

## **Islam, Modernity and Human Sciences**

Ali Zaidi

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The complex nexus between Islam and modernity is a fascinating subject and is one that sets out the coherent framework of one form of Islamic intellectual discourse. This discourse becomes more profound when the relationship is analyzed within the scientific context. Human sciences focus on the objectively informed critique of human existence and how this relates to reality. In other words, human sciences repudiate the metaphysical and religious explication of the macrocosmic reality. The constant perplexing friction between Muslim and Western social thought vis-à-vis integrating transcendental elements into the framework of human sciences is an important area of dispute in this debate. Ali Zaidi's book, *Islam, Modernity and the Human Sciences* is a concerted and an earnest attempt in this direction, as he analyses the variant paradigms of knowledge and eventually attempts to articulate a new and creative organic synthesis between the modern human sciences and Islamic social thought by presenting a lucid, scholarly and descriptive exposition of the dialogical hermeneutics, focusing on textual interpretation, and the explication of cultural traditions.

The work under review comprises three parts and six chapters; these are preceded by a foreword, introduction and followed by conclusion, bibliography and an index. In the introduction, Ali Zaidi presents the basic theme of his work and addresses the issue of re-enchanting knowledge both within Western and Muslim contexts. The first part ("Social theory and Dialogical Understanding", pp. 23-50) offers the framework for civilizational dialogue. The second part ("Muslim Debates on Social Knowledge", pp. 53-99) examines Muslim attempts at the reconstruction of knowledge. The third part ("Western Debates on Social Knowledge", pp. 103-43) highlights intercultural dialogue, focusing on Wilhelm Dilthey's and Max Weber's formulation of modern human sciences.

In the first chapter, Ali Zaidi succinctly encapsulates the significance of dialogue, positing that the shift from the hermeneutic perspective of human sciences has led to the subversion and destruction of traditional cultural understandings. He analyzes the dialogical hermeneutics of Hans Gadamer, comparing it to other approaches in hermeneutics, such as Bakhtin's theory of dialogue (1981). With Gadamer's extrapolation of hermeneutics the process of dialogue is thought to be transformed into the ontological event. While shifting the focus from interpretative aspects of dialogue to critical interference,

Ali Zaidi expounds on the type of critique that is compatible with the dialogical process. Ali Zaidi defends hermeneutic dialogue, spelling out various inconsistencies in other interpretative critical attempts at interpreting human sciences which incorporate both dialogue and critical evaluation, for example, Habermas's critical theory, the deconstruction, as explicated by Arkoun and the Foucauldian discourse, as identified in the works of Mona Abaza. The significance of silence is furthermore expatiated, and underscored sometimes as a palatable option.

In the second chapter, Muslim attempts at the reconstruction of knowledge are analyzed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's project of re-enchantment is deliberated upon with precision and conscientious elaboration, and is seen to delineate the process of reconstruction. Ali Zaidi analyzes Ismail Raji al-Faruqi's "Islamization of Knowledge" project, and various other critically oriented projects concerned with the reconstruction process, including the *Ijmali* critique led by Ziauddin Sardar and Pervez Manzoor; this last represents a clear counter-current. While referring to the critical counter-current as Nativist Ressentiment, Ali Zaidi mentions intellectuals who are critical of reconstruction projects, including Mona Abaza and Syed Farid al-Atas; according to them, at times the viewpoints of Muslim scholars reflect an implicit rejection of basic scientific premises.

In the third chapter, Ibn Khaldun's concept of human sciences is examined. In his *Muqaddimah*, he develops a theory of *'Ilm al-Umran* (science of human association/science of culture). *'Ilm al-Umran* is seen as a precursor to many social sciences. According to Ali Zaidi, Ibn Khaldun's work represents the complete analysis of an ontological and epistemological framework. Ibn Khaldun's use of hierarchical concepts and respective knowledge construe proximity between human and religious sciences. The central concept of his theory, *'Asabiyya*, group cohesion or social solidarity, is seen to constitute the fundamental basis of social order rather than revealed religious law.

