

Secular Knowledge at its Islamic Best

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So far as success or failure in the Hereafter is concerned. It rests entirely on the revealed knowledge passed on to mankind by the Prophets (2:120) The Prophet Muhammad is enjoined to proclaim to mankind that “Gods” guidance is the only guidance.

Nevertheless, Islam holds that while the principles for the attainment of salvation in the Hereafter derive solely from divine revelation the attainment of material progress in underlain by knowledge of the laws of nature as discovered and established by secular scientific research. Islamic schematism, therefore by reason and by tradition has always accorded to the secular sciences the status of an independent branch of learning. In fact, the Quran repeatedly urges us to give serious thought to the natural phenomena of the heavens and the earth, as being “signs for men of sense – those who remember God when standing, sitting and lying down and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, saying ‘Lord, You have not created this in vain’ (3:190). These verses clearly suggest that proceed to our own conclusion on the basis of human ratiocination in matters of the world.

The difference between the scientific and the religious approach to practical matters has been made clear in a hadith. Fifty out of the 63 years of the Prophet’s life were spent in Mecca, a desert city where there was no agriculture. Latter he migrated to Medina where agriculture and horticulture were practiced – in particular the growing of date palms. Naturally, the Prophet has no experience of either farming or fruit growing. One day as the Prophet was passing through the outskirts of Medina, he noticed that some people, who had climbed up the date palms were engaged in some activity. On inquiring what they were busy with, they explained that they were fertilizing the trees. Traditionally they did this by the artificial pollination of the date flowers, and this ensured a good crop. But, when the Prophet said, “What if you don’t do it?” the people in deference to his judgment climbed down the trees without completing their task. That year the yield was very low.

When the Prophet inquired why the yield was so low that particular year, the orchard keepers replied that the yield depended on the pollination which they have been carrying out when he stopped them. On hearing this the Prophet replied: “Continue doing as you used to, since you know the matters of the world better than I do,”

The incident illustrates how the Prophet separated religious knowledge from a practical matter such as horticulture, In fact, the principle evident in this was applicable not just to horticulture, but to all natural matters governed by the laws of nature. The clear inference is that what is demonstrable in nature, yielding itself to research and experiment will be accepted by Islam as established empirical knowledge.

The same principle may be applied – as well as in agriculture and horticulture-- to all other scientific disciplines for instance, to geology astronomy, engineering and so on. Islam is quite clear on this point that all of these are the subject matter not of religion but of scientific research.

For instance, if experiment shows that water boils at 100 degree Celsius it will be accepted as such without any dispute. Only that will be held valid which has been proved by scientific research experiment. All discoveries must be verifiable. Nothing will be accepted on the basis of mere speculation.

Historically, this Islamic policy of the division of religion and science is extremely important, as it opened the door to scientific progress for the first time in human history Prior to the advent of Islam, this policy of division has never been followed, so that science remained the mere handmaiden of religion. Any attempt at true scientific research was generally hampered or stopped altogether by the forces of dogmatism and superstition. Independent progress was impossibility. The division recognized by Islam was epoch-making precisely because it freed secular science from the grip of religion. This Opened the way to the open conducting of research and experiment without any fear of interference. This process of liberation continued for a period of a thousand years, until the modern era came into existence which is now known as the scientific age.
