Critique and Retrieval: The Absent Obligation in Contemporary Islamic Thought

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Abstract

This study seeks to provide a grounded framework for contemporary Islamic thought by tracing it back to three major approaches. Each approach claims to represent the correct methodology required in the present age. These approaches are: the traditional system with all its schools, the modernist system with its various schools, and the eclectic approach, commonly referred to as the reformist trend.

These approaches rarely agree on a shared position. They often adopt attitudes of hostility and rivalry toward one another. For this reason, the study focuses on identifying the most significant pitfalls into which each approach has fallen, as well as the crises that result from them. It then explores the prospects of a new path capable of bringing these approaches together. This path seeks to integrate perspectives in a manner acceptable to all parties, based on a Qurʾanic anthropological principle.

This principle serves as the point of departure for a new trajectory, namely the path of critique and retrieval. This path does not position itself in opposition to other approaches. Instead, it accommodates them all through the principle of critique and retrieval. The foundational premise adopted here is shared, in essence, by all existing approaches.

Introduction

Islamic thought continues to oscillate between three approaches from which it seems unable to escape. One of these approaches was established in early history, while the other two emerged in modern times. Islamic thought rarely draws from anything outside these frameworks.

The first approach clings firmly to the past and seeks no alternative to it. The second rejects the past and embraces the new. Between these two, attempts are often made to introduce contemporary adaptations or classical disguises. As a result, conflicts and intellectual battles frequently erupt between the two sides. These battles have often led to the establishment of what may be described as intellectual tribunals. Yet such efforts repeatedly end in failure. Rather than resolving tensions, they tend to intensify complexity and polarization.

This is largely because such tribunals usually adopt what they consider a middle position between the two sides. From this emerged a third approach. Often without full awareness, this approach becomes entangled in conflict. At times, it confronts the first group, and at other times, it challenges the second. Consequently, contemporary Arab thought has come to be characterized by three distinct approaches.

The core problem does not primarily lie in the outcomes, regardless of how they may appear. It lies instead in the methodology adopted. This brief study therefore seeks to contribute a modest degree of intellectual and methodological awareness that aligns with the demands of the present stage. To begin with, it is necessary to identify these three approaches within Arab thought and to trace them back to their underlying systems and foundational principles.

1. The Traditional System

This system represents the first approach. It follows the path of the early Muslim scholars in matters of legal reasoning and deduction. Within this approach, epistemology is grounded in the sources of Islamic legislation. These begin with the Qurʾan, followed by the Prophetic Sunnah, then consensus, analogical reasoning, and other established sources.

No distinction is intended here between the two major branches of Islam, namely Sunnism and Shiʿism. The focus on Sunnism is merely for predominance in reference. The discussion applies equally to Shiʿism and also includes Ibadi thought.

The traditional system is primarily concerned with reinforcing the intellectual products of earlier scholars regarding the principles and conditions of ijtihād. It contributes little of significance in this area, except for limited subsidiary efforts related to contemporary circumstances. Even these efforts remain bound by the foundational principles of earlier scholars. Adherents of this system rarely dare to subject these foundations to critique. When they do, it is usually through citing the critiques of well-known imams, such as Mālik's criticism of Abū Ḥanīfa or Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's criticism of al-Shāfiʿī, and similar examples.

The same applies to matters of creed. Followers of the Ashʿarī school do not critique Ashʿarī principles themselves. Likewise, adherents of the Ḥanbalī tradition do not critique Ibn Ḥanbal or Ibn Taymiyya. The furthest extent of their disagreement is the adoption of one reported opinion of their imam over another. Their critique is then directed toward refuting alternative views.

Followers of this system aim to reproduce earlier historical periods, especially the era of the Companions and the Successors. They view this era as the embodiment of true and ideal Islam. In their perspective, historical development is often perceived as a calamity for Islam and its followers. As time advances, corruption is believed to spread, trials increase, and people drift away from religion. The best generations are therefore the first three, which are seen as ideal. As a result, hearts and minds within this system remain constantly oriented toward the

past, toward the era of the righteous and ideal predecessors. All efforts are thus directed toward restoring the nation to its former glory.

This approach categorically rejects Western methodologies, particularly in the human and social sciences. This rejection is based on several arguments, including the following:

- These methodologies are founded on epistemological premises that fundamentally reject religion. Even when they accept religion, they do not accept Islam in particular.

