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# Towards an International Dialogue

# Relevant knowledge for dialogue: applicability, demystification and advocacy

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## Introduction

Dialogue literally refers to a conversation between two people. What we have in mind here, however, is more than just that. What we have in mind is a conversation on a subject of common interest between two or more individuals or parties whose beliefs are informed by differing worldviews. The ultimate aim of such dialogue is to achieve a level of appreciation, understanding, interest and compassion for the views of the other. The human sciences have a role to play in facilitating this dialogue both in public dis-

course and in formal education. For dialogue to be successful, it should have certain characteristics. Three such characteristics are discussed in this paper:

i. the conceptual vocabulary of the dialogue should be free of ethnocentrism. In other words, the conceptual language of the dialogue should not be drawn exclusively from one civilizational or religious tradition;
ii. discourse that informs the dialogue should be liberating in the sense that it should be intellectually demystifying; and
iii. the dialogue should be impactful upon the people who are the subjects of the dialogue, that is, dialogue should have an advocacy element. In other words, the knowledge that informs dialogue should be relevant.



The purpose of this paper is to present examples of what relevant knowledge means in relation to dialogue. This is done by theorising relevance itself, by way of establishing certain sociological criteria of relevance. In this paper, I discuss different types of relevant knowledge. In the next section, the problem of the relevance of knowledge is introduced. A typology of irrelevance is provided. The main types are conceptual, value, mimetic and topical irrelevance. Included under conceptual irrelevance are two types, namely, the inapplicability of theories and concepts, and their sophistry, perversion and mystification. In these cases, bodies of knowledge can be said to be irrelevant when they are inapplicable or when they mystify through false and vicious reasoning, or by veiling re-

ality. In the sections that follow I provide examples of relevant knowledge. An example of a body of knowledge that is conceptually irrelevant is from the study of religion. An example of discourse that is conceptually relevant in the sense that it demystifies dominant perspectives is the critique of Islamic economics. Value irrelevance refers to the disconnectedness of knowledge from its political, economic and cultural milieu. An example of a discourse of value relevance is that which critically deals with sectarian persecution. I illustrate what such a discourse might be like with recourse to the case of the persecution of Shi'ites in Malaysia.

## The problem of relevance of knowledge



Among the problems of the social sciences in the Third World which are peculiar to the state of postcolonialism is that of their irrelevance. What is clear from the literature of the last forty years is the strong awareness of a lack of fit between Western theory and non-Western realities. Many examples have been noted of the irrelevance or non-applicability of Western concepts, theories and assumptions.[1] Epistemological issues concerning the reliability of claims to truth or the origin of knowledge are common to social sciences in both the countries of their origin as well as in postcolonial societies. The problem of irrelevance is not confined to epistemology.

1. Alatas, "The captive mind and creative development"; Alatas, "The captive mind and development studies"; Fahim, "Indigenous Anthropology"; Fahim & Helmer, "Indigenous Anthropology"; Parekh, "The poverty of Indian political theory"; Pieris, "The implantation of Sociology in Asia"; Singh Uberoi, "Science and Swaraj".

Nevertheless, sociological or philosophical approaches concerned with the questions of objectivity or the social basis of knowledge have generally not raised irrelevance as a problem. Objectivity and the social basis on knowledge are universal concerns, whereas the problem of irrelevance is peculiar to the social sciences of some societies. It is necessary first to conceptualise irrelevance by way of presenting a preliminary typology of the phenomenon.

A review of the vast literature on the state of the social sciences in various non-Western and postcolonial societies reveals a number of problems said to beset the social sciences in these areas, which we may understand as constituting various types of irrelevance. There are a number of theoretical perspectives that address the state of the social sciences in postcolonial societies, such as Orientalism,[2] academic dependency theory,[3] the theory of mental captivity,[4] postcolonial theory, and other critiques of the social sciences which detect problems in the application and practice of North American and European social science in postcolonial contexts. Each of the problems identified can be understood as illustrating a type of irrelevance, as follows:



I. From the theory of mental captivity we may derive an understanding of irrelevance as typifying social science

2. Said, *Orientalism*; Said, *Culture and imperialism*.

3. Altbach, "Servitude of the mind?"; Alatas, "Academic dependency and the global division of labour"; Sinha-Kerkhoff & Alatas, *Academic dependency in the social sciences*.

4. Alatas, "The captive mind and creative development"; Alatas, "The captive mind and development studies".

that is defined by the inability to raise original problems and to devise original methods of problem-solving. This leads to the "unreality of basic assumptions, misplaced abstraction, ignorance or misinterpretation of data, and an erroneous conception of problems and their significance" in social science[5] and the alienation of the social-science enterprise from its surroundings.

II. The theory of mental captivity also discusses redundancy as a problem.[6] The uncritical imitation of redundant propositions (those already known) provides us with yet another aspect of irrelevance, that is, unimportance or triviality.

III. Yet another aspect of irrelevance is that of unaccordance or disparity as, for example, between assumptions and reality, a point that has been made by all the theories of social science referred to above.



