

“ENGLISH STUDIES AND ISLAM: IIUM’S APPROACH OF ISLAMISATION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE (IOHK) TOWARDS A HARMONIOUS AND BENEFICIAL ISLAM-WEST RELATIONSHIP”

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1. Introduction

In this post-colonial era when the relationship between the West and the Muslim world has been strained for a variety of factors, it is crucial that the intellectual discourse of “Islamisation of Human Knowledge” (IOHK) in universities and institutions of Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria and some Arab countries be understood objectively and positively. The mainstream discourse of Islamisation in general – certainly we are not including the deviant anti-democratic propaganda of militant Muslim groups such as ISIS or Al-QAEDAH or TALIBAN -- refers particularly to the peaceful Muslim efforts worldwide to live in accordance with the social, moral and spiritual teachings of their religion in the post-independence era, because many of the crises and problems in their societies are in fact due to Muslim societies’ deviations, departures and neglect of those teachings when their political leaders and elites decided, in the post-independence era, to join the ban wagon of secular ideologies of “progress”, “modernity” and “development”. Therefore they and their leaders need to undergo a process of desecularisation and comprehensive Islamicisation to rebuild the Muslim world in accordance with the worldview of the Qur’an.

It should be noted that IIUM, as a prominent Islamic university which decided, from the very beginning, to use the English language as its medium of teaching, learning and administration, has devoted its attention for the last 38 years to the intellectual and educational reform of the Muslim community (*ummah*) in the context of its vision of Muslim civilisational

renewal, inter-civilisational dialogue and its mission of excellence with the soul. The mission of Islamisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK) among the seven university missions of IIUM was chosen in order for the university's graduates to develop Muslim societies in Malaysia and in the world in accordance with the intellectual, ethical and civilisational vision of Islam. Thousands of IIUM graduates are now playing important leadership roles in the economic, technological, intellectual, political and religious development of Muslim majority and minority countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe (especially Bosnia Herzegovina).

This international vision of balanced intellectual development (harmony of science with religion/ revelation and reason) was once actualised and flourishing for about eight hundred years when the knowledge-triumphant Islamic civilisation of Andalusia which produced the spirit of civilisational synthesis that characterised the culture of Al-Andalus and constructed the wonderful cosmopolis of *Convivencia* in Muslim Spain, leading to the birth of European Renaissance (George Saliba, 2007; Ahmed Essa and Othman Ali, 2012; Bryn Barnard, 2011; Robert Kaplan, 2016). Medieval Europe benefitted in many ways from its peaceful inter-cultural encounter with Islamic experimental science, mathematics, engineering, medicine, philosophy, art, architecture in Islamic centres of learning and cosmopolitan cities. It is most unfortunate, however, that the Crusading spirit, Western imperialism, Colonialism, Christian evangelism, International Zionism, Atheism and racial supremacist agenda had a great impact in forging the anti-Islamic attitudes which blossomed into the global Islamophobia that informs the western media and the Internet today. Consequently contemporary Europe or the West forgot or chose to forget its debt to Islamic civilisation; instead, after the collapse of the Communist Empire, NATO countries chose the Muslim world to be the "New Enemy". The late Roger Garaudy (1913-2012), French thinker, philosopher and former Communist author advised Muslim scholars and intellectuals in Malaysia in 1984 as follows:

[S]urrender to the logical implications of Western culture or to its peculiar brand of growth and development after five centuries of Western hegemony does lead and had led the entire planet Earth to the brink of suicide. They determine the future course of Muslim development, and make Muslim countries dependent upon the West's philosophy underlying Western science and technology.....

Primordial Islam has known well how to integrate the cultures of all peoples, from Byzantium and Greece to Persia and India. It did so in a creative and selective manner, while critically assessing other cultures. In this century, living, dynamic Islam must do likewise. We, the Muslims, ought to exercise the same creative effort as did our ancestors....

Hence it is crucial, in this as in other domains, to avoid two errors: blind copying of the West and outright rejection of everything Western. We should acquire Western science and technology selectively, creatively and critically. (Roger Garaudy, 1989).

