

## ***Research Note***

### **Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Islamisation of knowledge**

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#### **Introduction**

Islamization of knowledge is an intellectual and methodological enterprise and not an ideology, a discipline, or a sect. Islamization of knowledge is a methodology for dealing with knowledge and its sources. It is an attempt to fashion out an Islamic paradigm of knowledge based on the Islamic world view and its unique constitutive concepts and factors. This is because the knowledge as conceived in the West is value laden and has detached itself from *tawhid* (unity and sovereignty of Allah, SWT). The rationalistic thought in the West has reduced both the objective and subjective poles of knowledge to a single level devoid of the divine. These scholars deliberately distort Islam to suit their own ends and the loss of sacred has created a vacuum in human life.

Building from this point many scholars have devoted their time and energy in the discourse of Islamization of Knowledge (IOK). They view the modern Western knowledge from the point of view of Islam and attempt to Islamise it. Though, some scholars have criticised the idea of IOK arguing that all knowledge is Islamic, many Muslim scholars see it as a trust to revive the Islamic method of pursuing all kinds of knowledge (Suleiman, 1995). The concept of “Islamization of knowledge” involves multiple approaches to the various forms of modern-world thought in the context of the Islamic intellectual tradition, including metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and methodological premises regarding the modern issues of knowledge (Dzilo, 2012). These scholars use different approaches to Islamise the modern knowledge from different point of view. Among them is Seyyed Hussein Nasr whose idea on islamization of knowledge is the main thrust of this paper. He sees Islamization of knowledge from the point of

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view of *scientia sacra*. This is due to his orientation as a scientist. He rejects the argument that there is no such thing as the Islamic problem of science. He is against the idea of encouraging science devoid of the divine.

Nasr was born in Iran in 1933 where he received his early education. He studied physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), U.S., and later obtained his doctorate from Harvard University. His well-deserved reputation as a scholar and historian of Islamic science is derived from the large number of impressive books and articles. His brilliance and clarity of exposition and ability to communicate has made Nasr by far the most influential of Muslim philosophers who wrote on Islam and science. Currently, he is a professor of Islamic studies in George Washington University, USA. A quick look at Nasr's wide ranging works reveal that the question of science occupies central place in his thought. His writings, 50 books and about 300 articles, on religion and science made him famous in the world of history of science as a prolific writer and Gnostic thinker (Kalin2001).

### **Traditional spirituality**

Nasr is one of the neo-traditionalist who attempts to integrate the modern science within the frame work of the sacred. He did not only use the Islamic tradition but also the tradition of other religions. In his *scientia-sacra*, perennial philosophy and the revival of spiritual tradition, he argues that though it is strange to talk of sacred at a time where anything that cannot be proven is rejected because nothing is absolute rather all things are relative. *Scientia-sacra* is the application of metaphysical principles to the macrocosm as well as the microcosm, the natural as well as the human world. It is a science that involves physical and metaphysical phenomena. This is necessary because the modern science has reduced knowledge to rationalistic thought (Irfan, 1995).

Islamic tradition is not the only concern of Nasr but he incorporates the traditions of other religions where the emphasis is through a review of the traditional world view as the central and perhaps the only viable solution to the problems of modern humanity because the loss of the sacred has created a gap in human life. Scholars have described this scenario as secularization that dehumanises humanity. The sacred is the knowledge of God which, Nasr argues, can only be understood through twin sources of metaphysical knowledge and certitude namely revelation and intellection. So traditional is the principal

milestone for spiritual authenticity and infinite source of grace. It is the whole structure of thought that articulate the concepts embodied in the world of myth and symbols (Nasr, 2010, Mirtaheeri, 2012, Irfan, 1995).

### **The modern science and the problem of the Muslim world**

Rationalistic thought in the West has reduced both the objective and subjective poles of knowledge to a single level. The loss of the sacred has created a vacuum in human lives particularly the Muslim world. Since the introduction of Western science into the heartland of the Islamic world in the 13th/19th century, the attitude of most of the modernists and other sectors of the educated Muslim intelligentsia which came to know something of this science was its wholesale and uncritical adoption. According to this view, modern science in the West is nothing other than the further expansion and growth of the science which Muslims had developed from the 2nd/8th to the 8th/14th centuries and which was transmitted to a large extent through Spain and Sicily to Europe. If this science had caused havoc from a religious and ethical point of view in the West, it is the fault of Christianity and not this science. If the Muslims take this science back into their own fold, they would be able to expand and develop it farther without any of the negative effects which the spread of a secular science and the Industrial Revolution have had upon the West socially, morally and spiritually (Nasr, 2010). Those modernistic thinking which claim that Islam is compatible with modern science - the science which Galileo and Newton are usually credited to having initiated - are flawed. The modernist must recognise that *ilm* refers to knowledge of God not knowledge of the profane. The modernist must recognise the fact that modern science is a cancer which is steadily eating away the fabric of the Islamic faith. This is because of their reliance on reason and observation as the arbiter of truth which is totally unacceptable. Also Nasr argues that Afghani and his student Muhammad Abduh were interested in the western science but have very little knowledge of it and interested in Islamic revivalism in the Muslim world.