- These methodologies are believed to aim at undermining Islam and sowing doubt among its adherents. Such views are often framed within what is known as conspiracy theory discourse, supported by the Prophetic tradition: "The nations will soon summon one another against you as people summon one another to a dish." (Sunan Abī Dāwūd, 2009, p. 355). "مَا فَرَّطْنَا فِي اَلْكِتَابِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ" [الأنعام:38]

- Islam is believed to possess sufficient methodological resources that render Western methodologies unnecessary. God has neglected nothing in the Book: "We have neglected nothing in the Book" (Qurʾan, al-Anʿām: 38).

- God has warned against imitating Jews and Christians, considering this imitation a sign of the Hour, as stated in the Prophetic tradition: "You will surely follow the ways of those before you, hand span by hand span and arm length by arm length, even if they were to enter the hole of a lizard, you would enter it"

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, nos. 3269, 6804, 7320).

Despite its insistence on adhering to classical methodologies and attempting to replicate an idealized past, this system now stands powerless in the face of sweeping European development at all levels. This development has become a dominant force that has gradually affected the followers of this system. It has led to a steady decline in their numbers. The system is unable to produce new methodologies capable of confronting this major transformation. At the same time, it has failed to reinforce its old methodologies in a way that preserves its followers. As a result, it has resorted to methods and language far removed from academic rigor and objectivity, such as accusations of innovation, moral deviation, and disbelief.

2. The Modernist System

This system represents the second path within contemporary Islamic thought. It adopts the achievements of Western modernity in the human and social sciences in a largely uncritical manner. These achievements are then directly projected onto the Arab reality. The modernist system seeks to establish these methodologies as the primary reference for Islamic thought, in place of traditional methods.

This orientation is usually driven by two main reasons. The first is an attempt to escape the state of underdevelopment experienced by Islamic countries at all levels. This situation is perceived as a comprehensive crisis that requires an effective means of deliverance. The second reason is fascination with Western civilization and its

achievements in relation to the human condition. The second reason is, in fact, a consequence of the first. Modernist thinkers see no way out of the current state of decline except through full engagement with Western modernity and the abandonment of old and worn-out ideas, just as Europe once did.

Because this trend is fully aware that it does not enjoy wide acceptance in Islamic circles, it often resorts to intellectual disguises. These take the form of selective Islamic justifications used to legitimize its positions. Nasr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd refers to this strategy, in his commentary on Arkoun's methodology, as concessions (Discourse and Interpretation, 2000, p. 10).

The modernist system rejects all traditional forms of knowledge production on the grounds that:

- They emerged from an epistemological foundation based on theology in the production of knowledge. This corresponds to what Auguste Comte described as the theological and metaphysical stages of thought.

- The human mind possesses sufficient capacity to replace ready-made theological knowledge, and it has already demonstrated its competence.

- Religion is hostile to science and unable to accommodate it. Religion, according to this view, has failed at all levels. Scientists were killed or burned in its name, and long-term wars erupted as a result of it.

Despite having emerged within advanced and developed environments, this system has been unable to replace the traditional system or to compensate for the deficiencies it identified within it. This is because it originated from dialectical materialism and ultimately returned to it. Its focus therefore remained limited to a single dimension, as Herbert Marcuse pointed out. It neglected the hidden and ambiguous dimensions of the human being. It treated the human being as an object among objects, which led to a reduction of the human to a purely natural or material entity[1].

As a result, this system failed to penetrate the depth of the civilizational crisis facing the Islamic community. It transplanted Western problematics, which emerged within a different historical and cultural context, onto the realities of Muslim societies. These realities operate within a context fundamentally different from that of the West.

3. The Eclectic System

Some scholars refer to this system as the reformist trend. It represents the third path. This trend contains two distinct orientations. One is ascending, and the other is descending.

The ascending orientation moves from the old toward the new. It initially belonged to the traditional system, then opened itself to the achievements of Western civilization. This shift led to intellectual hesitation regarding which path to follow. It eventually settled on the necessity of eclecticism, though its proponents often describe it as reconciliation. In this view, the traditional system remains the foundation, while the achievements of Western civilization are regarded as

divine blessings. God bestows His blessings upon whom He wills.

The descending orientation, by contrast, began from a purely Western intellectual framework. Its proponents studied in the West, absorbed its ideas, and adopted them, often more enthusiastically than their original advocates. They later encountered an impasse. This led to an ontological crisis that pushed them to search for salvation within another system. They came to see a return to origins as a virtue. As a result, they returned to the traditional system while remaining loyal to the Western system at the same time.