Roger Garaudy wrote those lines nearly two decades before the world entered the 21st century. The relationship between the Western world and the Muslim world remains precarious, but we in IIUM believe that a more harmonious relationship between the two worlds would be beneficial for the whole of humanity. The English language and literature currently provide for us the cultural avenue for that most desirable scenario to develop. Humanity cannot afford another hegemonic Empire invasion ("The Big Lie") of the Middle East. The West should heed the following advice given by Robert D. Kaplan, former editor of *The Atlantic*:

Europe must now find some other way to dynamically incorporate the world of Islam without diluting its devotion to the rule-of-law-based system that arose in Europe's north, a system in which individual rights and agency are uppermost in a hierarchy of needs. If it cannot evolve in the direction of universal values, there will be only the dementia of ideologies and coarse nationalisms to fill the void. This would signal the end of "the West" in Europe. (Robert D. Kaplan, 2016).

We, in the Anglophone domain of the Muslim world, have embarked on the intellectual discourse called "Islamisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK)" first, as a path to internal Islamic civilisational transformation, and now as another conduit for our peaceful and mutually beneficial dialogue of civilisations. Perchance the missing dimension of Transcendence in contemporary Western civilisation which Roger Garaudy lamented would be restored through the gate of Islamic epistemology, as presented and promoted by the Islamic academia such as IIUM.

2. Islamisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK) and English Studies: IIUM Perspective.

As a tool of critical analysis as well as a mission of IIUM, IOHK is premised upon the postulates and principles of the Worldview of the Qur'an, or as the eminent Japanese Islamist Toshihiko Isutzu called it the "Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*". Its epistemology gives priority to Divine Revelation (*al-Wahy*) as the highest source of truth, but accords a lofty position to human reason (*al-'Aql*) insofar as it is subservient to Divine Revelation, and insofar as it operates within the limits laid down by God as the Creator and Sustainer of human reason and rational intelligence. In the worldview of the Qur'an, language is God's creation which is to be used only for expressing, communicating and conveying what is good and right (*ma`rūf*), true (*ḥaqq*), beneficial (*nāfi'*) and ethical. In an interesting article written by Dr Sayyid M. Sayeed, "Islamization of Linguistics", he says:

All human languages are worth studying and equally important. It is possible that any language might have been a vehicle of God's message sometime in the history of the speakers of that language.

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ ۗ ...

Never have We sent a Messenger but he has addressed his people in their language that he may fully expound his Message to them.

(Q. 14: 4) (Sayyid M. Syeed, 1989).

Muslim philologists and classical lexicographers define the meaning of knowledge essentially as “that which perceives or knows the reality of something as is” while the Qur’an regards knowledge (*al-`Ilm*) as the truth revealed by God in His Divine Scriptures as well as in the universe (as “Signs of God”, *ayatu’Lāh*) and that human knowledge (*ma`rifah bashariyyah*) is useful as long as it serves the Divine purpose in creation and in the world, and is in harmony with the will of God. As for people of knowledge or scholars (*`ulama`*), Qur’anic epistemology, axiology and ethics extol the *`ulama`* as “those who possess fear (*khasyah*) of the censure or displeasure of God. (Q. *Fāṭir* 35: 28). The Qur’an urges and strongly encourages the use of reason (*la`allahum ya`qilūn*) and rational thinking (*yatafakkarūn; liqaumin yatafakkarūn*) many times as a way of getting to know the Truth or the Right Way. God praises these people, calling them “people in possession of sound intellects” (*Ulu’l-Albāb*).

On the above epistemological basis, we in IIUM do not regard our academic staff as mere academics, lecturers on contract or scholars in the ordinary sense. As long as they are Muslims, they are regarded as scholars (*`ulama`*) of the truth and as representatives of *Ulu’l-Albāb* who “remember God standing, sitting and lying down, thinking deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth” (Q. 3: 191). In fact, for a long time we have been urging the Muslim academics to be *Murabbi’s* (caring, loving and concerned educators, advisors, counsellors) of the students. Furthermore, when we function as Anglophone “Consumers” of English Studies in its broad spectrum, or when we function as IIUM “Producers” of aspects of contemporary English Studies, we have to be conscious of our multiple functions as fellow *`Ibād al-Raḥmān* (Servants of The Most Compassionate), *Mu`minūn* (Believers) in the mission of *Raḥmatan li’l-`Ālamīn*, *Khulafā’ al-Arḍ* (Stewards of God’s Earth), *`Ulamā’*, *Ulu’l-Albāb*, *Murabbis*, and trustees of Divine trust (*Amānah*) in the *jihād* of peaceful, harmonious civilisational reform, revival and transformation for the benefit of all mankind in the East and in the West. These religiously-prescribed

