

Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty

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Abstract: The search for knowledge has been central to the Islamic tradition from its inception in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahādīth*). The injunctions to obtain knowledge and contemplate the signs of God in all things undergird a culture of ultimate questions in which there was an underlying epistemic unity among all fields of knowledge, from the religious sciences to the intellectual sciences to the natural sciences. Having lost sight of the underlying metaphysics that provides this epistemic unity, many thinkers in the modern period read the classical Islamic texts independently of the cognitive cartography and hierarchy of which they are a part. This approach leads to further misunderstandings and thus to a sense of hermeneutical gloom and epistemic subordination characteristic of coloniality. Postcolonial theory provides effective tools for diagnosing the process by which this epistemic erosion produces ideologically and epistemically conscripted subjects. But as it, too, arises from within a secular frame, it is only by understanding the cognitive cartography of the sciences within Islam that epistemic confidence and sovereignty can be reinstated.

Keywords: Islam; philosophy; theology; postcolonial; epistemology

From the revelation of the Quran until today, a central concern of Islamic intellectual traditions in particular and of Muslims more broadly has been the question of how the human being can discern truth from falsehood, right from wrong, good from bad. God refers to the Quran as “a clarification for all things” (Q 16:89) and says of its revelation, “Truth has come and falsehood has vanished, falsehood is ever bound to vanish”.¹ (Q 17:81) Knowledge is considered essential for understanding and following the Quran aright: “Those who have been given knowledge see that what is sent down upon you from your Lord is the truth and that it guides to the path of the Mighty, the Praised”. (Q 34:6) In addition to what is revealed by God, the Quran presents the created order as an intelligible reality, filled with “signs for a people who reflect” (Q 13:3; 30:21; 39:42; 45:13; cf. 10:24), “for a people who understand” (Q 2:164; 13:4; 16:12, 67; 30:24; 45:5), “for those possessed of intelligence” (Q 20:54, 128), “for those who know” (Q 30:22), and “for those who possess insight” (Q 3:13). Knowledge and understanding of the created order thus function in harmony with knowledge of revelation. As one increases in knowledge, one becomes ever more aware of the link among knowledge of God, knowledge of the created order, and knowledge of oneself. The most frequently cited verse in this regard is Q 41:53: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth”. Those who are unable to understand the created world in light of higher realities see only the “ephemerality of the life of this world” (*arāḍ al-ḥayāt al-dunyā* Q 4:94; 24:33) and are those of whom God says, “They know some outward aspect of the life of this world, but of the Hereafter they are heedless”. (Q 30:7)

Given the importance of knowledge for guidance and the Quranic emphasis on the underlying intelligibility of reality, discernment and wisdom are privileged throughout the Quran: “He grants wisdom to whomsoever He will. And whosoever is granted wisdom has been granted much good. Yet none remember save those possessed of intellect”. (Q 2:269) Several verses draw a stark contrast between those who know and those who do not, as when the Prophet is enjoined, “Say, ‘Are those who know and those who do not know equal?’ Only those possessed of intellect reflect”. (Q 39:9)² Underlining the importance of knowledge, it is the only thing for which the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) is specifically



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enjoined to seek increase in the Quran: “Do not hasten the recitation (Quran) before its revelation has been completed for you, but say, ‘My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!’” (Q 20:113–14) To advance in knowledge is not only an intellectual exercise, but, moreover, spiritual development: “God raises in degrees those among you who believe and those who have been given knowledge”. (Q 58:11)

From a Quranic perspective, ignorance is our greatest foe and knowledge our one true need. When applied and lived, knowledge provides all that is necessary to heal and overcome spiritual, moral, emotional, and even physical and political decrepitude.³ As such, the Quran does not simply assert its teachings and enjoin one to follow blindly. Rather, as Rosalind Gwynne observes, it provides detailed syllogistic arguments for its central teachings and injunctions.⁴ Many *aḥādīth* underline and perpetuate the Quranic understanding regarding the importance of knowledge: “The superiority of one who has knowledge over the one who [merely] worships is as the superiority of the full moon over all the planets”;⁵ “The superiority of one who has knowledge over one who merely worships is as my superiority over the least of my companions”.⁶ And many more *aḥādīth* enjoin and extol seeking knowledge for all believers:

“Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim”.⁷

“Whoever goes out seeking knowledge is in the way of God until he returns”.⁸

“No one leaves their house in search of knowledge but that the angels lower their wings in approval of what he does”.⁹

From the time of the revelation until today, Muslims have thus sought knowledge in all its forms. We need not review the myriad contributions of medieval Muslim scholars in so many domains here, as there is ample scholarship regarding it,¹⁰ and new scholarship regarding the persistent pursuit of knowledge in all fields continues to appear. Works such as Ahmad Dallal’s *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History*,¹¹ Miri Shefer-Mossensohn’s *Science Among the Ottomans*,¹² Khaled El-Rouayheb’s *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*,¹³ and Asad Q. Ahmed’s *Palimpsests of Themselves: Logic and Commentary in Muslim South Asia*¹⁴ demonstrate the manner in which the pursuit of all forms of knowledge remained central to Islamic civilization in the post-classical period (ca. 600/1200–1300/1900). Sonja Brentjes’ groundbreaking *Teaching and Learning the Sciences in Islamicate Societies (800–1700)* demonstrates the manner in which “secular” sciences developed in Muslim lands and were even incorporated into madrasah curriculums.¹⁵