Within this system, its adherents feel no discomfort in selectively drawing from Islam and its original framework to the same extent that they draw from the Western system. This approach is supported by several arguments:

- Reason and revelation are both paths that lead to truth. They are compatible and not contradictory.
- Science and its products are not the exclusive property of any individual or nation. They constitute the shared heritage of humanity. Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, and wherever it is found, he has the strongest claim to it.
- God has permitted the consumption of the food of the People of the Book and allowed marriage to their women. This applies even more to other matters, especially material ones.

This system resembles a hybrid entity. It belongs fully to neither side. At times it inclines toward one, and at other times toward the other. As a result, it lacks a clear identity. The loss of identity is itself a serious dilemma. For this reason, this trend has faced rejection and disdain from both of the previous systems. It lacks stability, adopts no clearly defined path, and follows no coherent methodology. It has thus become lost between modernity and tradition, which has drawn it into a cycle of impulses and arbitrary influences.

We are now confronted with these divergent paths. They do not agree on a shared position. Nor can they reach agreement as long as they proceed from subjective standpoints. Each perceives the other only through its own perspective. In other words, each reads the other not as the other understands itself, but as it wishes it to be. The traditional system reads the modernist system exclusively through the methodology of the early scholars. A clear example of this is the tendency to accuse those who reject certain foundational principles of misguidance, innovation, disbelief, immorality, or injustice, depending on the perceived offense.

From the modernist perspective, the traditional principles of reasoning are rejected on the grounds that they contradict science and epistemological theories based on reason, sensory perception, empirical experience, or a combination of these. The third path is the least coherent and the least objective. It seeks to appease both sides, yet it finds no way to do so because of the profound qualitative differences between them.

In reality, these methodologies are products of the human intellect and were developed independently of

religion. For this reason, religious thinkers reject them. Modernists, on the opposite side, also reject religion. Each side rejects the other. Yet each relies on a firm foundation. Religion is indispensable to the human being, and science is equally indispensable. Eclecticism offers no effective solution. This raises the question of an alternative capable of achieving consensus without negating any party.

A genuine and effective alternative cannot be achieved unless a shared ground is established. By "parties," we do not mean individuals or religious authorities. We mean an epistemological foundation that is compatible with all systems and rejected by none, based on their own internal principles. Through careful reflection on both systems, we identified a shared principle that often goes unnoticed. This principle is both modern and Qurʾanic at the same time.

Its connection to modernity appears through anthropology, which has made significant progress in this field. Anthropology can contribute to bridging the existing divide within contemporary Islamic thought. However, Islamic thought has not given these studies sufficient attention. What can be gained from them is an explanation of how the human mind operates in its perception of the other, in a manner that is deeply Qurʾanic, yet rarely noticed even by Muslims themselves.

Anthropology, based on cultural diversity, affirms the relativity of human reason. It holds that no one has the right to claim absolute truth. Each culture seeks to meet its needs through its own cultural means. Anthropology has concluded that cultures share fundamental characteristics and basic traits. They seek to fulfill common human requirements, even though the methods and approaches they adopt differ from one society to another (Farouk Ismail Mustafa, 1980, p. 162). This anthropological insight is sufficient to prompt individuals to reconsider claims of absolute truth. People do not choose their religion, culture, language, or ethnicity. They therefore cannot be blamed for what they did not choose. Once blame is lifted, the labels of error and misguidance must also be removed. Only then can we place ourselves in the position of others and understand their reality. Accusing others of error or misguidance from an external standpoint, namely our own, contradicts the basic requirements of scientific methodology.

From a Qurʾanic perspective, we rely on the verse: "And indeed, either we or you are upon guidance or in clear error" (Qurʾan, Sabaʾ: 24). "وَإِنَّا أَوْ إِيَّاكُمْ لَعَلَى هُدًى أَوْ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ" [سبأ:24] This verse establishes that truth becomes evident only when each party places itself in the position of the other. One must first assume oneself to be rightly guided and the other misguided, then examine the outcome. One must then reverse the assumption. Through this method, both the self and the other are examined in the same manner and with full objectivity. Yet how distant is contemporary Islamic thought from such an approach?