roles notwithstanding, Muslim “Consumers” or “Producers” must do justice to the subject matter of English studies by knowing how the English authors as Non-Muslim “Producers” understand and interpret their products. For example, during the colonial period when Britain saw herself as being superior to the brown or black-skinned people and therefore she carried the “*mission civilisatrice*” for the benefit of the inferior African or Asian races, her English literary products were infused and permeated with her “civilising mission”. Her literary products as well as other cultural products were meant to “educate” or make her colonial subjects “civilised” were loaded with her worldviews, beliefs, values and prejudices. The well-known Columbia University professor of literature, Edward Said who examined literature in light of social and cultural politics, has exposed the hidden cultural agenda of Western imperialism and colonialism in his most widely-read *Orientalism* (1978), followed by *The Question of Palestine* (1992) and *Power, Politics and Culture* (2001).

Our very own literary critic, Dr Mahmudul Islam of the Department of English – treading the dangerous path of Edward Said -- has written several articles regarding the importance of applying Islamic critical analysis with regard to English literary products as in “The Islamization of English literary studies: a postcolonial approach” in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (AJISS), “Islam’s encounter with English and Ismail al-Faruqi’s concept of Islamic English: a postcolonial reading” in AJISS (2014), 31 (2): 1-21, and “English Literary studies: including Islamic perspectives in pedagogy and practice” in AJISS (2015), 32 (1): 1-22. Dr. Mahmudul Hasan was also inspired by the work and thought of the late Prof. Dr Syed Ali Ashraf (1924-1998), Professor of English at the Islamic Academy in Cambridge who played a great role in organising the First World Conference on Islamic Education, held in Makkah al-Mukarramah in 1977. Among the observations made by Prof. Syed Ali Ashraf are the following:

A particular author or a text may convey divergent ideas, some of which may or may not be compatible with Islamic values. So, while handling such authors and

texts a lecturer should do his/her best to discuss their pros and cons. Disregarding such a duty goes against the very notion of a teacher as *murabbi*.

Syed Ali Ashraf stated further:

If the teacher, on the other hand, takes a permissive attitude and considers a writer whose code of life is completely at variance with the Islamic code, and leaves students in a vacuum, and allows them to respond to that writing or be influenced by it as they like, he will not be doing justice either to literature or to his students. Literature can be extremely seductive and may even be misleading, corrosive and destructive. However, the venture of reading English texts from Islamic perspectives with complacent or uncritical eyes and inadequate knowledge may be counter productive. (Mahmudul Islam 2015. For a full study of the life and thought of Syed Ali Ashraf, please see Md. Isharaf Hussain 2020, *Syed Ali Ashraf's Thoughts and Contribution to the Islamisation of Education*, PhD thesis IIUM).

Muslim academics may discover that in the post-colonial era, British literary products may no longer be loaded with the "sacred" civilising mission but they are never value-free. In the postcolonial period, the English literary products may be loaded with what the British people today regard as their dominant or prevailing worldviews (such as atheism, agnosticism, postmodernity, relativism, gender equality, liberalism, universal human rights, or British way of life). In the arena of higher education, the worldviews of positivism, naturalism, secularism, scientism or Darwinism may provide the underlying assumptions of natural sciences taught in Britain, while in humanities and social sciences, the worldviews of postmodernism, nihilism, leftism, liberalism, secularisation or neo-atheism may be the main sources of underlying assumptions, theoretical or philosophical orientations.

It is important for Muslim students studying in IIUM or other Muslim universities to have a sound knowledge of the worldview, ideological, philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of products of English Studies in the UK, USA, Australia or New Zealand, in addition to their knowledge of

the worldview of the Qur'an, or what the *`Aqīdah*, *Sharī`ah* and *Akhlāq* or Islam stand for in relation to English Studies.

