COMMUNICATION EDUCATION FOR THE MUSLIM SCHOLAR : A NEED FOR A METATHEORETICAL REASSESSMENT

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Introduction

Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.

The renowned observation by Rudyard Kipling aptly describes the state of this world. It is one, and yet it is many. The world as it is today, has never been a better proof for the prediction 'never the twain shall meet.' For indeed, the world we live in now is very divided, geo-politically and socio-religiously. These divisions are a result of history and the rise and fall of various civilizations. The modern world inherits the legacies of these past civilizations. Hence today, we speak of various worlds and worldviews which structure, arrange, influence and dictate our lives. In this essay, I am interested to trudge on to the aspect of our lives we label education and knowledge. For here too, we find divisions, such as western and eastern knowledge. To narrow this further, I will explore the arena of knowledge, which today we term as communication.

In many centers of education around the world today, the study of human communication has proven to be significant and important. In the west, communication, as a subject of inquiry, is probably as old as western civilization itself, dating back to the times of Plato and Aristotle. In the east, communication has always been an important oral tradition, attributed as being responsible for the spread and diffusion of ideas and knowledge. However, as a subject of inquiry, there has yet to be traced its historical linkage. Therefore, it is no wonder that communication, as a study, has always been viewed as originating from the west; its core assumptions, theories and ideas, can all be traced to western tradition. Such was communication when it was introduced as a subject in the academic institutions of the east some twenty years ago, and such is communication pursued now by most eastern scholars - with a totally western perspective, oblivious of some contradictions to their indigenous values. This essay is an attempt at reviewing communication as a subject of inquiry for the eastern scholars, namely the Muslim scholars. It will examine communication from a metatheoretical stance, and compare it with an Islamic viewpoint. Prior to this, it is essential to examine the current trends of education faced by the Muslim scholars, and the general impact on the Muslim community. It is hoped that this will build a rationale for the suggestion that education, and specifically communication education, for the Muslim scholars in today's world, needs to be reassessed.

The background

Who are the Muslim scholars? Obviously, they are Muslims who answer to the call for the quest of knowledge seriously. The Muslims are people who believe in the ideology of Islam. In the contemporary world, Islam is subscribed to by almost one-quarter of the total world population. There are approximately 837 million Muslims in the world (Weekes, 1984: xxi). They form the majority of the population in 36 countries, and are close to 50% of the total population in four other countries. In the Soviet Union and India, where there are small minorities, they number together more than 125 millions. Islam is also dominant in the Malay Archipelago of Southeast Asia, namely Malaysia and Indonesia. As a religion, it is the third largest in the world after Christianity and Buddhism.

What is Islam? Briefly, Islam means "submission to the will of God." The fundamental element in this act of submission to God is man's sense of indebtedness to God for giving him existence, so that

this sense of indebtedness is a prior condition to true submission. Muslims believe that God, who created mankind, taught Islam to the First Man and through various prophets down the ages, revealed various facets of Islam. The historical evolution and incorporation of prior messages into Islam is clearly stated in the Qur'an. Thus Islam is not a new religion. The Qur'an refers to it as the religion of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jesus and other prophets. It is the last of the divine messages to reach humanity through a prophet (Muhammad) chosen by the Creator as the bearer of his last and all-encompassing revelation (Bassiouni, 1977:11).

Islam is centered on God-consciousness and loyalty to God. Muslims believe that God (Allah) is Omniscient and Omnipresent — Allah is the Creator, Sustainer and Controller of all the worlds. Muslims are commanded to live their lives, not as mere individuals, but also as members of a community with social and moral obligations.

Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge and emphasizes education as the means to acquire wisdom. The Holy Qur'an commands Muslims to study the universe and goes to the extent of saying that man, with his knowledge and wisdom, can even control the sun, the moon and other planets. Muslims do not claim to have founded knowledge or civilization. Prophet Muhammad said that humanity had acquired knowledge in the past and it is the duty of every Muslim to gather and develop it. In the Hadith, which is a record of utterances, discourses, usages, practices, sayings and the way of life led by the Prophet, it is stated that he said "knowledge is the lost property of a Muslim, take hold of it whenever you come across it" (Ali, 1985: 37-38).

After about six centuries of intellectual advancement, the world of Islam began to decline. One of the reasons for this decline is the loss of *adab* in the Muslim community (al-Attas, 1985). This loss of *adab* means the loss of discipline — the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one's proper place in relation to one's self, society and community, and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials. In other words, amidst the struggles and the changes that the world has gone through, the Muslims lost their Muslim-ness. In their hastiness to catch up with their surroundings, the Muslims unconsciously sacrificed their authentic values.