IV. Inapplicability, as in the inapplicability of a certain theory, is also an aspect of irrelevance. The theories of Orientalism, Eurocentrism and postcolonial criticism have tirelessly demonstrated how inapplicable theories are unwillingly forced onto data and end up in the form of problematic constructions.

V. Irrelevance also connotes sophistry, perversion and mystification. Here we speak of social science as irrelevant when it mystifies through false and vicious reasoning while at the same time being sophistic and sophisticated. The irrelevance lies in the ability of the social

5. Alatas, "The captive mind and development studies", p. 11.

6. *Idem*, p. 12.

sciences to make attractive claims to truth which are illogical, unsound, or groundless.

VI. Irrelevance also implies inferiority. Here we refer to inferior, mediocre or shallow social science that gains a respectability in the non-Western outbacks that far outweighs its ideal powers.

VII. The irrelevant, servile (alien, other-empowering) commitment of many social scientists to social-science agendas originating from without represents another type of irrelevance.

Each of these types of irrelevance, that is, empowerment of others, alienation, triviality, discordance, inapplicability, mystification and inferiority, can be seen to plague the social sciences at different levels.



i. *Conceptual irrelevance*—The study of the history and logic of concept formation in the social sciences reveals how concepts derived from one cultural language are elevated to the level of universal concepts and comparative dimensions, the application of which veils discrepancies between text and reality.[7] An example would be the use of concepts from the sociology of religion such as church, sect and even religion itself to talk about Islam. Durkheim was possibly guilty of this. The manner in which he treated magic, for example, was according to the self-understanding of Christianity.[8] Irrelevance of types IV and V are found in this category.

7. Matthes, "The operation called 'Vergleichen'".

8. Personal communication with Professor Joachim Matthes, Singapore, September 13, 1997.

ii. *Value irrelevance*—As mentioned earlier, the role of values in prioritizing research according to extra- or non-academic criteria must be taken into account in understanding the establishment and perpetuation of research agendas in the social sciences. An example of this problem comes from Egypt, where researchers complain of funds being spent on surveys to find out what people think of the veil, a topic deemed to be of low priority.[9] Often value commitments prevail that are not rooted in the immediate surroundings of the researcher. Irrelevance of type VIII is found in this category.

iii. *Mimetic irrelevance*—This refers to the uncritical adoption of theories, concepts and methods from external sources, which, due to uncritical and imitative treatment, results in redundancy, mystification and mediocrity. Included in this category are irrelevance of types III, VI and VII.

iv. *Topical irrelevance*—This arises when what is deemed to be problematic is not obvious but rather remains in the midst of expected familiarity, in the "field of the unproblematic".[10] Irrelevance of type II comes under this category.



It follows that what must be regarded as relevance is the reverse of all that has been presented above as irrelevance. Relevant social science would then refer to an original, significant (non-redundant), concordant (referring to concordance between assumption and reality), applicable, demysti-

9. Personal communication with Dr. Ezzat Hegazy, Cairo, June 1997.

10. Schutz, *Reflections on the problem of relevance*, p. 25.

fying and superior tradition which can be seen to exist at all levels of sociological activities. The sociological criteria of relevance can be derived by putting into reverse the four categories of irrelevance, as follows:

i. *Conceptual relevance*—This requires rethinking the universality of concepts and comparative dimensions, by first of all establishing non-dominant cultural languages as sources and then working to develop truly universal or canopy categories. What would an anthropology or a sociology of religion look like if its concepts were derived from Islam rather than Christianity? The classification of religion may not include Catholicism and Protestantism under the same category of Christianity, because their doctrines and rituals differ too greatly to warrant their inclusion under one religion. Such an approach to religion would be as ethnocentric as the Eurocentric study of religion that it sets out to correct. The task would be to move beyond such one-sided constructions.

ii. *Value relevance*—This refers to the selection of values that we establish as a criterion or standard for selecting research topics and drawing up research agenda, as well as for policy-making and advocacy.

iii. *Mimetic relevance*—Mimesis can be turned into a virtue in the context of endogenous intellectual creativity, which requires self-consciousness of the problem of irrelevance at both the individual and institutional levels.

iv. *Topical relevance*—This requires the ability to discover problems, unfamiliarities, in the midst of the

familiar or the "field of the unproblematic". An example is a Khaldunian theory of the stability of the Syrian state, or a Khaldunian theory of elite circulation in 19th century Sudan.

In what follows, I present examples of different types of relevant knowledge. As stated above, included under conceptual irrelevance are two types, namely, the inapplicability of theories and concepts, as well as their sophistry, perversion and mystification. Here we speak of social science as irrelevant when they are inapplicable or when they mystify through false and vicious reasoning, or by veiling reality. An example of a sociology that is conceptually relevant is one that critiques the Eurocentric concept of religion and offers a more universal concept of religion. An example of discourse that is conceptually relevant in the sense that it demystifies dominant perspectives is the critique of Islamic economics. Finally, an example of a discourse of value relevance is that which critically deals with sectarian persecution. I illustrate how such a discourse might be like by resorting to the case of the persecution of Shi'ites in Malaysia. In the three sections that follow, each of the examples of relevant knowledge, that is, applicability, demystification and advocacy, is discussed.