As Consumers of English Studies, Muslim academics who uphold the worldview of the Qur'an, should approach or engage the subject matter coming from the English-producing societies and countries or from Anglophone countries with a critically appreciative mind while using the following evaluating principles of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung* :

a) *`Aqīdah* (Creed or belief system) which provides principles regarding Ontology, Cosmology, Anthropology, Theology, History, Eschatology, Teleology and Axiology;

b) *Sharī`ah* (Divine Way of Life and Divine Law) which provides principles of *Ḥalāl*, *Ḥarām*, *Wājib*, *Sunnah*, *Makrūh* and *Mubāh* that Muslims have to observe; the five or more *Maqasid* (higher objectives of the *Sharī`ah* – the minimum being preservation of religion, preservation of life, preservation of the intellect, preservation of lineage, preservation of property) that should inform their choices or appropriation of foreign languages, literatures or cultures;

c) *Akhlāq* (Ethics and Morality) which provide principles of spiritual excellence and beauty (*iḥsān*, *taqwā*, and *maḥabbah* of God as taught in the discipline of *taṣawwuf*), good conduct, behaviour, character and *Adab* (propriety, etiquette and refinement in speech, action and interaction) between the Believers and fellow human beings, with nature and with the Creator, Sustainer and Master Himself.

When Muslim academics or students are in the position of Producers of subjects under English studies, as in IIUM, they are also obliged to apply the relevant principles, norms or values derived from the above three branches of the worldview of the the Qur'an. They should be aware and have prior knowledge of the schools of thought, theories, paradigms, contemporary literary criticism or whatever conventional knowledge relevant to their areas of specialisation before they infuse, inject or apply

the Qur'anic principles or values to their products (poetry, prose, drama, literary criticism, film review, creative writing, journal articles, essays, or any other genre within the wide spectrum of English studies. For example, if present-day Muslim academics or graduate students want to specialise in the genre of literary theory or cultural theory, they need to be conversant with, say: a) Gender Studies and Queer Theory which involve both feminist or masculinist perspectives, or b) Post-colonial or Post-modern Criticism or Ethnic Studies, or c) Neo-Marxist and Critical Theory as taught in mainstream British, American or Australian departments of English.

3. Conclusion

In whatever role they wish to be in – consumers or producers -- Muslim academics in English studies would do well to be conversant with the perspectives, theoretical assumptions or worldviews of the Non-Muslim authors and experts, as they become more knowledgeable of the main components of the worldview of the Qur'an. Bearing in mind that IIUM's vision includes peaceful co-existence between the Islamic civilisation and Western civilisation, the IOHK approach of the English Department should be conceived and developed as a non-political channel toward bridging the two estranged civilisations in a new world order of harmonious Islam-West relationship. Muslim novelists, poets, dramatists, literary critics, playwrights, film script writers, thinkers and academics who write in English in Anglophone or Francophone countries could be encouraged by IIUM and the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) to adopt the principle of "Spreading Mercy to all of the Worlds" (rahmatan li'l-`Alamin) in all their works. Indirectly their English works or products addressing Western audiences become a *da`wah* tool for "knowing one another" (*al-ta`āruf*), "peaceful co-existence" (*al-ta`āyush al-silmī*) and "cooperation in matters of righteousness and God-consciousness" (*al-ta`āwun `ala'l-birri wa't-taqwā*) – all of which are encouraged by the Qur'an. With regard to the Jewish and Christian communities in the West, the Muslims have a lot in common with them, since the followers of

Muhammad (SAW), the followers of Jesus (on whom be peace) and the followers of Moses (on whom be peace) belong to a single Abrahamic family, whose original religion was based on belief in the One True God. Our Muslim academics and students of the English Department should be prepared to play another important civilisational and humanistic role in the 21st century.

It is also our wish and hope in IIUM that English, once the language of the colonial masters of much of the Muslim world, would morph one day into becoming the language and culture of Islam, second to Arabic, just as French could also become a bridge of future civilisational *rapprochement* between France and the Muslim world. It should be a source of encouragement for Muslim academics to know from Dr Lin Hongxuan (2017) that the Sufi groups in Singapore have been using the English language to spread Sufi teachings and literature in Singapore and also in other Anglophone communities around the world (Lin Honghuan 2017). It is obvious that English has been able to unite the multi-ethnic Muslim communities in Singapore, whereas in the 19th and 20th centuries it was Arabic and Malay that united them.

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