The root of the problem

Historically, Islam has always been regarded by the West as posing a challenge to its very way of life. Islam is not only a challenge to Christianity, but also to the epistemological and philosophical principles deriving from Graeco-Roman thought which forms the basis of western worldview and education. The west is ever bound to regard Islam as the true rival of the world, challenging its basic beliefs and principles (al-Attas, 1985). Until today we find that the west, and Europe specifically, still regards Islam as a threat to its existence. This is evident in the case of Turkey, an Islamic nation, applying to be a full member of the European Common Market. Europe is delaying its reply to Turkey. Other than economic reservations, the unspoken issue is Islam, i.e., how Europe will accept its Muslim culture (The Wall Street Journal, May 25, 1988). And so the confrontation between the west and Islam continues. If Islam is taken to represent a strong segment of the east, once again the words of Kipling rings true.

Whatever the pages of history tell us about this confrontation, the fact remains that western worldview and knowledge now dominates most of the Muslim world. For about five centuries, the western views of progress, science and technology have overwhelmed the rest of the world. The paths of development taken by the west are often followed by the east, including Muslim countries under Muslim leadership. The idea of progress imposed upon the world has come to be known as modernization (from an agrarian society to an industrialized one). The basic essentials for the modernization process as invented by the West was gradually accomplished through the educational system.

When the colonial masters were in control in the Muslim countries, they also remodelled the type of education and school system in the colonies. Even after they left and the colonies regained their independence, the educational system remains, because by then, colonization has left a permanent imprint in the minds of the colonized. This is evident in countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia. What followed was the prevalence of foreign and alien ideas with secular concepts and methodology dominating all branches of knowledge in the Muslim world. Such secularism contradicts Islamic principles and leads to a confrontation between tradition and modernity in society.

Modern western public education emphasizes reason and rationality and underestimates the value of the spirit. Reason conceived as the role instrument of human understanding alienates man from his intuition and prevents him from achieving true wisdom which surpasses reason. Empiricism as the only criterion of truth tends to supress the sense of wonder over the perennial mysteries and the great ontological questions. Western emphasis on education is anthropocentric, i.e., it looks at as the central fact of the universe. This emphasis places man against nature instead of in nature, and causes him to treat nature without any sense of responsibility. The product of this kind of education is the modern man, who idolizes his own creations. And as in all forms of idolatry, this subjects the idolator to spiritual impoverishment and intellectual sterility. It separates man from nature, the source of his physical sustenance, and his traditions, the source of his spiritual sustenance (Tehranian, 1980). Hence, the root of this loss of spirituality in the modern Muslim community points to the western-oriented educational system that they are now adopting.

In the late seventies, the Islamic world witnessed a revolution that reawakened them from the intellectual slumber. Muslim intellectuals began to realize that if they do not start instilling Islamic viewpoints in all branches of knowledge, then the structure on which Muslim society is based will gradually be destroyed. If the cultural identity of the Muslims is to be preserved and strengthened, educational reform is necessary (Al-Attas,1979,1985; Al-Faruqi et. al., 1981; Khan,1981; Ashraf,1985).

Thus in the Muslim world today, there is a call for the Islamization of knowledge. This is the challenge now for the new intellectual class of Muslims, which guides and governs the minds of the younger generations. These new intellectuals hold the responsibility to reformulate basic concepts of the various disciplines of knowledge on the basis of Islamic concepts. A revision along Islamic lines is possible only when faith in the validity of Qur'anic statements and the Prophet's tradition (Hadith) is firmly ingrained in the soul of the scholars, and they accept without qualification these Qur'anic premises. Muslim intellectuals are expected now to justify their methods and at the same time, restate their traditional ideas in the context of the new (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979). The task is gigantic but is necessary for the survival of the Muslim world.