The historical record is not, however, the subject of this article. What I wish to focus upon is a paradigm that, in following upon the Quranic and prophetic injunctions, made knowledge central to Islamic civilizations from Africa to Indonesia and beyond. While there were multiple disciplines and many more sub-disciplines, the various subjects and fields of classical Islamic learning stood, as Wael Hallaq has put it, “in a particular relationship to one another, one that could be said to have a cohesive structure in which cross-fertilization was routine”.¹⁶ Karim Lahham underlines the epistemic unity at the heart of this cross-fertilization: “. . . the Islamic sciences possess a real unity, as shown by the interdependence of logic, metaphysics, and ethics. This interdependence is conditioned on the answer to the question of the fundamental epistemic nature and validity of knowledge (*‘ilm*)”.¹⁷ Central to this cohesion and interdependence lies the Quranic paradigm of knowledge that leads towards God and inner equilibrium, thereby establishing everything in a balance (*mīzān*)—or what Syed Naquib al-Attas refers to as “justice”:

With respect to man, we say that justice means basically a condition and situation whereby he is in his right and proper place. ‘Place’ here refers not only to his total situation in relation to others, but also to his condition in relation to his self. So the concept of justice in Islam does not only refer to relational situations of harmony and equilibrium existing between one person and another; or between the society and the state, or between the ruler and the ruled, or between the king and his subjects, but far more profoundly and fundamentally so it refers

in a primary way to the harmonious and rightly-balanced relationship existing between the man and his self.¹⁸

Integral to the maintenance of this paradigm and the pursuit of knowledge is the question of epistemology and of noetics—here I distinguish between epistemology and noetics because of the distinctly secular character that the word “epistemology” has assumed in the post-Kantian era. Knowledge is not only a question of what one knows, but of how one knows what one knows, what fields of knowledge determine others, and what modes of knowledge can be considered to provide legitimate forms of knowledge. Epistemology and noetics, how we know that we know what we know, were central concerns of Muslim scholars from the beginning of the theological debates regarding the nature of God, the nature of the sinner, and the ontological status of the Quran. Epistemology and noetics have, therefore, been analyzed extensively from the time of al-Kindī (d. 256/870) up to the present. Central to these discussions lies the question of the relationship between revelation and reason as stated by some and the relationship among revelation (*wahy*), reason (*aql*), and inspiration (*ilhām*) or unveiling (*kashf*) as stated by others.¹⁹ In the pre-modern period, this debate was developed by Muslim thinkers in part because the recognition of prophethood as a phenomenon experienced by all human collectivities required that Muslim philosophers and theologians explain not only the knowledge possessed by the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS), but also that possessed by the prophets before him.²⁰ Since this time, the need to reconcile prophetic knowledge with knowledge obtained through philosophical investigation has led to robust epistemologies wherein prophethood, inspiration or unveiling, and philosophical investigation (with all of the empirical manifestations we would today call “science”) have been conceptualized as various modes of knowing God and knowing creation (*khalq*) in relation to God, the Creator (*al-khāliq*).

For intellectuals of all disciplines, metaphysics, here meaning the understanding of first principles and of all else in relation to them, was central to the cognitive cartography whereby the links among various fields were understood, often implicitly and sometimes explicitly. One of the earliest articulations of this understanding that came to influence most other articulations is that of Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037):

As for that [science] whose generality (*umūmuhu*) is at the same level as the generality of the existent and the one (*al-mawjūd wa-l-wāḥid*), it cannot be that a science about things below this generality could be a part (*juzʿan*) of the science of this generality . . . and, indeed, it is necessary that the particular sciences are not part of this general science. Since the existent and the one are general (*āmmān*) to all subjects (*li-jamīʿ al-mawḍūʿāt*), it is thus necessary that all other sciences are below this science which investigates [the existent and the one]; and as there is no subject matter more general than these two, it cannot be that the science investigating these two is below another science.²¹

This “first science” then provides the link whereby all sciences are tied to a greater vision of the whole, such that “all the sciences share in one benefit—namely, the attainment of the human soul’s perfection in act, preparing it for happiness in the hereafter”.²² We do not have space here to review all the unique articulations of these foundational principles, from al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā to Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), Mullā Sadrā (d. 1050/1640), and beyond, that unfold in the Muslim philosophical and theological traditions. I wish to focus instead upon the foundational principles they share in common, the absence of which can be found in many expressions of Islam in the contemporary period. Foremost among these principles is an acknowledgement of the transcendent, and thus, an acknowledgement that any theory of knowing must account for knowledge that comes through revelation, and according to some, through unveiling as well,²³ the former always being recognized as superior to the latter. Even the most “rational” philosophers who adhered to a more Peripatetic method moving through predicables to syllogistic and demonstrative sciences acknowledged and even argued for the reality of revelation (though

some would not have accepted *kashf*). Ibn Rushd, the purest Aristotelian of Islamic intellectual history, goes so far as to cite Quranic verses such as Q 7:184, Q 16:25,²⁴ and Q 59:2 to argue that “Since it has been determined that the revealed law (*al-shar*) makes it obligatory to reflect upon existing things by means of the intellect, and to consider them therefore, it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon the existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning”.²⁵