The Qurʾan goes even further in its commitment to credibility and

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objectivity. It calls people to stand honestly before themselves. Truthfulness with oneself alone leads to truth. A sound human nature cannot deceive itself. God says: "Say, I only exhort you to one thing: that you stand for God, in pairs or individually, and then reflect. There is no madness in your companion. He is only a warner to you before a severe punishment" (Qurʾan, Sabaʾ: 46). "قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَعِظُكُم بِوَاحِدَةٍ أَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ مَثْنَى وَفُرَادَى ثُمَّ تَتَفَكَّرُوا مَا بِصَاحِبِكُم مِنْ جِنَّةٍ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ لَكُم بَيْنَ يَدَيْ عَذَابٍ شَدِيدٍ" [سبأ: 46] The Qurʾan then clarifies that this exhortation seeks no worldly gain: "Say, whatever reward I have asked of you is yours. My reward is only from God, and He is Witness over all things" (Qurʾan, Sabaʾ: 47) "قُلْ مَا سَأَلْتُكُم مِنْ أَجْرٍ فَهُوَ لَكُم إِنْ أَجْرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى اللَّهِ وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ" [سبأ:47]

This is the only path upon which all parties can meet. Placing oneself in the position of the other is the only way to understand the condition in which the other lives. It is also the only way to distinguish truth from error. Truth is preserved, and error is set aside.

In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between two concepts whose proper understanding can resolve many disputes. These are understanding and empathetic understanding. Understanding is the initial stage through which we grasp the knowledge, ideas, and applications of others. Empathetic understanding is a higher stage. It places one in the position of the other. It allows one to experience their condition, sense their concerns, and think, even temporarily, as they think. It also enables one to perceive their goals, intentions, and aspirations.

Thinkers in the Islamic world have not fully internalized this principle. As a result, each party has remained captive to its own ideas. Each side even seeks refuge in God from thinking like the other.

The traditional camp constantly prays for steadfastness upon the path of the righteous predecessors and asks to be protected from the deviation of others. Some go further in this closure. They dare to prohibit the reading of opposing views. They criminalize the study of modern methodologies. They describe these approaches as frivolous, atheistic, or outside the bounds of religion.

Modernists, in turn, persist in diminishing the role of religion and its influence over people's hearts and minds. Some have gone so far as to strip sacred matters of their sanctity and to violate established moral boundaries. The third group remains confused and lost between the two sides. It is unable to introduce modernity to the first group. It is equally unable to convince the second group of the necessity of religion in human life.

The School of the Islamization of Knowledge, represented institutionally by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, attempted to move beyond these tensions and contradictions. In most cases, however, it either reverted to the first path, which is the dominant outcome, or drifted toward the third path. This is largely due to the fact that many of its theorists fall into selectivity. At times, they engage with Western intellectual achievements only through rejection. At other times, a sense of intellectual arrogance prevents them from accepting serious scholarly

contributions in the field of Islamization.

A clear example of this is their treatment of The Cognitive Methodology of the Qur'an by the Sudanese thinker Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd (1942–2004). A symposium was held on this work in Cairo in 1992. It resembled a trial more than an academic discussion. Its proceedings were recorded and documented in an appendix to the book. The reactions of many scholars were marked by subjectivity rather than scientific rigor. The most "academic" critiques among the opponents were those grounded in the traditional system, which they treated as an ultimate reference with no alternative, almost as if it were the revealed Qur'an itself. Other critiques were methodologically unsound. This was evident in Muḥammad ʿImāra's claim that Ḥājj Ḥamd's Qur'anic interpretations were esoteric and mystical (Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd, 2013, p. 244).

This judgment overlooks the fact that Ḥājj Ḥamd proceeded from a clear methodology. He drew upon contemporary sciences and scientific theories. He also engaged with the intellectual heritage of Muslim scholars throughout history. He did so through an explicit critical approach that is evident to any careful reader.

In my view, the reason for such bias is clear. A person is often hostile toward what he does not understand. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī provided a model of intellectual humility when he stated: "Professor Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim has a deeply analytical style of thought. It rises and rises until it sometimes escapes your sight. For this reason, only highly specialized scholars will benefit from his book" (Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd, 2013, p. 252).

I cite these two well-known figures deliberately, namely Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and Dr. Muḥammad ʿImāra, to demonstrate that the Islamization of knowledge cannot be achieved through ignorance. It can only be achieved through knowledge. Muḥammad ʿImāra lacked sufficient familiarity with Western methodologies, theories, and their philosophical foundations. He was therefore unable to critique or retrieve them for the Islamic intellectual sphere. As a result, he failed to understand Ḥājj Ḥamd's project and accused him of esotericism and mysticism. A person is an enemy of what he does not know. Al-Ghazālī, by contrast, was understanding and humble. He recognized that Ḥājj Ḥamd's work was not conjecture or unfounded speculation. He described it according to the limits of his informed understanding.

Many people err when they classify Ḥājj Ḥamd as a modernist thinker. They place him alongside Muḥammad Arkoun, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and others in their discussions of modernity. Others who embrace modernity make a similar mistake by placing him within traditional theological thought. The first group does so because he departed from convention and employed philosophy and Western intellectual tools. The second does so because he took the Qur'an as his reference and faith as his point of departure. Modernity, in their

view, recognizes only reason and sensory experience.

