third World countries, the process of de-Westernization or de-Occidentization has already begun. Islamic anthropology can make a valuable contribution to this process and thereby to the emergence of a genuinely universal science of man. Historically, Islam has played a key role in cross-cultural understanding and integration. Islamic anthropology has the potential and the promise to carry on this historic mission.

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