Searching for *‘ilm* or knowledge is one of the central concerns, as the Quran asks, “Are those who know and those who do not know equal?” and emphasizes that “Only possessors of intellect (*ulu l-albāb*) reflect” (Q 39:9). *Albāb* in this verse literally means “piths”, “kernels”, or “cores”. “Possessors of intellect” are those who have knowledge of the inner reality of things. As per Ibn ‘Arabī, intellect can be compared to a “pith” or “kernel” of knowledge sent by God, while reason can be compared to a “shell”. One must use the latter to reach the former if one wants to employ reason effectively. From this perspective, “possessors of intellect” are those who know that reason in and of itself is not independent of revelation,²⁶ but a handmaid to it. Reason and logic in the classical Islamic tradition cannot be separated from revelation, for reason and logic can only verify claims based upon accepted postulates. They cannot provide the postulates themselves. As Karim Lahham observes, “It is the task of revelation to provide definable and recognizable references that can be brought into human understanding. Logic is given the role of providing in us an eternal order reflective of the order of creation, a role that bestows upon it, therefore, a certain sacrality”.²⁷ As such, Muslim intellectual traditions have historically acknowledged different modes of knowledge and ways of knowing beyond reason, since it cannot be an end in itself. As a famous saying employed throughout the Islamic tradition states, “Knowledge is a light which God throws into the heart of whomsoever He will”.²⁸ Regarding this matter, Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

Sound knowledge is not given by reflection, nor by what the rational thinkers establish by means of their reflective powers. Sound knowledge is only that which God throws into the heart of the knower. It is a divine light for which God singles out any of His servants whom He will, whether angel, messenger, prophet, friend, or person of faith. He who has no unveiling has no knowledge.²⁹

Second among the characteristics that define the Islamic intellectual tradition is that refined thinking allows one to discern between truth and falsehood no matter whose tongue or pen articulates it. As ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) is reported to have said: “Do not know truth through men. Know truth and then you will know its people”.³⁰ Commenting upon this saying, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) writes, “Those with weak minds know truth by men, not men by truth”.³¹ He then advises that one learn to sift truth from falsehood and likens this process to that of a moneychanger who does not reject everything a counterfeiter brings outright, but instead uses his knowledge of true currency and false currency to sort the good from the bad and make use of the good. This position encapsulates both al-Ghazālī’s method and the broader unity of the religious and non-religious sciences wherein “each science, even each theory, should be evaluated on its own merits. In that way. . . even a science that is normally stigmatized as impious can be of benefit whenever it is correct”.³²

Such discernment is not only a question of how we know and what we know, but also a question of what we are, of the ontological and teleological reality of the human being. As al-Ghazālī writes, “knowledge is the end destined for man and his special characteristic for which he was created”.³³ As he puts it in *The Book of Knowledge of the Reviver (Iḥyā)*, “The intellect is the noblest attribute the human being possesses. . . since through it one agrees to take on God’s trust, and by it one achieves proximity to God”.³⁴ The science of how we know is thus directly related to the science of what we are and the manner in which we achieve our final ends. Allusion to this connection between knowledge and our final ends can be seen in the famous *ḥadīth*, wherein the Prophet (SAWS) was asked, “Who is the most intelligent of believers?” To which he replied, “The most frequent in recalling death, and best prepared for what follows it, they are the most intelligent”.³⁵

From this perspective, an absence of epistemologies that are grounded in the classical Islamic tradition and conversant with the classical tradition has radical implications for Islamic civilization as a whole, for the relation between the Divine and the human, and for individual salvation. Yet, as many contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Syed Naquib al-Attas, Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have observed, in the face of the challenges posed by Western domination, reform movements of all stripes often serve more to undermine Islamic civilization and its intellectual traditions than to support them by failing to analyze the forms of knowledge they adopt. Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān begins his masterful analysis of this trend, *The Spirit of Modernity (Rūḥ al-Ḥādāthah)*, with the following observation:

Who can deny that Muslim society is enduring grave spiritual challenges just as it is enduring grave material challenges. At the forefront of the spiritual challenges it confronts lies an intellectual perplexity represented by a great conceptual strife from which it knows no escape, since it does not cease to be inundated by a multiplicity of concepts fashioned by other societies. It has wandered aimlessly through the subtleties and complexities of these concepts, not to mention their labyrinths and snares, unable to fully grasp them and with no capacity to effectively reject them. The reality is that so long as Muslim society does not find the way towards developing its own concepts or reformulating the concepts of others as if they were *ab initio* its own, there is no hope of escaping this intellectual perplexity that afflicts the minds of those within it.³⁶

Awed by the technological achievements of Western civilization, many have freely surrendered the ground of intellectuality to the secular humanistic and scientific (as opposed to scientific)³⁷ world-view that gave rise to them.³⁸ In doing so, they have relied upon epistemologies that are not simply foreign to classical Muslim epistemologies, but even opposed to them, because they are grounded in a paradigm that denies the very idea of the transcendent, one that relies upon an illusion of metaphysical neutrality to abolish metaphysics, the science of first principles, as such.³⁹