## The intellectual christianization of "religion" and its alternative

I would like to provide an illustration of the problem of Eurocentrism using the example of the concept of religion

and drawing from the work of Joachim Matthes.[11] This concerns the translation of cultural terms such as religion into scientific concepts. Social-science concepts originate from cultural terms in everyday language. As such they present problems when introduced into scientific discourse and used to talk about areas and periods outside those of their origins. The result is a distortion of the phenomena that they are applied to.

The Latin *religio*, from which the English term religion is derived, was a collective term referring to diverse practices and cults in and around Rome prior to the emergence of Christianity. When Rome became Christian, Christianity became the dominant belief and all other beliefs were absorbed or eliminated. But *religio* was not applied to Christianity as there was no need to—it was the only legitimate belief, so it was just known as the Church. With Luther and the Protestant Reformation, *religio* referred to Christian beliefs and a way of life separate from the institution of the Catholic Church. It was oppositional to the clergy, that is, it was the layman's religion. In 1593, the French philosopher Jean Bodin published his *Colloquium heptaplomeres* (*Colloquium of the seven about the secrets of the sublime*). Here there was a generalized understanding of religion that included non-Christian faiths. By the 18th century, "religion" came to be used as a scientific concept, referring to belief systems other than Christianity.



But while "religion" meant all beliefs, when European scholars wrote about religion critically, they had in mind Protestantism (as in Marx's reference to religion as the opi-

11. Matthes, "Religion in the social sciences".

um of the intellectuals) or the institutional religion (Catholicism), as opposed to the religion of the believers (Protestants). When "religion" is applied to beliefs other than Christianity, for example Islam or Hinduism, there is an implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, which results in an elision of reality. According to Matthes, the logic of comparison is such that the two things to be compared are subsumed under a third unit which is at a higher unit of abstraction. For example, apples and pears are subsumed under fruits. "Fruits" becomes the *tertium comparationis*. Similarly, Christianity and Islam are subsumed under religion. The problem with this is that, to begin with, the characteristics of religion are derived from Christianity. Therefore, the supposedly general scientific concept "religion" is culturally defined by Christianity, and Islam is looked at in terms of Christianity rather than compared to Christianity in terms of a *tertium comparationis,* a general concept "religion".



What reality is lost, what is the distortion done to Islam? Religion as it is understood in the West is a private matter as opposed to state and church. Therefore there are such dualities as sacred *versus* profane, religious *versus* non-religious, and so on. Also, religion in the West refers to the beliefs and private lives of believers. The danger is that Islam is also seen in these terms when in fact there are no such dualities. For example, there is no distinction between secular and religious education. All knowledge and education is either about God or the creations of God.

Let us also consider the case of Hinduism. According to Smith, Hinduism is "a particularly false conceptualization,

one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of Hindus. Even the term 'Hindu' [an Indian or non-Muslim inhabitant of India] was unknown to the classical Hindus. 'Hinduism' as a concept certainly they did not have."[12] The term 'Hindu' has its origins in antiquity as the Indo-Aryan name of the river Indus, which is its Greek transliteration.[13] It is from this usage that the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' gradually acquired their descriptive and geographical denotations. Muslim scholars such as al-Bīrūnī (A.D. 973- ), writing in Arabic, used the term *al-Hind* to refer to the Indian subcontinent, but when they referred to the people of that subcontinent or aspects thereof they were referring to what they considered the indigenous and non-Muslim inhabitants of India. In Persian and Urdu the corresponding geographical term to *al-Hind* was *HindustÅn*. Things *HindustÅnÇ* referred to whatever was indigenous to India and non-Muslim.[14] The English 'Hindu' probably derived from the Persian. The term "Hindu" appears in the *Gaudiya Vaisnava* texts of the sixteenth century.[15] The usage here is consistent with that in



12. Smith, *The meaning and end of religion*, p. 61, cited in Frykenberg, "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism'", p. 102, n. 3.

13. Smith, *The meaning and end of religion*, p. 249, n. 46, cited in Frykenberg, "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism'", p. 83. Smith's source is Spiegel, *Die Altpersischen Keilinschriften*, vol. 1, lines 17-18, A, line 25: 50, 54, 246.