There have been various discussions and writings on the issue of the Islamization of modern education in Muslim countries. However, generally, the Muslim world has not been too successful at this effort because the rest of the problem has not been tackled properly. Though there have been attempts to make religious education compulsory, there has been little done at teaching and re-learning literature and fine arts, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences from the Islamic point of view. At this point, it is important to state that Islamization of knowledge does not mean Muslims have to ignore western viewpoints and ideas. Islamization of knowledge entails that Muslims re-examine knowledge so that is aligned with their own values, and does not overlook the divine existence. Islamic education centers on God, i.e., it is theocentric. As al-Faruqi (1981) stipulates, all forms of learning should re-order themselves under the principle of *tawhid*, i.e., God exists and is One, and that He is the Creator, the Master, the Provider, the Sustainer, and the ultimate metaphysical cause, purpose, and end of everything that is. Therefore, education and even methods of teaching should reinforce faith in God, instead of creating doubts in the minds of the students.

The field of communication

As stated earlier, communication has emerged as a very important field of study in the academic arena.

This is understandable since by definition itself, communication is the social matrix of man. Human communication is the way human beings manage and coordinate meanings with one another so as to maintain and promote a sense of socialness in his world. Communication is thus concerned with relationships and linkages that one builds as an individual in the community. The field of human communication then revolves around both the individual and the community. Defined and conceptualized in such a manner, communication, as a subject of inquiry, fits perfectly with the values espoused by Islam. This is because Islam always emphasizes man and his community, and that they exist in this phenomenal world in a symbiotic relationship, where each feeds and nourishes upon one another. Man is dependent on community, and community is dependent on man for survival. This is a central theme in the Qur'an, for in Islam there is no such thing as a societiless individual. The concepts of human action, such as that of *taqwa* are meaningful only within a social context (Rahman, 1980: 37). An Islamic definition of human communication should thus reject individualistic emphases of human communication.

A useful way of looking at human communication as a field of study is to view it from a metatheoretical stance. Metatheory involves philosophical issues in the study of human communication. It deals with issues of epistemology, issues of ontology, and issues of perspective. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge. Ontology is the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of being, reality or ultimate substance, i.e., the phenomena we seek to know. Epistemology and ontology go hand in hand, since what we conceptualize as knowledge depends partly on our notions of the phenomena we seek to know. A perspective is a viewpoint — it guides us in choosing an angle or a focus. A perspective is largely affected by how we view knowledge and being. Therefore, perspective, ontology and epistemology are inter-connected. The issues are the assumptions behind various views of human communication. Hence, tackling human communication at the metatheoretical level is fruitful in helping us build an Islamic perspective of communication, because we are examining its very roots.

Western epistemological assumptions stresses experience as a way of knowing. Many communication theorists believe that all knowledge arises from experience. We observe the world and thereby come to know it. Knowledge is also regarded as relative. Relativism is a major viewpont regarding the certainty of truth and knowledge in western thinking. The universality of knowledge, or obsolute truth, is a great debate in western epistemology. The question of how do we know what we know lies at the heart of epistemology. There are various positions on this issue as related to communication. Communication theorists who are rationalists suggest that knowledge arises out of the sheer power of human reasoning. Communication empiricists state that knowledge arises in perception and experience. Others insist that knowledge or truth is created or constructed by people so that they can function pragmatically in life. Many scholars also believe that knowledge is best conceived in wholes, while others argue that it can be understood as parts separately.

Littlejohn (1983) summarizes that the epistemological assumptions give rise to two basic positions which he calls worldviews. The first world-view is based on empiricist and rationalist ideas. Reality is thought of as outside human beings, waiting to be discovered. It assumes a physical, knowable reality that is self-evident to the trained observer. The second worldview is termed as humanistic and constructivistic. This view stresses on individual differences and the subjective responses. Reality is seen as a created entity and human beings are construers of that reality. Knowing is a result of the perceptual and interpretive processes of the individuals. Therefore, knowledge in this view, only covers what the human imagination can perceive and interpret.

In Islam, man is central only in his relationship to God. With this notion then, knowledge is not only to be discovered and perceived, it is also given to man. Revelation, which is the Qur'an, is another source of truth and knowledge for man. Revelation is the result of the contact of individual will with the Supreme Universal Will that is God. God revealed His Will for the benefit of mankind through the will of the individual whom God had chosen as His Prophet. The absolute that man seeks is realized

through this contact. Hence, in Islam, man's spiritual ability to realize wisdom from the Absolute is an important source of knowledge.

This dimension of knowledge provides another form of human communication that is outwardly ignored in western perspective — that of between man and God. This form of communication, whatever we may call it, is vital for man to realize his full potentialities as a human being. The Qur'an implies that empirical knowledge, which gives rise to communication at the interpersonal and social levels only, is of little benefit unless it awakens the inner perception of man as to his own situation, potentialities and destiny:

> Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom, and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts (Sura 22: 46).