In the analysis of al-Attas, adopting foreign epistemological paradigms and seeking to graft them onto Islam leads to a situation wherein “we have weak Muslims and weak and dangerous leaders whose comprehension and knowledge of Islām is stunted at the level of immaturity, and because of this Islām itself is erroneously made to appear as if ‘undeveloped’ or ‘misdeveloped’ or left to stagnate”.⁴⁰ What al-Attas refers to here is a loss of epistemic confidence, which leads many Muslims to seek epistemic models that do not appear to be too “Islamic”, that is, models that allow some space for Muslim thinkers without offending the secularist sensibilities of their Euro-American epistemological overlords. Regarding this trend, Karim Lahham observes, “The uncritical adoption of neo-positivist natural sciences and their attendant philosophical outlooks in the present context of the Islamic world is symptomatic of a universal tendency that has spread irrespective of creed, belief, or theological affiliation”.⁴¹ As a result, the *postulates* provided by an overarching understanding of first principles are replaced by the *hypotheses* inherent to the modern secular weltanschauung. This results from and perpetuates a truncated presentation of intellectual texts and traditions in Islamicate lands, which leads in turn to monstrous misinterpretations that further subconscious submission to the epistemic sovereignty of the West, a submission that is necessary for inclusion in its power structures. As Homi Bhabha puts it, “Orientalism does not allow for native agency”. The “native” is thus only given or allowed a voice once they have been culturally, ideologically, and epistemically conscripted.⁴² Once conscripted, individuals are then allowed to have a stage or a voice, so long as it can be seen as contributing to the continuing production of epistemologically and politically domesticated subjects. If the “native” decides to challenge the epistemic hierarchy imposed by the colonial power, they are often termed “dogmatic”, “essentialist”, “non-critical”, “essentialist”, and so on. These terms are undoubtedly effective to annihilate an entire apparatus of knowledge and reshape the cognitive cartography of classical Islam,

a process that Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as “epistemicide”, or the murder of knowledge.⁴³

Social practices are knowledge practices, but they can only be recognized as such to the extent that they are the mirror image of scientific knowledge. Whatever knowledge does not fit the image is discarded as a form of ignorance. The single view, rather than being a natural phenomenon, is the ur-product of the creative destruction of modern science. The epistemological privilege that modern science grants to itself is thus the result of the destruction of all alternative knowledges that could eventually question such privilege. It is, in other words, a product of what I called in a previous chapter *epistemicide*. The destruction of knowledge is not an epistemological artifact without consequences. It involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledges.⁴⁴

Wael Hallaq in *Reforming Modernity* demonstrates how the forms and modalities of knowledge in Islamic tradition have come to near-extinction due to the hegemony of Euro-American thought and the “structural genocide”⁴⁵ of colonialism. As per Hallaq,

The death of ‘ilm-education, of the traditional scholarly circle (*halaqa*), and of the *madrassa* signaled the effective extinction of an entire sociology of knowledge, of a hermeneutic that governed the production of a particular kind of knowledge. The destruction of this system was so colossal that one is compelled to describe it as a *structural genocide*, the annihilation of an entire apparatus of knowledge understood as both a system and a particular way of living in the world.⁴⁶

From this perspective, epistemicide is a central component of structural genocide. Hallaq continues,

This was the death of a habitus, of a particular way of honing the self within a communal and socioepistemically shared environment, with its own doxa and fairly unique assumptions. . . by 1900 or thereabouts, there was not a single ṣūfī master, an Adab writer, a Qur’ān commentator, a Ḥadīth specialist, a Mutakallim, or a metaphysician left who could operate and produce works within the relevant tradition that had thrived only a century earlier. For the forms of knowledge and the modalities of their production have undergone a profound change, not least due to the hegemonic influx of Western modes of thought.⁴⁷

With the independence of many nation states across the Global South, direct imperial colonialism might have ended for many. Nonetheless, coloniality, the “mode of thought that legitimizes colonialism (and neo-colonialism) while espousing universalism”⁴⁸ as a model of power, continues.⁴⁹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres provides a lucid explanation of the difference between colonialism and coloniality:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.⁵⁰

The model of power perpetuated by coloniality maintains a paradigm of structural domination wherein non-Western epistemologies are seen as incapable of rigorous intellectual thinking.⁵¹ Being epistemically conscripted into a paradigm centered upon the sovereignty of Euro-American epistemologies leads in turn to epistemic erosion, where, as a civilization, Muslims are, too often, no longer able to think in line with their traditions,

but must employ paradigms from outside to even conceptualize their place in the world. This state of affairs results from a persistent and systemic assault on the epistemic viability of classical Islamic intellectual traditions.

In the European tradition, the first stages in the demolition of classical Islamic paradigms came through the likes of Ernest Renan, Ignaz Goldziher,⁵² and Theodore Nöldeke. The details of these discursive reductions in areas as diverse as Quranic studies, Islamic law, and Islamic philosophy have begun to be addressed in recent scholarship. Their overarching ethos and discourse are analyzed in detail by Edward Said and a host of others. What I wish to address here are the subsequent processes of epistemic conscription, whereby many Muslims become complicit in undermining their own traditions. Muslims of all stripes, especially those of us in the vaunted halls of academia, know that they must adhere to a system that recognizes the epistemic sovereignty of the secular Euro-American paradigm if they are to gain recognition or even be heard within it. Citing classical Muslim thinkers is all well and good but must be done within an epistemic framework that acknowledges the superiority of post-Enlightenment paradigms and makes these scholars second-class citizens whose ideas are fit to be catalogued but must not be drawn upon for “knowledge production”. It is an underlying premise of the modern Euro-American academy (a creed in the “religion of progress”) that non-Western epistemologies are fit to be an object of investigation or analysis but are not fit to be the tools of analysis through which we might understand texts and the world or through which we might analyze dominant Eurocentric epistemologies. As Amy Allen observes, “By taking the European path of development as normative, and viewing non-European cultures and peoples as less developed or as non- or premodern, progressive or developmental theories of history serve as an ideological rationalization and justification for ongoing racism, neoracism, colonialism, and neoimperialism”.⁵³