14. Frykenberg, "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism'", p. 84.

15. O'Connell, "Gaudiya Vaisnava symbolism of deliverance from evil", p. 340-3, cited in Frykenberg, "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism'", p. 84.

the Muslim texts of the premodern Arabs and Persians. Even in the modern period, this negative definition of Hinduism is found, as is evident in the Hindu Marriage Act. The Act defines a Hindu, among other things, as one "who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion…"[16] The terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' in reference to religion, and a unitary one at that, were for the most part a modern development. In the eighteenth century they began to be used by European Orientalists such as Halhed, Jones and Müller to denote an Aryan, Brahmanical or Vedic-based high culture and religion.[17] It is this usage that was adopted by the early Indian nationalists themselves like Ramohun Roy, Gandhi and Nehru.[18] This 'new' religion was founded on the ontology and epistemology contained in the *VarnÅsramadharma* and encompassed the entire cosmos, detailing as part of its vision a corresponding stratified social structure.[19]



What is important in these developments, as far as the intellectual Christianization of Indian belief systems is concerned, is that (i) the belief systems of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (excluding Muslims, Jews, Christians and Parsis) came to be regarded as religion; (ii) these belief systems were seen to constitute a single religion; and (iii) they were founded on a system of Brahmanical doctrines based on

16. Derret, *Introduction to modern Hindu law*, p. 18-19.

17. Frykenberg, "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism'", p. 85-6.

18. *Idem*, p. 86.

19. *Idem*, p. 86.

the *Catur-Veda* (Four Vedas).[20] It is in these senses that characteristics of Christianity were read into Indian beliefs. Gradually, the newly christened Hinduism also came to encompass the 'low' tradition, or what is nowadays referred to as 'popular', 'temple', 'bhakti', 'village', or 'tribal' Hinduism.[21]

What are the problems with these constructions of non-Western experiences that utilised Western concepts?

1. The mix of fact and fiction. The beliefs of peoples such as those of Muslims and the Indian subcontinent are not understood according to the self-understanding of these peoples. There is a mix of fact and fiction in that facts are organised into a coherent framework that is derived from Christian categories posing as the *tertium comparationis*, the result being a construction that is somewhat mythical.
2. The imposition of categories from the outside. Categories such as "religion" are imposed from the outside, that is, by European scholars, resulting in constructions that do not accord with the self-description of the communities concerned.
3. Homogenization. There is an attempt to homogenize societies and communities, thereby hiding complexities. Simply stating the commonalities of the people who live on the Indian subcontinent veils not only the contrary self-understandings but also the variety and heterogeneity of religion in India.



20. *Idem*, p. 86.
21. *Idem*, p. 87.

4. There is a Eurocentric bias in that ideas, models, problem selection, methodologies, techniques and even research priorities continue to originate from American, British, and to some extent French and German works.
5. There is scant generation of original ideas in terms of new theoretical perspectives or schools of thought or innovations in research methods.
6. There is a general neglect of local literary and philosophical traditions. This is not to say that there are no studies on local literature or philosophy. The point is that these traditions remain as objects of study and are not considered as sources of concepts in the social sciences. Furthermore, they are rarely studied by social scientists.
7. The above problems exist within the context of intellectual imperialism, that is, the intellectual domination of the Third World by the social-science powers (United States, Britain, France and Germany).[22]



It should be noted that the field of the sociology of religion, especially where the study of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam is concerned, is very backward in this regard. A proper approach would be to develop the *tertium comparationis* from a comparative study of concepts in all these belief systems. The development of what we may term as alternatives to Eurocentric discourses, therefore, requires fa-

22. Intellectual imperialism is discussed in detail by Syed Hussein Alatas, "Academic imperialism"; "Intellectual imperialism: definition, traits, and problems".

miliarity with the local or indigenous tradition, which is understood by Kim Kyong-Dong to mean both the classical tradition as well as the world of popular discourse.[23] Knowledge of the local or indigenous is a prerequisite for the development of the *tertium comparationis*.

The Muslim scholar Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Bīrūnī (973-1048) provides us with an alternative conception of what is today called Hinduism. He provides a comprehensive account of the civilization of India, including the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, science, customs and laws of the Indians. This paper concentrates on al-Bīrūnī's construction of the religions of India.[24]

Al-Bīrūnī had a universal conception of *dÇn*, which he applied to religions other than Islam, at a time when the Latin *religio* was only applied to Christianity. At the same time, al-Bīrūnī does not intellectually or culturally Islamize the religions of the Indians by reading into the Indian material an Islamic model or Islamic meanings. Al-Bīrūnī did not read Islamic meanings into the religions of the Indians. It is interesting that al-Bīrūnī's translator, Edward C. Sachau, observed that al-Bīrūnī's method was not to speak himself "but to let the Hindus speak, giving extensive quotations from their classical authors" (Sachau, 1910,



23. Kim, personal communication, 21 June 1996. See also Kim, "Toward culturally 'independent' social science".

24. I consult both the original Arabic, the *KitÅb fÇ tahqÇq mÅ li al-hind*, as well as Sachau's English translation, *Alberinu's India*. Dates in brackets indicate the year in which the work was written. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in English are taken from Sachau's translation.

p. xxiv), while Sachau himself does not always allow al-Bīrūnī to speak when he reads modern European meanings into al-Bīrūnī's Arabic text.

