

INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR ON ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: REALITY
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Paper on “Integration of Interdisciplinary Approaches and
Culture in University Programmes: The Case of Islamic
Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences” by MKH.

One of the interesting contemporary academic debates in American and European universities is on the fate of humanities and arts in higher education in light of the ascension of STEM curriculum and its dominance in today’s neo-liberal oriented academia. While many universities have been marginalising or belittling the importance of the study of the humanities and the arts, some educationists in Western countries argue for the need for a more balanced curriculum which makes it necessary for science and technology majors to have a minor in humanities, or exposure to some courses in the humanities or arts. One of the justifications for the inclusion of humanities is that the humanities provide students with knowledge of the non-material, non-technical or non-technological dimensions of life. The humanities especially literature, philosophy and art also provide meaning and values necessary for human existence in this highly technocentric and post-modernist civilization.

The major problems of Western social sciences and the humanities have to do, **first**, with the philosophical or metaphysical presuppositions or assumptions, and **second**, with the methodologies of knowledge construction, and **third** with ends or purposes they are meant to fulfil. These three factors involve fundamental assumptions about man, society, ethics, purpose and meaning of life and human civilisation. In secular, agnostic or atheistic societies or cultures and civilisations, those fundamental assumptions are derived from the dominant secular worldviews, man-made ideologies or philosophies.

In Islamic culture, society or civilisation, those fundamental assumptions or philosophical presuppositions are provided not by human reason, empirical or pragmatic knowledge or man-made ideologies, but given by The One and Only Creator-Master-God-Sustainer, through His Revelations (*Wahy*). Therefore the scientific study of Man, Society, Culture and Civilisation shall necessarily employ the tools of reason, logical and rational analysis, empirical and scientific observation on

the one hand, without neglecting or marginalising the data, principles, values and norms provided by the Qur'an and the Authentic Sunnah regarding man, culture, society, civilisation, life, Realities and Truth. In short, the methodologies of social sciences and humanities – in Tauhidic epistemology and axiology -- are not restricted to human reason or rational intelligence, or empirical observation as in the secular academia and cultures. In these cultural milieu, the consequence of using autonomus reason or purely empirical methods of understanding social realities or phenomena is what the Qur'an describes as “*ya`lamūna dhāhiran min al-ḥayāti`d-dunyā wa hum `ani`l-ākhirati hum ghāfilūn*” (“They know the outer, tangible, external and apparent phenomena of this-worldly life, and they are heedless, unaware and neglectful of the Hereafter (and the unseen or transcendent Realities),” in Q. *al-Rūm* 30: 7).

As for the Muslim social scientists who wish to break away from the philosophical assumptions of secular, agnostic or atheistic paradigms of knowledge-construction they were exposed to while doing their graduate studies in Western universities, they need to acknowledge and embrace the other data: the metaphysical, non-empirical data, plus the normative values, norms, visions and ideals of man, society, state, culture, civilisation from the worldview of the Qur'an, as well as the cultural experiences and values of many Muslim societies and communities in the non-Western societies and cultures. In that way they will be able to: (a) get the holistic perspective of human and societal facts, realities and truths and: (b) play the role societal reformers and transformers in the spirit of Divine vicegerency (*khilafah*), *al-amr bi`l-ma`ruf wa`n-nahyu `an`il-munkar* and the mission of *Rahmatan li`-`Alamin*. This is a major challenge for the young Muslim social scientists or humanists who have just joined IIUM after getting their Ph.D's from secular Western universities. They need to liberate their minds and personalities from being “captive” (using the term popularised by the late Prof Syed Hussein Alatas) to the secular perspectives or paradigms of secular humanism, agnosticism or atheism, because many of the text books and major references as well as reputable scientific journals in their areas of specialisation are written from the secular humanistic or agnostic perspectives or worldviews.

With regard to the issue of reconciliation between natural science with religion or theistic beliefs, an interesting development in contemporary Western philosophical thought has been going on for quite some time now. That is the reassertion of the

theistic perspective in the interrogation and investigation of nature and the natural phenomenon, in spite of the assertiveness of the neo-atheistic perspective represented by Stephen Dawkins. The recent contribution of Stephen C. Meyer -- in addition to Phillip E. Johnson and J.P. Moreland, Alvin Plantinga -- in his *The Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries that Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe* (HarperOne: 2021) is most gratifying as it may accelerate the intellectual movement in the West for some kind of consilience of the two cultures or unity of knowledge in the West as envisaged by Edward O Wilson (1998). Nearer home, the National University of Singapore has recently established its New College of Humanities and Sciences which “marks a deeper emphasis on interdisciplinary learning and a drive to provide students with opportunities to develop competencies across [multiple disciplines]”. With “unparalleled flexibility and greater choice” students at NUS can be 1) **versatilists** with one major and unrestricted electives, 2) **integrators** with two majors and unrestricted electives, or 3) **deep specialists** with one major, while sharing the Common Curriculum across all pathways.” (news.nus.edu.sg. 8 December 2020).