On the other end, the *ulama'* (religious scholars) of the *madrasah* (religious seminary) opposed both the modern science and the appealing made by the modernist of the impact of the modern science to the Muslim world. They rejected it outright to safeguard their faith. They refused to study it and their criticism is without any intellectual ground. The traditional class of Muslim scholars, therefore, preserved the faith against many of the onslaughts of Western thought, but was not able to provide a critical examination of modern science on

the basis of Islamic criteria. The abdication of the *ulama*' from this important task allowed the ever greater spread of Western science under the banner of a "religiously" coloured positivism into the Islamic world without an effective Islamic response. Islamisation would allow the Islamic world to digest this science and make it part of its own organism through assimilation as well as rejection rather than through the wholesale uncritical swallowing of Western science and technology (Nasr, 2010). This has made scholars like Seyyed Nasr to engage in the balance of the two views above and bring back the glory of Islamic science-*scientia-sacra* by sieving what is Islamic from the modern western science. These scholars mostly pursued their education in the western universities after having their traditional madrasa education. So they tried to bring about awareness and attempt to Islamize the western science.

### **Islamization of knowledge/ modern secular science**

Nasr has focussed his ideas on the threats posed by the modern secular science to Islam. He boldly challenges the assumptions and the values of the modern science arguing that the problem of the modern science is that it relies solely on reason and observation as the arbiter of truth. The detachment of modern knowledge from its metaphysical principles in the sphere of Western culture is the key to Nasr's critical approach to the issue of knowledge (Nasr 1980). Nasr laments that the Western science poses a challenge of monumental dimensions to the Islamic worldview and what remains of the culture and civilization of Islam (Nasr, 2010). Muslim youths stop praying when they are taught in the Western schools that oxygen and carbon-de-oxide makes water not God. This has affected the youth and their ideologies. Thus, there is a need to Islamise. According to Nasr,

The Islamization of science cannot but be the integration based upon criticism, assimilation and rejection of various elements of the existing sciences into the Islamic intellectual universe and therefore another framework than the existing modern scientific paradigm, a framework in which *tawhīd* reigns supreme and where every atom of the universe is seen to be created for a purpose and in accordance with the wisdom and plan of the Creator (2010: 7).

The consequences of the secularism of modern science can only be stopped when this science is change into a body of knowledge in an intellectual universe where knowledge is never divorced from the sacred, where every form of

knowing participates to some degree in the sacred character of knowledge whose supreme form is the knowledge of Allah (SWT) based on *tawhidi* episteme. The essence of religious experience, according to Nasr, is *tawhid*, in the sense of transcendence. This is because the question of metaphysical knowledge is with Him the All Knowing. Allah (SWT) says: “And they ask you concerning the soul. Say: ‘The soul is from the affairs of my Lord, and of knowledge you have but little’” (Qur’an, 17: 85).

### **Islamization of knowledge/science according to Nasr**

To Islamize science/knowledge, firstly, there is a need to master the field from the Western perspective thoroughly so as to know the contradictory points as well as the consensual ones entrenched within the field. We should not only look at the applied science but also the philosophical suppositions. This is because there is nothing wrong with the science but its philosophical supposition. The person who will carry out this task must also master early Muslim Intellectual thought which accommodated alien sciences and knowledge during their time. According to Nasr, not only the intellectual requirements of the Islamizers matter, but also the spiritual, as they are required to hold a strong faith. Thus, it is essential for the people involved in this task to be intellectually and emotionally attached to the Islamic world view. In addition, Seyyed Nasr emphasizes the need for people involved to reach apex of these fields. They have to establish an authoritative voice before they embark on the criticism of the field and eventually transform them in accordance with the Islamic perspective. The Muslim world should produce scholars, men and women, who will know, as a whole all the branches of modern science, whether it be mathematics, astronomy and physics, or geology, chemistry, biology, botany, zoology, medicine, etc. as well as all the newly created fields which are related to these older disciplines.

Secondly, there must also be Muslim thinkers who will be able to master in depth the philosophy and methodologies of modern science by digging the roots, at once historical, philosophical and sociological, of modern science. Muslim scholars must verify the philosophy and epistemology upon which the science is built. Such scholars must be veritable Occidentalists who know the Western intellectual tradition deeply and who are able to understand the nature of modern science to the same extent as do the Western critics of this science with whose works Muslims thinkers must also become well acquainted. Such scholars must also be deeply steeped in the Islamic intellectual tradition and know Western

intellectual history as *Islamic* thinkers, not as second rate Western thinkers without their own distinct intellectual framework.