The acute obsessions of many academics aiming to connect the particulars of their traditions to the Western hegemonic universal worsens the situation, as these obsessions gradually result in Eurocentric biases when applying theories to understand a particular culture rather than consulting the traditions of the culture being theorized about. Even if the text and the individual(s) analyzing the text are of the same cultural or religious background, the theoretical model employed to analyze the text is generated from outside of the culture. The opposite, however, rarely applies to Eurocentric and Anglo-American theory, which produces its own self-reflexive theory that is assumed to be impervious to outsiders theorizing about it from perspectives that emerge from beyond the Euro-American academy. The tendency to employ foreign theoretical models concurrently produces intellectual mystification and fantasies about the studied subject.⁵⁴ In an Islamic context, once this Eurocentric paradigm is privileged and adopted, the various disciplines of the classical tradition come to be conceptualized through foreign categories that deny the cohesive cross-fertilization among fields and subfields that, as Hallaq observes, characterized classical Islamic learning. For example, the interpenetration of Sufism and Shariah as two fields that together defined the moral outlook of Islamic societies is not only ignored, but repudiated to a point where the mention of Sufism remains anathema in many circles, and, even when allowed, is often denied the epistemic validity it enjoyed in pre-modern times.⁵⁵ One of the reasons for this denial is the forceful imposition of the Eurocentric lens to philosophize or theorize classical Islamic writings where meaningful intellectual communications within the tradition and a non-hegemonic engagement within traditions are largely absent. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues,

Because of the lack of discernment which characterizes the modern world and which is to be seen often even more among Westernized Orientals, Muslim and otherwise, than among Westerners themselves, all kinds of fantastic excesses on both sides have prevented for the most part a meaningful intellectual communication and a comparative study of philosophy and metaphysics worthy of the name. The greatest gnostics and saints have often been compared with sceptics, and different levels of inspiration have been totally confused. A Tolstoy has

been called a Mahatma; Hume's denial of causality has been related to Ash'arite theology on the one hand and to Buddhism on the other; Shankara has been compared with the German idealists, and Nietzsche with Rumi. Western students of Oriental doctrines have usually tried to reduce these doctrines to "profane" philosophy, and modernized Orientals, often burdened by the half-hidden sense of inferiority to which allusion has already been made, have tried to give respectability to the same doctrines and to "elevate" them by giving them the honor of being in harmony with the thought of this or that Western philosopher, who in fact is usually out of vogue in the West itself by the time such comparisons are made. On both sides, usually, the relation of the "philosophy" in question to the experience or direct knowledge of the Truth which is the source of this "philosophy" is forgotten, and levels of reality are confused.⁵⁶

This precedence of the Western philosophical tradition over marginalized philosophical traditions is a product and perpetuation of systemic institutional racism. As Jay Garfield writes when addressing the academic treatment of Buddhist philosophy:

Ignoring the philosophical traditions of other cultures in fact, whether we like it or not, continues the colonial project of subordinating those cultures to our own. That project was "justified" by the white man's burden of bringing civilization to the benighted heathen, a burden of which we can only make sense if we deny their manifestly existent intellectual traditions the epistemic status we grant ours. Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as "philosophy" while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions, . . . hence implicates us directly in institutional racism. Recognizing that we are so implicated and refraining from changing our individual practice and from working to change our institutional practice hence constitutes, however passive it may be, individual racism.⁵⁷

What Garfield points to is the manner in which classical intellectual traditions of non-Western civilizations are hermeneutically marginalized in favor of methodologies of secular origin whose superiority is assumed. This assumption is largely unchallenged even among the proponents of postmodernity and postcoloniality.⁵⁸ Amy Allen argues that the progressive and developmentalist reading of history in which the West or Europe is perceived as more developed or enlightened than other parts of the world is predominant within postcolonial scholarship and that it is deeply intertwined with the civilizing mission of the West, which justified imperialism and colonialism and continues to justify neocolonialism of the current political, legal, and economic order of the World. "In other words, as James Tully has pithily put the point, the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people".⁵⁹

The developmentalist and progressive reading of history, which has served as the justification for the civilizing mission of the West and continues to underwrite the informal imperialism of the neo-colonial world, remains at the core of modern Islamic Studies. Many scholars in Euro-American academia and beyond remain epistemologically committed to the very structures of colonialism and imperialism that they condemn morally and politically. This creates a gaping hermeneutical inequality by denying epistemic validity to the very sources being analyzed. The subordination and exclusion of certain modes of inquiry and knowledge marginalizes many of the noetic and hermeneutic modes that have had central value to Muslims in many lands. When reduced to an object of study, Islamic intellectual traditions are denied full hermeneutical participation in their own definition. Unfortunately, many unwittingly participate in this process of hermeneutic marginalization by accepting Euro-American definitions of their traditions and a universal humanism that ignores, belittles, or even denies the cognitive hierarchy of which said traditions partake. In the name of progress, this approach perpetuates structural epistemic prejudices that discriminate against their own traditions, exclude them from participation in addressing contemporary exigencies, and require that they be denatured if they are to be considered at all.