Sachau's English translation of the Arabic original, undertaken in the late nineteenth century, reads into Arabic terms nineteenth-century European ideas about what Hinduism was. For example, in his preface to the Arabic original, al-Bīrūnī refers to "the religions of India" (*adyÅn alhind*) (Al-Bīrūnī, 1377-1958 [c1030], p. 4), which is translated by Sachau as "the doctrines of the Hindus" (Sachau, 1910, p. 6), leading one to assume that al-Bīrūnī conceived of a single religion called Hinduism.[25]

## Islamic economics as capitalist ideology



One crucial result of dialogue, I am sure we would all agree, is that it should aid in releasing the mind from mental captivity. Academic dependency at the level of ideas is the general condition of knowledge in the Third World. Although it is fashionable to expose Eurocentric biases in the social sciences, the emergence of autonomous or alternative theoretical traditions has been very slow, and the dependence on theories and concepts generated in the European and North-American context continues. This problem of dependence is linked to the ubiquity of imitation, a condition conceptualised by Syed Hussein Alatas as mental captivity. The captive mind is an "uncritical and imitative mind

25. In fact, a study of Sachau's translation may be more a study of the intellectual Christianization of the religions of India than of al-Bīrūnī's work on India.

dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective".[26] The external source is Western social science and humanities and the uncritical imitation influences all the constituents of scientific activity such as problem-selection, conceptualization, analysis, generalization, description, explanation, and interpretation.[27]

Among the characteristics of the captive mind are the inability to be creative and raise original problems, the inability to devise original analytical methods, and alienation from the main issues of indigenous society. The captive mind is trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, whether in the West itself or through their works available in local centres of education. Mental captivity is also found in the suggestion of solutions and policies. Furthermore, it reveals itself at the level of theoretical as well as empirical work.



Alatas suggested that the mode of thinking of colonised peoples paralleled political and economic imperialism. Hence, the expression academic imperialism,[28] connoting the context within which the captive mind appears.

Academic dependency at the level of ideas should be seen in terms of the domination of social-science teaching and research by the captive mind, the consequence of which is the persistence of Eurocentrism as an outlook

26. Alatas, "The captive mind and creative development", p. 692.

27. Alatas, "The captive mind and development studies", p. 11.

28. Alatas, "Academic imperialism"; Alatas, "Intellectual imperialism: definition, traits, and problems".

and orientation in social-science teaching and research, as well as planning for economic, social and cultural development. A case in point is the discipline of Islamic economics, which provides an example not only of the dependence on ideas but also the function of such dependence.

The notion of Islamic economics did not arise from within the classical tradition in Islamic thought. In the classical Islamic tradition there were discussions and works on economic institutions and practices in the Muslim world, but the notion of an Islamic science of economics and a specifically Islamic economy did not exist.[29] Islamic economics, therefore, is a modern creation. It emerged as a result of dissatisfaction with capitalist and socialist models and theories of development in the 1950s.[30] It is mainly in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that Islamic economic research is being carried out, although there has also been a great deal of interest in this field in Egypt, India, Iran, Malaysia, and Sudan. Interest in Islamic economics predates the rise of the modern Islamic states of Iran, Libya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. Islamic economics rejects the ideology of "catching up" with the West and is committed to discerning the nature and ethos of economic development



29. Abdullah, "Al-Mudarabah"; Masters, *The origins of Western economic dominance*; Udovitch, "At the origins of the Western commenda"; *Partnership and profit in Medieval Islam*; "Commercial techniques".

30. Abdul Rauf, *A Muslim's reflections on democratic capitalism*; As-Sadr, *Iqtisaduna*.

from an Islamic point of view. The need is, therefore, to identify the Islamic ideal of economic development.[31]

The starting point of Islamic economics is based on a rejection of various ethnocentric misconceptions to be found in modernization theory with regard to Muslim society, such as its alleged fatalism and the lack of the achievement motive.[32] Muslim scholars have been tireless in pointing out that the prerequisites of development are to be found in Islam and that development within an Islamic framework is based on the constellation of values that are found in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (the traditions of the Prophet of Islam).[33] Western development theory and policy are based on the peculiar characteristics, problems, and value constellations that are found in Western society.



However, the Islamic critique of development studies is not directed solely at modernization theory, but generally at the corpus of development thought encompassing the entire spectrum of perspectives from the Left to the Right to be found within the discourse of modernism. Modernism, whether in its liberal or leftist moments, calls upon Islam to promote development by recasting Islam in a modern light, by tempering its fundamentalist tendencies, by accepting Western notions of economic and political development, in short, by recasting itself in a Western mould.[34]

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31. Ahmad, "Economic development in an Islamic framework", p. 171.

32. *Idem*, p. 173.

33. Alhabshi, "Peranan Akhlak dalam Pengurusan Ekonomi dan Kewangan" ("The role of morality in economic and financial management").

34. Tibi, *The crisis of modern Islam*; Nasr, "Religious modernism".

Islam, on the other hand, has a different outlook on life and the nature of social change, and implies a unique set of policy options for the solution of the problems of development. Nevertheless, Islamic economics suffers from a number of problems, some of which have been dealt with by others.[35] The following remarks on Islamic economics, however, are centred on the distinction between ethical and empirical forms of theory.