In reality, he belongs to neither camp. In our view, Ḥājj Ḥamd is a renewal-oriented thinker. He took the Qur'an as his reference and faith in God as his foundation. He treated the sciences, in all their forms and theories, including philosophy, as instruments. He fused all of this within a coherent methodology. The result was a new framework that brought faith, science, and philosophy together.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that those leading the project of Islamizing knowledge in the Islamic world remain far from achieving the desired goal. More precisely, they are not yet the qualified agents capable of carrying out this demanding task. This is not an accusation. It is an attempt to diagnose the current state of the Islamic intellectual scene.

The Islamization of knowledge requires scholars and thinkers from diverse disciplines. They must be well-versed in scientific theories, their epistemological foundations, and their philosophical backgrounds. At the same time, they must possess a deep understanding of the Qur'anic epistemological methodology and contemporary linguistic studies in all their theoretical dimensions. They must also recognize the necessity of critique and retrieval of these theories in light of the Qur'an. This must not be done in the manner of earlier scholars. Those scholars operated within a different epistemological context. They uncovered certain dimensions of the Qur'an according to the intellectual resources of their time.

Today, we face an entirely different historical stage. Profound transformations have occurred at all levels. These changes must be taken into account if the process of Islamization is to succeed. This is precisely what this school has not yet achieved. It continues to rely on old frameworks and has not kept pace with developments at the level of language and knowledge.

We have excluded this group of thinkers from undertaking the process of Islamization because its conditions are extremely demanding and not accessible to everyone. Even if we consider only the two conditions proposed by Ḥājj Ḥamd, they are sufficient to reveal both the gravity and the difficulty of this project.

The first condition is that the empirical sciences must find solutions to their research and applied problems through the framework of the Islamization of knowledge when diagnosing natural and human phenomena. This means that the Islamization of knowledge should provide new hypotheses capable of addressing the challenges of applied scientific research. These hypotheses should assist in identifying phenomena, analyzing them, and reaching advanced methodological results. It is no longer valid to claim that there exists a missing element in nature, its properties, or its internal motion, which God completes through direct intervention (Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd, Epistemology of Universal Knowledge: Islamization of Knowledge and Method, 2004, p. 46).

This condition requires extensive mastery of various scientific disciplines. Mere theoretical familiarity is

insufficient. Practical engagement is also required. Where, then, are the Islamic laboratories? Where are the Muslim experimental scientists?

The second condition is that the Islamization of knowledge must demonstrate, in relation to all other religions, that it alone possesses a definitive, absolute revealed scripture that is immune to distortion or falsification (Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd, Epistemology of Universal Knowledge: Islamization of Knowledge and Method, 2004, p. 47). This condition requires precise knowledge of the characteristics of the Qur'an and its epistemological methodology. It does not mean relying on people's opinions about the Qur'an through earlier scholarly views and interpretations. Most scholarly efforts have focused on reproducing earlier interpretations and reinforcing them through various means. Others have followed traditional methods that inevitably lead to earlier conclusions. This approach renders the Qur'an static and prevents it from engaging with new realities.

We therefore argue that critique and retrieval must proceed according to the Qur'an's own epistemological methodology. The Qur'an alone has the capacity to Islamize knowledge. Returning to the systems of jurists and theologians will only increase complexity. It will also distance us from truth on the one hand and from the unity and cohesion of the Muslim community on the other. This approach further encourages ideological rigidity and sectarian bias. Researchers affiliated with specific schools will devote their efforts to proving that their own doctrine is the most deserving of Islamization. This mirrors what occurred after the era of the independent jurists, when scholars focused on defending their schools, supporting them with various arguments, and refuting others.

Adopting these systems as central references in the process of Islamization, as ʿImāra and others did during the symposium, raises several problems. The first is determining which system is more legitimate than the others. If the Shiʿi system is adopted, what position remains for Sunnism and Ibadism? If the Sunni system is adopted, where do Shiʿism and Ibadism stand? In jurisprudence, adherents of different schools will inevitably object to one another. Thus, we remain trapped in the same historical conflicts among competing systems and doctrines.

This reason alone should prompt thoughtful members of the Muslim community to reread their religion and their scripture in a way that is free from prior doctrinal and juridical affiliations. This can only be achieved by restoring the Qur'an to its proper position, free from the constraints imposed by jurists and legal theorists, their classifications, abrogations, particularizations, and generalizations. That phase has been epistemologically exhausted. We are now facing a new era in which the Qur'an must serve as a judge over other systems, not as something judged by them.