Thus, knowledge which comes from man-God communication and relationship, brings about a moral perception, which is hoped to kindle in the social communication of man. The secular view of the west fails to realize this and thus, also fails to reduce the anxieties of finitude and absurdity which emerge out of an awareness of the certainty of death, and ignorance about human destiny.

Assumptions about ontology and human nature are another important metatheoretical issues in the theorizing of human communication. There are various views on these issues in western thinking. In relation to the field of human communication, approaches in phenomenology, ethnomethodology, social action theory, cybernetics, open systems theory and behaviorism are influential. Basically, these approaches can be summarized as actional and nonactional theory (Littlejohn, 1983). Actional theory emphasizes active interpretations by individuals. Individuals are assumed to create their own meanings and realities, have intentions and make real choices based on future goals. Individual behaviors are not governed by universal prior events, instead they are seen as highly contextualized. Nonactional theory downplays active individual interpretation. It assumes that behavior is deterministic and caused by a multitude of past events. This is represented by the covering law paradigm and behavioristic theory, whereby human behavior is thought of as being controlled by a set of natural laws. Hence, the regularities or patterns observable in human behavior are detemined by these laws. These deterministic framework denies the existence of human free will.

Islamic ontological position does not deny all the assumptions found in actional and nonactional theory. However, Islam takes a middle range view rather than extremes. In addition to this, Islam also adds another view of human nature that is missed in western antology. This view follows from the creation of man as depicted in the Qur'an. Man is regarded by Islam as the vicegerent of God on earth and the entire creation is regarded as subservient to him:

> Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: I am about to create, from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape; when I have fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him (Sura 15: 29).

Man is the vicegerent or representative of God on earth because God had bestowed on him, and him alone among all creations, the most comprehensive ability to recognize, understand and emulate the attributes of God and realize them in practice in this life. Because of this comprehensiveness, there is almost no limit to human knowledge and no end to human ability to command the universe. However, since man is not the creator of these qualities, and the only universal and all-comprehensive will is the Will of God, the complete fulfillment of human personality can only be achieved when the norm of the attributes of God is obeyed.

The creation of man also indicates that he is made up of opposites. Man's body is formed from mud and it is this odorous earth that is supposed to be the source of all that attracts man towards the

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temporal and earthly. God breathes into man's body His own spirit, and this is supposed to be the source of all attraction towards good. He is also made up of dust, and thus man has the impulse to act with selfishness and contrary to the laws of God. The above features of man then assumes the existence of free-will in him. This means that Islam does not accept the notion that man's predisposition is predeterministic. Man has the ability and the freedom to make his own choices. What determines human behavior is human will itself. Statements on this free-will abounds in the Qur'an:

> If anyone contends with the Apostle even after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, and follows a path other than that becoming to men of Faith, We shall leave him in the path he has chosen (Sura 4: 115).

> He knoweth the Unseen and that which is open: He is the Great, the most High. It is the same to Him, openly; whether he lie hid by night or walk forth freely by day. For each (such person) there are angels in succession before and behind him: they guard him by command of God. Verily never will God change the condition of the people until they change it themselves (with their own souls) (Sura 13: 9 - 11).

Therefore on the issue of human free will and making choices, Islam differs significantly from nonactional theory, specifically the covering law paradigm.

Epistemological and ontological assumptions are correlated to a large extent with perspectives. Perspectives guides the scholar in choosing what to focus on and what to leave out, how to explain the process, and how to conceptualize what is observed. On this note, it is therefore important to examine issues of epistemology and ontology before a perspective can be developed. Since there are significant differences between western and Islamic epistemological and ontological views, then an Islamic perspective of human communication will certainly differ from western perspectives. This essay does not attempt to develop that perspective, for it is certainly a responsibility due unto all Muslim scholars. Suffice it is to state here that a metatheoretical reassessment of the field of human communication is very much necessary in the Muslim world.

Conclusion

A Muslim worldview of human communication is now undoubtedly vital so that the Muslim scholar will not be caught in an epistemological and ontological confusion. With a theocentric emphasis in viewing knowledge, reality and the nature of man, it is hoped that communication, as a field of inquiry, will bring Muslim scholars closer to God and reinforce their faith in Islam. As a concluding note, it is necessary to reiterate that an Islamic perspective of human communication is not aimed at denouncing western perspectives, rather it is an intellectual invitation to Muslims to explore the unending possibilities of their Faith.

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