Ethical theories express preference or distaste as regards reality in accordance with certain standards of evaluation. In addition to this, they specify the ideal goal toward which changes should be made. Empirical theories, on the other hand, are generalizations about observable reality and require the process of abstraction and conceptualization.



Islamic economics presents an ideal of development that is based on an Islamic philosophy of life. Arising from this alternative vision of development, various policy options have been suggested, such as the introduction of interest-free banking and *zakah* (poor tax).[36] What is presented as Islamic economics are in fact ethical theories of production, distribution, price, and so on. When Islamic economists dis-

35. Kuran, "Behavioral norms"; "The economic system in contemporary Islamic thought"; "On the notion of economic justice"; Fazlur Rahman, "Riba and interest"; "Islam and the problem of economic justice".

36. Ahmad, "Interest-free banking in Pakistan"; Ariff, *Money and banking In Islam*; Faridi, "Zakat and fiscal policy"; Iqbal & Mirakhor, "Islamic banking"; Karsten, "Islam and financial intermediation"; Khan, "Islamic interest-free banking"; Khan & Mirakhor, "Theoretical studies in Islamic banking"; "Islamic banking"; Uzair, "Some conceptual and practical aspects of interest-free banking".

cuss the traditional categories of economics such as income, consumption, government expenditure, investment and savings, they do so in terms of ethical statements and not in terms of analyses and empirical theory. Contrary to what is claimed,[37] it would be difficult to refer to an Islamic science of economics, although we do have the scientific study of economies in Muslim countries, as well as the study of Muslim economic institutions and commercial techniques.

When Islamic economists are engaged in empirical theory, what is presented as Islamic economics turns out not to be an alternative to modernist discourse, as far as empirical theory is concerned. The foci and method that have been selected by Muslim economists for economic analysis is essentially that of Keynesian and neoclassical economics. The foci are the traditional questions that come under the purview of theories of price, production, distribution, trade cycle, growth, and welfare economics, with Islamic themes and topics involved, such as *zakah*, interest-free banking, and profit-sharing. The problems associated with this are the following:



First of all, the techniques of analysis that have been selected, that is, building up abstract models of the economic system, have not been translated by Islamic economists into empirical work. For example, works on interest tend to construct models of how an interest-free economy would work. There is no empirical work on existing economic systems and the nature, functions and effects of interest in these systems.

37. Nasr, "Religious modernism", p. 194-5.

Secondly, these attempts at Islamic economics have sought to ground the discourse in a theory of wealth and distribution in very much the same manner that Western economic science does, as a glance at some of these works will reveal.[38] When they are engaged in the sort of discourse that one could understand as constituting empirical theory, this is not done from a specifically Islamic scientific approach. The point here is that attempts to create a "faithful" economic science have not yielded policy options for the problems that are being addressed because what "Islamic economics" amounts to is neoclassical economics dressed and made up in Islamic terminology.

In the 1930s, 40s and 50s, economists in Latin America, Europe, and the United States began to pay attention to underdeveloped areas. The dominant school used to explain development in advanced capitalist countries was neoclassical economics, according to which the operation of free-market forces can maximise aggregate economic welfare, and the growth of output under full employment will continue as long as there is a positive propensity to save and invest in excess of what is needed to maintain capital equipment. The subsequent rise of development economics was in part a response to the inapplicability of neo-



38. Kahf, "Savings and investment function"; Khan, "A macro consumption function"; Khan, "Islamic interest-free banking"; Abdul Mannan, "Allocative efficiency"; Siddiqui & Zaman, "Investment and income distribution pattern"; "Investment and income distribution pattern"; Zarqa, "Stability in an interest-free Islamic economy".

classical economics.[39] There are a number of approaches to the study of the economies in underdeveloped areas, including the structuralist school, neo-Marxism, dependency theory, and the new institutional economics.

Islamic economics is very much embedded in the tradition of neoclassical economics in terms of its near-exclusive concern with technical factors such as growth, interest, tax, profits, and so on. A host of issues relating to political economy, such as uneven development, unequal exchange, bureaucratic capitalism, corruption, and the role of the state, have been addressed by structuralist, neo-Marxist, dependency, and new institutional economic theorists, but are not dealt with at the theoretical and empirical levels by Islamic economists. This is not to suggest that Islamic economists should uncritically adopt these other perspectives to replace neoclassical economics. The successful indigenisation of development economics and the claim to scientific status depend on the degree to which indigenisation efforts retain what is of utility in neoclassical and other theories of development.



The main problem with this state of affairs is that under the guise of "Islamic economics" the policies generated in industrialised capitalist centres are implemented in the Muslim world and are legitimated, thereby undermining the very project that Islamic economics is committed to. In attempting to ground itself in a theory of rational man and a hypothetical-deductive methodology, it has merely sub-

39. Hunt, *Economic theories of development*, ch. 3.

stituted Islamic terms for neoclassical ones, retaining the latter's assumptions, procedures and modes of analysis. As such, it has failed to engage in the analysis and critique of a highly unequal world economic order in which the gaps are ever widening. That this supposedly anti-Western economics was co-opted and made to serve those very trends that it outwardly opposes must be considered.