From an applied perspective, Arab modernists were largely technical practitioners who applied Western intellectual products to the Islamic heritage, including the Qur'an itself.

The most prominent example of this approach is Muḥammad Arkoun. He drew extensively on Western intellectual achievements, particularly those of the French school, and applied them without sensitivity to context or specificity. He adopted the distinction between long-term and short-term historical duration from the French Annales School. He used it to trace Islam back to earlier revealed religions and to treat them as its foundation (Arkoun, 2005, p. 21). In doing so, he ignored the profound differences between these religions and their scriptures.

He also adopted the distinction between oral and written discourse from contemporary linguistics. This led him to one of the most problematic conclusions, namely that the oral Qur'an is not the same as the written Qur'an, and that the former represents the authentic Qur'an, which has been lost forever (Arkoun, 2005, p. 38). Arkoun failed to consider the specificity of both domains. Linguistics was developed for human texts and based on that assumption. Islamic revelation, by contrast, affirms the unity of Qur'anic discourse and Qur'anic text. Linguistics never addressed the possibility of divine speech embodied within linguistic expressions. Arkoun himself never seriously considered the possibility that the Qur'an is the word of God.

In the field of hermeneutics, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd adopted its principles in full and applied them directly to the Qur'anic text. Hermeneutics, as articulated by Schleiermacher, holds that as a text becomes more distant in time, it becomes more obscure.

Misunderstanding thus becomes more likely than understanding. On this basis, hermeneutics proposes a dual structure of the text. One side is linguistic and objective, making understanding possible. The other side is subjective and reflects the author's intention, manifested in his particular use of language. The reader may begin from either side (Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 2005, pp. 20–21).

Dilthey, by contrast, begins from the "self" and moves toward the "other." Experience proceeds from the known toward the unknown. He views the human being as a historical entity. Self-understanding does not arise from abstract reflection but from lived, concrete experiences of life (Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 2005, p. 28). Abū Zayd ultimately concludes that the Qur'anic text is a linguistic text. Language, by nature, is human. The text was formulated in this language in response to events and historical realities. For this reason, he argues that the text must remain bound to the earthly realm and cannot ascend to the level of the unseen.

To date, we have not witnessed any original contribution by Arab modernists to contemporary methodologies or sciences. Their role has largely been limited to repeating what others have produced and applying it in the same manner Europe applies it to any linguistic text or historical event. What modernists often overlook is that these methodologies are products of positivist philosophy and represent its expected outcomes. Europe severed its connection with religion and turned toward the earth. Everything it produces

originates from the earthly realm and ultimately returns to it. It exists in complete rupture with the transcendent. In this context, we do not wish to reiterate the well-known differences between Christianity and Islam in their views of science. Rather, our aim is to engage directly in methodological critique and deconstruction. In this regard, we find no better example than the work of Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd. His project exemplifies what may be termed critique and retrieval. I have described this process as the forthcoming obligation. This description reflects an awareness that it is a necessary stage for the Islamic community, should it seek to reclaim the sovereignty that was taken from it or that it relinquished.

Ḥājj Ḥamd developed a theory of Qur'anic epistemological methodology by drawing on contemporary scientific and philosophical approaches. He employed structuralism to restore the centrality of the Qur'anic text, which had been obscured by human interpretations to the point that it almost disappeared behind them. The Qur'an came to be seen as dependent on external texts, until it was judged rather than acting as judge. By adopting a revised concept of structuralism, Ḥājj Ḥamd affirmed the autonomy of the Qur'anic text. Structuralism views the text as self-contained and self-sufficient. It has no existence or extension beyond its linguistic structure and does not refer to an external authority. It constitutes an independent and closed system that requires nothing outside itself for understanding or interpretation (Qaṣṣāb, 2007, p. 133).

Drawing also on developments in the philosophy of natural sciences, which address universal laws through integrated theories ranging from physics to biology, Ḥājj Ḥamd benefited from the methodological discipline later applied to the social and human sciences. Through this approach, he established a parallel between the Qur'an as a written book containing knowledge equivalent to cosmic existence and motion, and the universe as an unfolded book. The universe is God's creation, while the Qur'an is God's word. It expresses the universe through a language that reflects a unified scientific methodology. This theoretical foundation is grounded in the Qur'anic verse: "So I swear by the positions of the stars—and indeed, it is a mighty oath, if you but knew—that this is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a well-guarded Book, touched only by the purified, a revelation from the Lord of the worlds" (Qur'an 56:75–80) "فَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَاقِعِ النُّجُومِ وَإِنَّهُ لَقَسَمٌ لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ فِي كِتَابٍ مَكْنُونٍ لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ تَنْزِيلٌ مِن رَّبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ" [الواقعة:75-80].