Like any academic discipline, Islamic Studies is a historically situated development that is built upon fundamental presuppositions and normative ideals. As with all dimensions of the Euro-American academy, Islamic Studies remains mired in a Hegelian mode of geneological inquiry, which, as Linda Alcoff observes, leads to an “epistemology of imperialism” wherein “all knowledge is perspectival, but all perspectives are not equal”.⁶⁰ By viewing their traditions through foreign paradigms, Muslim intellectuals too often participate in and perpetuate their own epistemic and hermeneutic marginalization. This only extends the epistemic humiliation that has dire consequences for Muslim societies. Many Muslim academics and intellectuals have in effect adopted the “residual prejudices” of secular modernity, while ignoring the fact that secular modernity has its own politics, which “do not necessarily coincide with the needs, visions and desires of everyone in the planet”.⁶¹ Miranda Fricker identifies “residual prejudice” as a situation wherein one has so deeply adopted societal norms that one may hold prejudicial images and presuppositions alongside conflicting beliefs.⁶² It is a most insidious form of prejudice because it creates a situation where the oppressed view themselves through the lens of their oppressors and thus, act in ways that perpetuate their oppression. This process of internalization is then central to building an epistemic universe of “hermeneutical injustice”⁶³ that perpetuates “a world which yields [one] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world”.⁶⁴ As per Fricker,

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, then, is to be understood not only in terms of the subject’s being unfairly disadvantaged by some collective hermeneutical lacuna, but also in terms of the very construction (constitutive and/or causal) of selfhood. In certain social contexts, hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be. . .hermeneutical injustice is not inflicted by any agent, but rather is caused by a feature of the collective hermeneutical resource—a one-off blind spot (in incidental cases), or (in systematic cases) a lacuna generated by a structural identity prejudice in the hermeneutical repertoire.⁶⁵

Among many Muslim thinkers, academics, and politicians, we witness a residual internalization of foreign epistemic norms that influences the perception of one’s own intellectual traditions. Through this residual internalization, many perceive themselves through the lens of an oppressive ideology. Tradition is the living, fluid application of principles to the exigencies of the moment, a negotiation between conceptions of the transcendent and the reality in which we live today. In “traditionalism” the great contributions of the classical tradition, the texts that preserve this ongoing negotiation, are too often truncated and presented with trite and hackneyed phrases that reduce them to empty ideologies. Reduced in this way to an object of study or to rapid slogans, Islamic intellectual traditions are denied full hermeneutical participation in their own definition. They may be allowed some role in shaping the private lives of Muslims (though even this is increasingly maligned) but are denied any role in the public sphere. Some directly support the oppressive ideology, seeing any intrusion of Islam into the public sphere as evidence of extremism. Others support it subliminally even though that ideology does not accord with their beliefs. The subliminal support is often a result of the more outward forms of adaptation. The direct intentional internalization and the subliminal internalization then work hand in hand to maintain and perpetuate systemic institutional injustices wherein the epistemic authority of most modes of thought are evaluated based upon whether or not they originate from the West, adhere to Western paradigms, or can at least be made to appear to be in accordance with Western paradigms.⁶⁶

Such an intellectual culture creates a dynamic wherein the epistemic authority of methodologies and epistemologies of Euro-American origin have what Fricker refers to as a “credibility excess”, while methodologies and epistemologies from the Islamic world have a “credibility deficit”. Any real epistemic transformation requires that we confront these residual prejudices within ourselves, within our educational institutions,

and within society at large. Until and unless we do so, we remain active participants in our own “hermeneutic marginalization”. This leads to a situation wherein many Muslims feel alienated from anything that is consonant with paradigms derived from pre-modern Muslim discourses and experience a sense of “hermeneutical gloom” when seeking to countenance their own traditions in the contemporary context or to apply the observations or even methodologies of Muslim theologians, philosophers, and Sufi scholars to the exigencies of the contemporary condition.

Such marginalization results from and perpetuates epistemic colonization, wherein methodologies or forms of knowledge that pose viable alternatives to Eurocentric epistemologies are impoverished and ghettoized, while other forms of knowledge are obliterated or curtailed until any epistemic challenge they may present to dominant epistemologies can be comfortably confined to the condition of artifacts to be displayed in museums as examples of so-called “traditional” knowledge.⁶⁷ The project of coloniality and the geopolitics of knowledge have placed modernity as the “civilization project” of the West, which systematically makes sure to negate and subordinate “other” knowledges, frameworks, thinkers, and subjects.⁶⁸ Those who then seek to reassert the primacy or even validity of modes of interpretation by which non-Western peoples understand themselves, their histories, and their texts and through which they present themselves to others are said to be “naïve” or “nostalgic” and labeled as “romantics”, “apologists”, “traditionalists”, “fundamentalists”, or even “terrorists”.