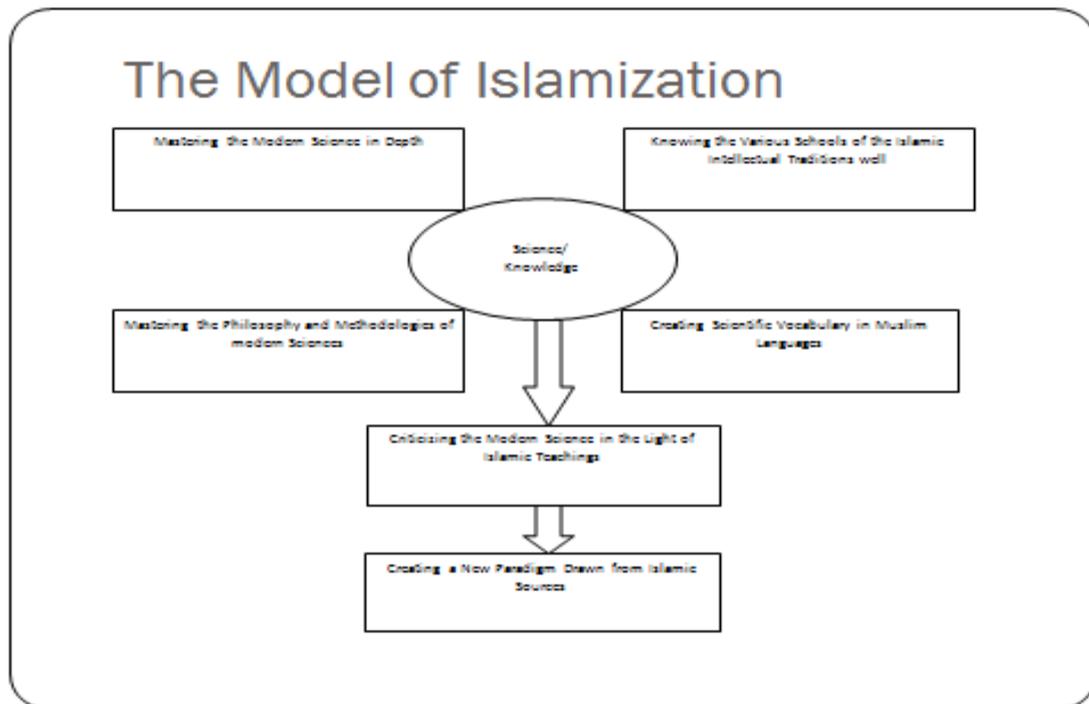
Thirdly, Muslim scholars must also be well-versed with Muslim intellectual tradition. It is pertinent to note that various schools of the Islamic intellectual tradition, developed over a long period of time, range from those of jurisprudence, philosophy and science rooted in the Qur'an. It was studied and developed in depth through many Muslim generations. Islamizers have to know them very well and master the methodologies used to be applied ever since. Without doing so, similar mistakes of nurturing Muslim scientists who are subservient to the Western modern science are bound to be repeated. It is important to dig out the Islamic concept of nature, mentioned and defined elaborately in the Qur'an, and the philosophy of science expanded by generations of traditional Muslims thinkers.

Fourthly, in any learning discourse, language plays a significant role in knowledge dissemination. One of the most successful revolutions is that of language. Is it done without any bloodshed and it is used as a vehicle for conveying the message of secularism. As a result of colonialism and imperialism, majority of the Muslim countries found themselves slave to the languages of the colonial masters. Foreign languages are used in schools and educational institutions vis-à-vis local languages which makes knowledge secularization easier and faster throughout the Muslim world. So, language needs to be Islamized. Islamization is not only confined to the content of the science and knowledge alone but also the language used for the dissemination and expression of the knowledge. Seyyed Nasr argues that the use of Islamic languages for the expression of scientific ideas is an important element in absorbing these sciences into the Islamic intellectual universe. If a truly Islamic science is to be created, therefore, not only is there a need for mastering the modern sciences and their philosophy and in resuscitating Islamic sciences and the philosophy of nature and epistemologies upon which they depend, but also in reappraising and benefitting to the extent possible from works produced in various Islamic languages during this transitional period of scientific activity in the Islamic world, stretching from the beginning of Muslim participation in the study and practice of modern science to the present day (Nasr, 2010).