In its literal structure, the Qur'an mirrors the cosmic structure. If a star were to deviate from its position, the entire cosmic order would collapse. For this reason, God juxtaposed the literal structure of the Qur'an with the positions of the stars. According to Ḥājj Ḥamd, God swore by the positions of the stars rather than by the stars themselves. No one but God can regulate the Qur'anic formulation at the level of the letter in a manner analogous to the structure of the cosmos. Each letter has a specific structural and linguistic function within the Qur'anic

construction, which goes beyond mere rhetoric. From this perspective, Ḥājj Ḥamd concludes that divine use of linguistic material, like divine use of any material in the universe, differs fundamentally from human use, even though the material properties remain the same (Ḥājj Ḥamd, 2013, p. 88).

His critique of contemporary philosophy of science proceeds in the opposite direction. It moves from within the Qur'an toward philosophy of science. Ḥājj Ḥamd observes that the Qur'an calls for two distinct modes of reading, then invites their integration. This is evident in Sūrat al-ʿAlaq: "Read in the name of your Lord who created. He created man from a clinging substance. Read, and your Lord is the Most Generous. Who taught by the pen. Taught man what he did not know" (Qur'an 96:1–5) " اِقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ اَلَّذِي خَلَقَ (1) خَلَقَ اَلْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ (2) اِقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ اَلْأَكْرَمُ (3) اَلَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ (4) عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ (5)" [العلق:1-5]

God commands reading in His name and reading alongside Him. Reading in His name is a comprehensive cosmic reading of the manifestations of divine power, attributes, and creation of meaningful phenomena. It defines a rightful purpose for creation. It is a pure reading of divine power within an open cosmic book (Ḥājj Ḥamd, The Second Islamic Universality, vol. 1, pp. 456–457). Reading alongside Him refers to objective reading through the pen. It operates within induction, inference, and all methods of human knowledge (Ḥājj Ḥamd, Epistemology of Universal Knowledge, 2004, p. 382).

By combining these two readings, philosophy of science can be restored.

Modern philosophy of science ultimately arrived at dialectical materialism, which Ḥājj Ḥamd considers a natural outcome of European philosophy, despite its attempts to escape it. All methodologies reduced cosmic creation to direct empirical observation, whether of humanity or nature. They failed to begin from the formative purpose of creation and thus lost their capacity for synthesis (Ḥājj Ḥamd, 2010, p. 69). Dialectical materialism, and the restriction of methodologies to sensory observation alone, appears atheistic in form but is agnostic in essence. It ignores efficient causes in terms of their nature. Agnosticism, in this sense, reflects confusion and loss, even when cloaked in the language of science.

Through this Qur'anic approach, philosophy of science can be redirected toward its proper course. This begins with Sūrat al-ʿAlaq, the first chapter revealed in the Qur'an, but through a reading different from that of classical exegesis. According to Ḥājj Ḥamd, the verse "Indeed, to your Lord is the return" (Qur'an 96:8) "وَأَنَّ إِلَى رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَى" [العلق:8] does not refer to eschatological return. Rather, it signifies immediate restitution to the very effect itself. It derives from al-rajʿ, meaning active return, like the returning sky in continuous interaction between heaven and earth. This meaning also appears in the verse: "When we are dead and become dust, that is a far return" (Qur'an 50:3) " أَئِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ذَلِكَ رَجْعٌ بَعِيدٌ" [ق:3]، The sense here is the negation of results within the worldly domain itself (Ḥājj Ḥamd, The Second

Islamic Universality, vol. 1, pp. 462–463).

As for al-zabāniya, traditionally interpreted as the angels of Hellfire, Ḥājj Ḥamd assigns a different meaning. He traces its root to the she-camel that repels others from its udder. Thus, "We shall call the zabāniya" (Qur'an 96:18) "سَنَدْعُ الزَّبَانِيَةَ" [العلق:18] denotes a force that repels one thing by another. It reflects divine reaction to human action under the same objective conditions. The verse "Let him call his council" (Qur'an 96:17)[العلق:17] "فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ" refers to worldly collectives and occurs only in this life (Ḥājj Ḥamd, The Second Islamic Universality, vol. 1, p. 465). In this way, the synthesis lost by contemporary methodologies is restored through the same objective conditions, yet oriented toward God, thereby granting them a defined purpose.