For Muslims to counter the multiple modalities of epistemic colonization does not require that one ignore modern secular intellectual discourse. To do so is in fact not effective, as one cannot avoid the presence of the modern colonial world and the prevalence of coloniality in most fields. The modes of thought transmitted from the West must instead be analyzed in depth and critiqued from within an Islamic frame, not from a position of epistemic subordination and contemporary traditions of victimhood. This requires that the cognitive cartography from which the Islamic sciences emerge and in which they participate be understood. Celebrating the contributions of individual scholars such as Ibn Rushd or Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) has its place, but failure to understand the metaphysical and epistemological universe that gave rise to them risks relegating their contributions to artifacts or mere symbols and allows them to be treated as “exceptions”. Treating them as exceptions then allows their very achievements to be employed as a subtle means by which to misrepresent the dynamic intellectual culture from which they arose. Such misrepresentations play a central role in coloniality, as they perpetuate the myth that modern thought is more subtle, nuanced, and dynamic than that of pre-modern civilizations.⁶⁹

The cognitive hierarchy of which such thinkers are a part and which gave rise to their contributions is the very thing that needs to be better understood, for, as Caner Dagli observes, each was part of “a thriving culture of ultimate questions” and their works contribute to ongoing debates within it. As Dagli explains, this culture

was sustained mostly from within three realms of discourse: *falsafah*, *kalām*, and *taṣawwuf*, loosely translatable as philosophy, theology, and mysticism. It was among these thinkers and practitioners—luminaries such as al-Ghazālī, Rumi, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Mullā Ṣadrā, and countless others—that ultimate questions were posed and explored, and it is their writings and works of art that we should cherish as a storehouse of wisdom, insight, and intellectual profundity. Muslim thinkers across these three disciplines—especially in the era before colonialism and the encroachment of modernism—had developed, through argument, elaboration, refutation, and engagement with each other, a marvelously limber, rich, and stable way to both frame issues and explain their competing and often profoundly diverse points of view. We need to study them, learn from their example, and continue their work in a way that makes sense for us.⁷⁰

To continue their work requires that we reject the hermeneutical marginalization that the secular frame requires of all non-Western philosophical systems and move towards epistemological paradigms that are cognizant of the contributions of non-Muslim civilizations and in dialogue with them, but do not enter into such dialogue from a position of epistemic subordination. As Walter Mignolo observes:

The ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectations’ are di-verse, or rather, pluri-verse -what each diverse local history has in common with others is the fact that they all have to deal with the unavoidable presence of the modern/colonial world and its power differentials, which start with racial classification and end up ranking the planet (e.g., First, Second and Third World was a racialization of politics, economy, cultures and knowledge). Thus, the pluriversity of each local history and its narrative of decolonization can connect through that common experience and use it as the basis for a new common logic of knowing: border thinking. That is, the fact of having to imagine a future that is not the future that those in Washington, or London, or Paris, or Berlin would like the people of the world to have can bring together all those who have been contacted in various ways by them.⁷¹

The dialogue with non-Muslim civilizations has another important aspect and that is to work together in challenging the “monologic modernity”⁷² under which we all are suffering at different levels. Muslims have historically been a “middle nation” (*ummah wāsiṭah*) in which variegated intellectual traditions from many lands cross fertilized one-another. Recovering the depth and breadth of that tradition can serve not only to address the epistemic alienation and psychological dislocation afflicting many Muslims, but also to provide pluriversal models for alternative modes of governance, economics, and education that, being grounded in the recognition of an ontological hierarchy, come closer to serving the fundamental needs of all.

Conclusions

Islamic epistemologies are variegated and are not all in accord with one another, but they do have a common underlying paradigm wherein the meaning of existence, the reality of the human being, and the intelligibility of creation is conceptualized in relation to the Real, the Absolute, God. The knowledge that derives from such conceptualizations is not only knowledge of facts and information; it also seeks knowledge of things as they are in themselves, knowledge in which everything is directly or indirectly conceptualized in relation to God, the relations between things are understood on the basis of their relationship with God, and there is an implicit cognitive hierarchy among the sciences. Muslim epistemologies cannot operate within the cognitive cartography of secular humanism, which reduces intelligibles to a corpuscular empiricism. A Muslim postcolonial approach must prioritize reinstating the cognitive order with an overarching understanding of the ontological order that informed all modes of intellectual investigation from the first centuries of Islam until the dawn of the modern era. Such an endeavor will contribute to a more holistic understanding of Muslim intellectual traditions and better enable the application of their teachings to the exigencies of contemporary humanity.

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Notes

¹ All translations of the Quran are modifications of the translation in (Nasr et al. 2015).

² Several other verses in the Quran that contrast the blind and the seeing are also read as references to the primacy of knowledge; see Q 6:50, 11:24, 13:16.