Chapter four delves into the process of intercultural dialogue; Ali Zaidi attempts a critical evaluation of historical reasoning, and refers to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, in which the conception of human sciences are ascertained not based on positivism or empiricism, but rather on engendering objective knowledge. Dilthey's attempt to analyze Comte's sociology and Mill's moral science and to sketch a foundational discipline and a descriptive psychology fails to cope with cultural phenomena. Ultimately, the transitional shift towards the hermeneutic perspective acts as a means to develop a conceptual analysis concerned with how knowledge and society function. Dilthey stresses the concept of human sciences that is both descriptive and prescriptive, and

which integrates moral and empirical realms. His concept deals with the non-corporal reality without relegating it to the psychic reality. This chapter indicates that there is a wide space for dialogue with Ibn Khaldun; both Ibn Khaldun's and Dilthey's conceptual analysis converges in the significance of the pragmatic influence of metaphysics.

Chapter five discusses how the shift from the hermeneutic perspective to a sheer positivist paradigm supplants the metaphysical elements and the search for transcendence in human sciences. To advance towards a dialogical process, Max Weber's philosophy of human sciences is analyzed. In Weber's quest to retain objectivity as the basis of the socio-scientific process, he articulates that no radical difference exists between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Socialwissenschaften*. According to Ali Zaidi, Weber ultimately resorts to the application of immanent organic metaphysics as a means to elucidate mystical experiences. Weber acknowledges the fact that *Entzauberungsprozess* engenders the rejection of metaphysical ideas, and eventually argues in terms of an ethic of responsibility that forms an important aspect of his organic metaphysics: modern man must attribute meaning to ultimate values and actions and must emphasize the application of the metaphysical worldview in order to choose between values and actions.

Ali Zaidi concludes by returning to the dialogical encounter. He advocates the feasibility of a transformative dialogue that is aimed at exploring the meeting-point between the contentious prototypes of knowledge within the context of human sciences by reappropriating hermeneutics in a holistic manner. Furthermore, Ali Zaidi indicates that while dealing with foundationalist and anti-foundationalist religious hermeneutical stances and insights, it is necessary to bridge the gaps between these disciplines. Finally, he argues that the main challenge which befalls Muslim thought is, on the one hand, the irrelevance of hierarchical thought. On the other hand, there is also the inefficacy of Muslim thought to integrate with postmodern thought.

Accordingly, this valuable study revolves round the concept of dialogue. The work primarily focuses on assaying and addressing the main problems of integrating religious metaphysics with the scientific worldview. It provides an entire background to Islam and the human scientific dispute, generating a new paradigm, addressing diverse challenges while formalizing a viable solution; this latter discloses the implicit dialogue with a comparative perusal of secular knowledge and the Western debates on metaphysical disintegration. The author competently reviews the broad socio-cultural context, and alleviates the malaise of actuating beyond transcendence by equating traditional norms of knowledge with socio-scientific knowledge. In contrast to much of

the work in the field of Islam and modernity, this work is admirably cohesive, innovative and somewhat different from the others as it approaches the subject through a dialogical process by reconstructing a theoretical framework, thus drawing upon hermeneutics and intercultural dialogue. This is used as a means to provide a better prospect for understanding the “other”. In short, this work makes a most useful and original contribution to one of the most pressing questions in academia. Can Islam and modernity be reconciled in the scientific context? Is it possible to integrate transcendental metaphysical beliefs with modern human sciences? This work is required reading for all those who are interested in this field of study as it offers key insights for those seeking answers to these questions.

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**Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy:  
Ba‘lamī’s Tārīkhnāma**

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Andrew C. S. Peacock, who teaches at the University of St Andrews, is interested in the history of Anatolia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. He is the author of several articles on medieval Islamic history and historiography. This book, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy: Ba‘lamī’s Tārīkhnāma*, originated as a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Cambridge in 2003.

The significance of Peacock’s book lies in its being the first monograph on Ba‘lamī’s *Tārīkhnāma*, the earliest work in Persian prose and one of the most influential works of Islamic historical writing; this work was translated into Arabic and Turkish and remained in circulation for a thousand years. This work not only includes the textual history of the *Tārīkhnāma*, the form and content of which throw light on the processes by which it has been transmitted. It also depicts the political and ideological circumstances of the Samanid Dynasty of Central Asia, one of the largest and most powerful Muslim states of the 10th century, which included Greater Khurasan, Ray and Transoxiana.