Thirdly, not very different from neoclassical economics, it extends a technical-economic rationality over a wide range of problems, which presupposes viewing different ends as comparable outcomes, which in turn entails eliminating cultural hindrances to the comparability of outcomes. In this sense, neoclassical economics, Islamic economics, Marxist and other alternative theories of development are similar in that they are based on narrow assumptions about human action.



It can be said, therefore, that Islamic economics functions ideologically to support world financial capital while claiming to offer an alternative to mainstream economics. More importantly, it interacts with and reinforces an attitude that can be described as a modernist Muslim ethic that some have referred to as Islamic Protestantism. This involves a sense of piety in economic action in the context of the loss of traditional culture and the buying into a crude materialistic outlook. An example frequently cited is the development of the area around the *haram* in Mecca.

So many historical sites in Mecca have been demolished that much of the prophetic legacy is disappearing.

Irfan al-Alawi, director of the UK-based Islamic Heritage Research Foundation, said: "The authorities are trying to destroy anything in Mecca that is associated with the prophet's life." The homes of the Prophet's wife, grandson and one of his companions have been demolished. The house of Prophet Muhammad's wife, Khadijah, was replaced with a block of 1,400 public lavatories. Other historical sites have been replaced with skyscraper hotels.[40] To complete the picture we can add that this modernist ethic has an affinity with Salafist and other modernist ideologies in the Muslim world in that both are indifferent to or reject tradition.

The 16th century Protestant remained traditionalistic in terms of the outlook on family, marriage, culture and aesthetics. By the nineteenth century, however, the Protestant element had receded into the background. As Weber said:

> The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate world morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism…[41]

Salafist economics can be said to embody an extreme development of this attitude in which culture and aesthetics are excessively subordinated to the technical and eco-



40. "As the Hajj begins, the destruction of Mecca's heritage continues", *The Guardian*, 14 October 2013.

41. Weber, *The Protestant ethic*, p. 180.

nomic requirements of development, even at the expense of the destruction of religious heritage. However, this must be distinguished from the so-called "Islamic Puritans" or "Islamic Calvinists" for whom the interconnectedness between religion, heritage and culture, on the one hand, and economy, on the other, remains strong.[42] The kind of political and business elite I am referring to as embodying the crass consumerist culture which is driven by Salafist economics is more akin to those who wish to tear down old neighbourhoods and forest areas and build shopping malls, luxury apartments and hotels.

## The persecution of Malaysia's Shi'ites



Any dialogue should be critical and impactful upon the people that it concerns. The dialogue should not remain at the level of scholars, the religious or any other elite.

Shi'ahs in Malaysia make up 250-300 million of the Malaysian population. Over the last 30 years, the attitude of the Malaysian authorities towards the Shi'a and their treatment of this Muslim minority sect has changed from acceptance to rejection and even persecution. In 1984, the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs declared that the Shi'ite Ja'fari and Zaidi

42. For more on this phenomenon, see ESI, Islamic Calvinists; Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic enlightenment*; and Uygur, "'Islamic puritanism'". For critical views on the idea of Islamic Protestantism, see Alatas, "Contemporary Muslim revival"; and Browers & Kurzman, eds., *An Islamic reformation?*

schools of jurisprudence were acceptable in Malaysia. In 1996, this decision was revoked.

This was followed by a series of *fatwas* issued between 1998 and 2012 by various states in Malaysia that placed restrictions on the spread and practice of Shi'ism. In some cases, such as in the state of Negeri Sembilan, the ruling is simply to prevent the spread of Shi'ism. Shi'ites are free to practice Islam according to their tradition but not permitted to spread their beliefs and practices among the Sunni majority. In other cases, such as in the state of Selangor, Shi'ites have been arrested for practicing their rituals. In December 2010, about 200 Shiites, including some foreigners, were arrested by state religious authorities during a raid at a Shi'ite centre.[43] In other cases, such as in the state of Perak, the law makes provisions for the arrest of Shi'ites who possess Shi'ite literature (books and documents). Under Section 16 of the Perak Criminal (Syariah) Enactment, 1992, it is an offence to possess items on Shi'ism, including books, audio-visual materials and posters.[44] In early August 2013, two Shi'ites were arrested, followed by another six arrests in September. The Perak Islamic Religious Department (JAIPk) enforcement chief Ahmad Nizam



43. http://dawn.com/news/592364/malaysia-may-charge-200-for-deviating-from-islam; http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/01/14/malaysian-shiites-face-growing-persecution/.

44. *New Straits Times*, 6 August 2013.