- 3 The verse most frequently cited in this context is Q 17:82: *We send down from the Quran that which is a cure and a mercy for the*
believers. See also Q 9:14, 10:57, 26:80, 41:44.
- 4 (Gwynne 2004).
- 5 Trimidhī 2682; Abū Dāwūd 3641; Ibn Mājah 223.
- 6 Tirmidhī 2685.
- 7 Ibn Mājah 224.
- 8 Tirmidhī 2647.
- 9 Ibn Mājah 226.
- 10 The classic texts for examining the importance of knowledge in Islam remain Franz Rosenthal’s *Knowledge Triumphant*, Sebastian
 Günther’s (ed.) *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam*, and George Maksidi’s *Religion, Law, and Learning in Classical Islam*.
- 11 (Dallal 2012).
- 12 (Shefer-Mossensohn 2015).
- 13 (El-Rouayheb 2015).
- 14 (Ahmed 2022).
- 15 (Brentjes 2018).
- 16 (Hallaq 2018, p. 76).
- 17 (Lahham 2015, p. 3).
- 18 (al-Attas 1993, p. 76).
- 19 For a detailed examination of this question and how it pertains to “knowing things as they are”, see (Spiker 2021).
- 20 For discussions of the philosophical examination of the concept of prophethood, see (Rahman 2011).
- 21 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifā*, *Burhān* II.7.165.3–7, p. 108.
- 22 (AVICENNA 2005, p. 13).
- 23 Whether non-prophetic “knowledge from on high” (*al-ilm al-ladunī*), often known as “unveiling” (*kashf*), had epistemological
 validity has been debated throughout Islamic history. Nonetheless, while there has been debate as to how to provide a
 valid philosophical explanation for “prophethood” (*nubuwwah*), there has been widespread agreement that prophethood is
 epistemologically valid.
- 24 “Call unto the way of your Lord with wisdom, and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner”.
 (Q 16:125).
- 25 (Ibn Rushd 2001, p. 3).
- 26 Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* III 120.32–35.
- 27 (Lahham 2021, p. 79).
- 28 This saying is cited throughout the Islamic tradition with slightly different wording, often with no attribution. Some attribute it
 to the second Sunni caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644).
- 29 (Chittick 1989, p. 170).
- 30 This saying attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib evokes a principle that comes to be central to al-Ghazālī’s methodology. It is also cited
 in the *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn* (vol. I, p. 195), and in *Mizān al-‘Amal*.
- 31 (al-Ghazālī 1996, p. 546).
- 32 (al-Akiti 2009, p. 60).
- 33 (al-Ghazālī 2013, vol. 5, p. 34).
- 34 *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 1, p. 52.
- 35 Ibn Mājah, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, 31.
- 36 (Abd al-Raḥmān 2016, p. 11).
- 37 This distinction is made by (Smith 1984, p. 9): “There is a sharp yet oft-overlooked distinction between scientific knowledge
 and scientific belief. And the difference is simple: authentic knowledge of a scientific kind refers necessarily to things that are
 observable in some specific sense, and affirms a verifiable truth; scientific belief, on the other hand, is distinguished precisely by
 the absence of these positivistic attributes”. Smith goes on to argue that most of the theories that the common educated person
 takes at face value as scientific propositions are in fact scientific beliefs arising from the bias of secular humanism.
- 38 (Lumbard 2009, p. 40).
- 39 As Karim Lahham observes, “the underlying structure of metaphysics that imbues all theoretical knowledge ensures that the
 fetidness of reason can never strangle transcendent aspirations, as metaphysics ensures that the framework of knowledge
 belongs to *theoria*, ensuring the necessity of vision for the completion or perfection of the cognitive process”. (Lahham 2021,
 p. xi).
- 40 (al-Attas 1993, p. 119).

- 41 (Lahham 2021, p. 2).
- 42 (Bhabha 1983, p. 200).
- 43 “Epistemicide” is a term coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos by which he refers to the death of the knowledge of the subordinate culture and social groups for the loss of epistemological confidence (de Sousa Santos 2016, p. 92).
- 44 (de Sousa Santos 2016, pp. 152–53).
- 45 The annihilation of an entire apparatus of knowledge.
- 46 (Hallaq 2019, p. 7).
- 47 (de Sousa Santos 2016, pp. 7–8).
- 48 (Salaymeh 2021, p. 253). As Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein observe, “coloniality essentially was an interstate system within a hierarchical layer where the formal colonies were situated at the bottom. Whereas colonialism has ended, coloniality continues in the form of socio-cultural hierarchy originated by colonialism”. (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992, p. 550).
- 49 (Walsh 2007, p. 229).
- 50 (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 243).
- 51 (Walsh 2007, p. 229).
- 52 For a detailed analysis of the manner in which Ignaz Goldziher undermines classical Islamic paradigms to fit Islam within the intellectual cartography of Euro-American secularism, see Lena Salaymeh, “The ‘good Orientalist’”, in (Salaymeh 2022).
- 53 (Allen 2016, p. 17).
- 54 (Lawal 1996, p. xvi).
- 55 In this move to “other” Sufism and myriad “esoteric traditions”, such as the occult sciences, both modernist and conservative trends within Islam mirror the Enlightenment modernist trend wherein esoteric traditions were “constructed during the eighteenth century as the polemical Other of modernity” in the process of defining its own identity (Hanegraaff 2012, p. 374). For analysis of this process in the development of Euro-American intellectual identity, see (Hanegraaff 2012).
- 56 (Nasr 2001, pp. 42–43).
- 57 (Garfield 2002, p. 260).
- 58 (Maldonado-Torres 2008, p. 375).
- 59 (Allen 2016, p. 3).
- 60 (Alcoff 1996, p. 206).
- 61 (Mignolo 2007, p. 488).
- 62 (Fricker 2007, p. 1).
- 63 By “hermeneutical injustice”, Fricker refers to an injustice “caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources”. Ibid. p. 1.
- 64 (Owen 2007, p. xii).
- 65 (Fricker 2007, p. 168).
- 66 (Melvin-Koushki 2021).
- 67 (Nygren 1999).
- 68 (Walsh 2007, p. 234).
- 69 As Ngugi wa Thiong’o observes, “Cultural imperialism in the era of neo-colonialism can be a more dangerous cancer because it can take new, subtle forms. It can hide under cloaks of militant nationalism, calls for dead authenticity, performances of cultural symbolism” (wa Thiong’o 1997, p. 10).
- 70 (Dagli 2017, p. 15).
- 71 (Mignolo 2007, pp. 497–98).
- 72 (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 261).

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