Despite this profound presentation of the Qur'anic epistemological methodology and Ḥājj Ḥamd's extensive mastery of scientific methods and their philosophical foundations, contemporary thinkers have failed to grant these efforts the attention they deserve. Much of their research has focused on issues that have already been exhausted by time. They continue to write on the same topics addressed by earlier scholars. They also reproduce classical works in new arrangements, believing this to be innovation. In reality, they merely repeat what their predecessors did.

To this day, it remains unclear what Ibn Kathīr added to al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr, or what his al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya added to al-Ṭabarī's al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh, apart from omitting some chains of transmission and abridging certain events. We had hoped that Ibn Kathīr would adopt a new interpretive methodology that might uncover dimensions of the Qur'an not identified by al-Ṭabarī. We also hoped that his historical work would focus on critical investigation rather than repetition. What Ibn Kathīr did with al-Ṭabarī's works is precisely what many contemporary scholars now do with the legacy of earlier thinkers. Only a few contributions move beyond this pattern, and even these do not rise to the level of genuine critical revision capable of addressing present challenges.

Most of these contributions do not come from scholars trained in Islamic sciences. They often come from specialists in philosophy, the humanities, or the social sciences. Many are even trained in natural and technical sciences. These scholars would have been better positioned to contribute to the Islamization of knowledge from within their own scientific fields, rather than abandoning them for Islamic studies.

This leads us to a serious issue. The greatest obstacle to the advancement of Islamic sciences lies in their own advocates. Their efforts have largely focused on two matters. The first is the sanctification of the past and presenting it as absolute truth beyond question. The second is the frequent obstruction of creative intellectual initiatives. This was evident in the reaction of several thinkers to Ḥājj Ḥamd's work. This attitude is not new. Earlier scholarly efforts to explore coherence among Qur'anic verses and chapters were also rejected. Their proponents were accused

of introducing religious innovations. Such accusations ultimately undermined the very concept of Qur'anic inimitability, as they measured divine speech by human discourse.

A clear example is the position of ʿIzz al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, despite his eminent scholarly stature. He justified his inability to perceive coherence in the Qur'an by stating that the Qur'an was revealed over more than twenty years, addressing diverse rulings and different causes. He argued that such diversity makes coherence impossible, just as one cannot expect consistency in the actions of rulers, judges, or even individuals, whose actions vary across time and circumstance (ʿIzz al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, 1995, pp. 338–339). This view inevitably historicizes the Qur'an and confines it to specific events and circumstances.

These two factors represent the greatest barriers to the progress of Islamic sciences. The first entrenches stagnation and self-enclosure, depriving the Muslim community of contemporary scientific and methodological advances. The second instills fear in anyone who seeks creativity or renewal, under the pretext of altering God's religion. There is no escape from this intellectual crisis except through affirming the Qur'anic–anthropological principle discussed earlier.

Conclusion and Findings

After this examination of the major approaches and modes of thinking in the Islamic world, illustrated through the applied example of Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ḥājj Ḥamd's intellectual project known as The Qur'anic Epistemological Methodology, the study leads to the following conclusions and recommendations:

- Heritage is of great importance, as it carries the earliest foundations of Islam and the development of Islamic sciences. It must therefore be understood within the context in which it emerged.
- Despite the value of the traditional system, contemporary challenges require deep critical reassessment. Such reassessment does not need to replicate or conform to earlier juristic reasoning.
- Western methodologies that shaped European thought are significant, but they must be read within their own historical and cultural contexts. Mechanical application to our culture is unacceptable and yields unrealistic results, as the contexts differ.
- The rejection of eclecticism stems from the fact that combining two distinct contexts without revising either leads to contradiction. This produces fragmentation rather than synthesis.
- Benefiting from Western methodologies requires subjecting them to critique and reevaluation in light of our reality, culture, and evolving context.
- All of this demands serious engagement with both Islamic heritage and contemporary methodologies. Critique without genuine mastery cannot produce meaningful outcomes.

Notes and References

[1] Natural (material) human being: A natural phenomenon rather than a distinct historical or civilizational entity. Its sphere is the material world,

and its limits are those of nature and matter. This human being is defined through natural and material categories, generating values and purposes from within the self. Yet this self is itself part of nature and matter, which recognize no rupture or duality (al-Masīrī, 2002, p. 460).

[2] This description was used by ʿAlī Ḥarb to characterize Muḥammad Arkoun in his article "Muḥammad Arkoun and the Reading of Islamic Thought," Awraq Falsafiyya, no. 30, p. 404.

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