Amiruddin is reported to have said that the Shi'a should be eradicated.[45]

Shi'ites are reported to be a threat to national security. The Ministry of Public Order and Security issued a paper entitled "The Modus Operandi of the Shiite movement and the Threat to National Security" at the seminar "Facing the Shiite Virus", held at the Science University of Malaysia (USM) on October 13 2013.[46] No evidence for the Shi'ites being a threat to security was ever presented.

The Malaysian government's position regarding Shi'ism appears to be in conflict with the Federal Constitution of Malaysia:[47]

> ***Article 3(1):***
> Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation



> ***Article 8(2)***
> Except as expressly authorized by this Constitution, there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment

> ***Article 11(1)***
> Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it.

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45. http://www.nst.com.my/nation/general/close-watch-on-shia-followers-in-perak-1.334060.

46. http://www.sinarharian.com.my/mobile/semasa/perkasa-undang-undang-pencegahan-ajaran-syiah-1.211537.

47. http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal%20Consti%20%28BI%20text%29.pdf.

The Federal Constitution clearly protects the rights of Muslims, as well as practitioners of other faiths. Where Islam is concerned, the Constitution mentions only Islam and not any specific school of thought.

The position taken by the Malaysian religious authorities and the government is contrary to a series of international declarations, including the Amman Message. Released in 2004, the Amman Message declares among other things that:

> Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four *Sunni* schools (*Mathahib*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*), the two *Shi'i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Ja'fari* and *Zaydi*), the *Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Thahiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible.



The Amman Message was endorsed by the major Sunni clerics and leaders of the Muslim world. Malaysia is also signatory to the Amman Message. The Malaysians who endorsed it were H.E. Dato' Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi (then Prime Minister of Malaysia) and Dato' Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman (Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and Religious Adviser to the Prime Minister).[48] The Malaysian authorities' position with regard to Shi'ism is, therefore, contrary to the majority view or consensus of the religious scholars of Sunni Islam.

The Amman Message was preceded by other declarations, among the most famous being the fatwa issued by HE Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut, the Head of Al-Azhar University,

48. http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=74.

Cairo, on the permissibility of following the Shi'i school of thought. An excerpt from the fatwa reads as follows:

> The Ja'fari school of thought, which is also known as Al-Shi'a Al-Imamiyya Ithna' Ashari, is religiously correct to follow, as are other Sunni schools of thought.

The Malaysian official position is also contrary to the International Bill of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, in particular with regard to the following articles:[49]

> ***Article 1***
> All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.
>
> ***Article 3***
> Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
>
> ***Article 18***
> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.
>
> ***Article 29***
> 1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
> 2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
> 3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.



49. http://www.un-documents.net/a3r217.htm.

In addition to legal action taken against Shi'ites in Malaysia, the community has been subjected to slander and demonization by the government-controlled media. A cocktail of distortions and half-truths have been reported in the media about Shi'ite practices and beliefs. For example, they are reported to encourage bloodshed and the killing of Sunni leaders.[50] At a Friday sermon in November (2013), the Malaysian Islamic Development Department or JAKIM listed 10 beliefs that Malaysian Shiah allegedly held, including sodomy.[51] In order to discredit Shi'ism, it has also been disseminated in the media that Shi'ism is a religion created by the Jews.[52] Many other examples of the misrepresentation of Shi'ism in the Malaysian state-controlled media can be presented.



Advocates of religious freedom for the Shi'ites of Malaysia should make the following demands:

i. To return to the 1984 decision of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs that recognized the Ja'fari and Zaidi Shi'ite schools of thought as legitimate in Malaysia. This is in keeping with international Sunni practice.
ii. To revoke all anti-Shi'ite fatwas and gazetted laws arising therefrom.

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50. *New Straits Times*, 6 August 2013; *Utusan Malaysia*, 9 September 2013.

51. http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/jihad-calls-for-eradication-of-shiah-that-permits-sodomy-muslims-told#sthash.0vbgL5cG.7rBSJEwN.dpuf.

52. *Utusan Malaysia*, 9 September 2013.

iii. To insist on fair reporting in the state-controlled media of matters to do with Shi'ism.

Furthermore, now is the time for social scientists and others to conceive of a research project that examines the nature and causes of sectarianism in Islam. Part of the objectives of the project would be to document and publicise the opinion of contemporary Sunni and Shi'ite theologians and jurists who have sensible views on the matter as well as sound theological arguments against the sectarianists.

## Conclusion

In order to facilitate dialogue among religions, particularly between the West and other civilizations, it goes without saying that serious inroads must be made in the trafficking of stereotypes by the media, which in turn are influenced by the extent to which education is Orientalist or Eurocentric. This is because the media and public discourse are influenced directly or indirectly by knowledge that is produced in tertiary education. Therefore, the problem has to be dealt with at the level of knowledge-production in these institutions, that is to say, teaching and research. This would then mean that there should be greater interaction among social scientists in Asia and Africa. At the same time, the dialogue should not be limited to conversations among the elites of scholars and statesmen. It should be a demystifying dialogue that also impacts upon the lives of those being discussed in the dialogue.

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