For us Muslim academics and scholars in IIUM, there is a lot we can learn from the NUS innovations in integralist education, although we do not have the problem of establishing a faculty or college which integrates the social sciences, humanities and Islamic revealed knowledge which we started in three decades ago. Our first challenge is how to break the traditional walls which segregated the three branches of knowledge and learn to benefit from interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, given the inter-dependencies and inter-connectedness of the three branches. We know from the study of the Qur’an and the history of Islamic civilization that the notion of the unity of knowledge is an Islamic principle but later Muslim educational development has led to the compartmentalization of even the religious sciences, while Islamic contemporary reformist thought has been struggling to remove the artificial dichotomisation of worldly sciences and religious studies.

It is useful to keep in mind that the primary objective behind the establishment of IIUM was to provide an alternative to the secular-oriented and colonial-based institution of higher learning, towards the reconstruction of a holistic and virtuous civilization that would be beneficial to all of humanity. Reformist Islamic intellectuals and thinkers since the early 20th century have been propagating the Islamic vision of

the knowledge construction whose goal is the reconstruction of virtuous and God-fearing personalities, cultures, societies and finally civilisation, as Islamdom had accomplished for a thousand years before it declined and was overtaken and subjugated by the rise of the modern West. Today, after three hundred years of Western dominance, Empire and post-colonialism, the world is going through an age of global turbulence, disruptions, post-normal weirdness and global environmental emergencies – with COVID 19 pandemic as the latest catastrophe. In my humble opinion, the post-pandemic period provides the second opportunity in world history for the global Muslim community to take up the mantle of civilisational leadership role in accordance with the theocentric paradigm of holistic wellbeing: the *ummah wasat* paradigm. This requires Islamic higher educational institutions to reunify human knowledge: natural sciences, human sciences, humanities and theology to reconstruct the new pillars of human civilisation. This is the noble civilisational mission of IIUM and the KIRKHS must be ready to lead the way in decolonisation, integration and islamisation of human knowledge and education. We hope that IIUM and similar universities in the Muslim world would be able to produce the right kind of social scientists, humanists and theologians who will also function as problem solvers and civilization builders not only for Muslim societies but also for the whole of humanity threatened by soulless materialistic and nihilistic modernity.

In order to equip the students and graduates of IRKHS with the integrated knowledge, holistic tools and civilizational development skills to prepare them for the problem-solving and civilizational transformation roles, the Kulliyah should seriously consider the following strategies of reform;

1): Islamicisation, desecularisation, deconstruction of conventional knowledge systems and decolonisation of the philosophical presuppositions or assumptions of social science disciplines as well as the humanities taught in the KIRKHS within the framework of the theology (*`aqīdah*), ontology, epistemology, axiology and teleology of *Tauḥīd*. To implement this strategy, colleagues from the IRKH disciplines could be requested by the Dean to offer some seminars or workshops to assist the lecturers in social science disciplines and humanities to understand the relevant aspects of the worldview of *Tauḥīd*, the ways of extrapolating the principles, values and norms of the Qur'an, the Sunnah and Heritage which can enrich the particular disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

2): Relevantisation of Islamic revealed knowledge and heritage programmes through the processes of curricular and pedagogical revival (*iḥyāʾ*), reform (*iṣlāḥ*), renewal (*tajdīd*), reconstruction (*iʿādah al-bināʾ*) and innovative and creative thinking (*ijtihād*) and integration (*takāmul*) of useful and complementary elements of humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The academics and scholars in IRKH disciplines such as *Fiqh* and *Usul al-Fiqh*, *Usul al-Din*, Qur'an and Sunnah Studies, Arabic language and Literature should strengthen their relevantisation efforts untuk "*membumikan*" (bring down to earth) dan "*memasyarakatkan*" (socialise) the values and norms of *Sharīʿah*, *Uṣūluddīn* and *Akhlāq* by learning from their colleagues in social sciences and humanities about societal facts, social realities and cultural problems which may require their intervention, wisdom or attention, so that the society will be able to witness the positive results from the application of IRKH knowledge and wisdom to social and societal issues.

3): Integration of the IRKH disciplines and Human Sciences disciplines in areas of research, social and community work and projects, students' extracurricular activities and the creation of a Common Curriculum or some Interdisciplinary Modules at the undergraduate or postgraduate levels. In this regard, Sustainable Development Issues and Muslim Future Studies provide new frontiers of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches which should bring scholars in IRKH, Social Sciences and Humanities to engage in collaborative research, teaching, societal engagement and civilisational reform, transformation and reconstruction.

The proposal for the establishment of a Department of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies in KIRKHS is a most welcome development. The department may serve as the reference centre in KIRKHS in particular and for other kulliyahs in general for the understanding, analysis, deconstruction and construction of diverse philosophical assumptions about man, societies, cultures, states and civilisations across the broad spectrum of social science disciplines and humanities.