The fifth step is the sieving stage. The Islamic world must use all its resources and energy at its disposal to know this science deep and wide and in its

relation to religion, philosophy and social forces, to criticize the premises and conclusions of this science in the light of the teachings of Islam. In so doing, the western knowledge would be put upon the Islamic framework for sifting out that which is alien to it.

Finally for Islamic scholars in the course of islamization process must create a new paradigm of knowledge from Islamic sources. This means to integrate all that is positive in the modern sciences into the Islamic worldview. The result would be a science which, while incorporating all the factual discoveries of modern science, would relate these facts to higher principles and would remain aware of the ultimate cause of all things which is God, a science which would affirm rather than neglect Unity or *tawhid* and the purposefulness of all creation for as the Qur'ān asserts, "Thou hast not created this in vain" (Qur'an, 3:191). The steps outlined above are clearly delineated in Diagram 1.



### **Technology and environmental crisis**

In the area of applied modern secular science which is emphasised in the Muslim world and their governments, Nasr has implored the epistemology of this technology and its effects on the Ummah and humanity in general. For him,

modern technology refers to technologies which have been developed during and after the Industrial Revolution mostly in the West and which have now spread all over the world. The destruction of environment by modern technology is seen as one of the most serious threats faced by humanity. This is because it has replaced traditional methods of making objects of daily use. This replacement has serious consequences for the spiritual health of humanity (Nasr, 2005). It changes the relationship of human beings and the means of creating things. What mind can think and create; now machines and thus reducing man to nothing. It takes away the creativity and spiritual content of work. First thing that need to be understood is that this technology is not neutral. Even the peaceful use of this technology, like automobile, is a major source of aggression against nature. Thus, the global warming is destroying many eco-systems and so many other things and that much destruction comes from the so-called peaceful use of the automobile.

Therefore, it is not simply a question of good use and bad use of technology. There is something more involved. Technology itself brings with it a certain technological culture which is against the soul of the human being as an immortal being, and is against the fabric of all traditional societies which are based on the spiritual relationship between the human being and the objects he or she creates, that are based on an art that is creative and reflects God's creativity, as the Supreme Artisan. God is called Al-Sani in the Qur'an; He is the Creator, the Artist, the Supreme Artisan, and He has given us the power of creativity which we share because we are His *khulafa*, vicegerents on earth (Iqbal, 2007). Now modern technology destroys that relationship. Whether the person driving a car uses it to go to the masjid to pray or to a night club for dancing and drinking, the destruction of the environment is there. Problems such as poverty, political oppression or dictatorships do not pose as great a danger as the problem of the destruction of the natural environment, because those things may gradually be solved, but environmental degradation caused by modern technology needs to be addressed fast or else nature will take a turn that cannot be imagined.

At the level of human being, what has to be done is to revive the sacred view of nature which is totally opposed to how modern technology views nature. What Muslims have to do, in fact, is not to employ every new foreign technology that comes along, but only use technologies which have less negative impact on the environment to avoid environmental crisis and limit the secular influence of the technology (Iqbal, 2007).

### **Criticisms against Seyyed Nasr**

As every scholar of knowledge, Nasr has been subjected to severe criticisms for his works in the field of knowledge in general and Islamization of knowledge in particular. It is argued that the concept of sacred science offered by Nasr is not an Islamic science per se because he opens the door for various religions to enriching each other through contact with a living tradition. The perennial philosophy of Nasr is not Islamic because he borrows the idea from Western philosophers like Rene Guenon and Frithjof Schuon. Their works especially Schuon with his book, *Transcendent Unity of Religions* is full of thought or ideas that have become the core inspiration for the propagation of religious pluralism discourse. According to Nasr, the difference between religions and faith are merely in the symbols and external qualities. The core of each religion is still one

Nasr is also criticised for his Sufi (mystic) affiliation. Nasr is taking the readers to a magical mystery tour. Inner world and the living world as argued by Nasr cannot be understood except by those Gnostic thinkers who believe in that. The problem with Nasr is that he overemphasizes the metaphysical aspect of Islamic science at the expense of its quantitative aspects.

### **Conclusion**

The model of Islamization of science/knowledge provided by Seyyed Hossain Nasr presents some fundamental principles of Islamization. He did not only express the problem of Muslim Ummah but went further to give details on how to go about solving them. The six major steps in his model could be employed by those who are willing to engage in the task of Islamizing knowledge.

Distinctly, Seyyed Hossain Nasr diagnosed and expressed the problem of knowledge and modern science first before going further to propose his own model. He has examined the threat of environment caused by the modern science and technology to Muslim Ummah and their society. Although his ideas are criticised he was able to shed light to the Muslim thinkers on the dangers of the secular science and the need for sacred science. The effect of secularism can only be averted when knowledge is transmuted into a body of knowledge in an intellectual universe where knowledge is never divorced from the sacred.

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