Insights and Perspectives

Islamic Thought Process:

The Cornerstone of A Community Of Success

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Introduction

What contributes to the success of a civilization? What makes it a potent force? What positions it to be a model for others to admire and emulate? There is no singular determinant that can be unequivocally identified when addressing these questions. Just as life is varied and multi-faceted, so too is the interplay of driving forces that make or break a civilization. However, this does not mean that we cannot identify pivotal prerequisites fundamental to success of a civilization. Perhaps, paramount among these pre-requisites is the thought processes unique to that civilization that shape its thinking, belief, and actions.

Knowledge & cultivation of thought processes

In Islamic epistemology, thinking - along with its corollary elements of knowledge - is the defining feature that makes us human. The act of thinking is essentially the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise what we know of our surroundings, and it is this faculty that can either debase or elevate us, to the level of animals or angels. So, it stands to reason that the measure of a civilization's success is dependent on the quality of its thought processes.

The collective belief, thinking and behaviors of a civilization[1] reflect the thought processes cultivated by that civilization. Thought processes that exhibit one-dimensionality, simplicity, pre-judgment and emotionality are indicative of failing civilizations. Conversely, successful civilizations are characterized as possessing thought processes that demonstrate robustness, criticality, analytical rigor, reliance on facts, scientific methodology, and empirical evidence. Therefore, if we are determined to create a successful and progressive society, there exist no alternative but to cultivate thought processes that honor knowledge at its highest pinnacle. The rationale is straightforward; to harvest apples, one must sow apple seeds as the cultivation of lemon seeds will not result in an apple harvest.

Thought processes revolve around the pursuit of seeking knowledge and processing knowledge. It is interesting to note that the Qur'an has immortalized two pivotal events that showed the importance of knowledge. The first was the creation of Prophet Adam (AS), a distinction bestowed upon him by Allah as a thinking creation capable of acquiring and mastering knowledge (The Qur'an, 2:31).[2] The second was the revelation of the first verse of Qur'an, "Iqra" (The Qur'an, 96:1-5), which underscores the importance of knowledge in seeking the truth and in dealing with the challenges of life itself. It is this mastery of acquiring knowledge that played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam across the globe.

[1] Indeed, creative and critical thinking are very much part of Islam and Quranic approach. They are represented in many thinking styles as projected in the Quran. See Badi, Jamal and Mustapha Tajdin. 2007. Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM.
[2] Says the Qur'an, "He taught Adam all the names of things" (al-Baqarah, Verse 31).

Conversely, it is the abandonment of such pursuit and mastery that contributed to the decline of Muslim civilizations.

Abandonment of Critical Thinking

Why and how did this happen? One likely reason lies in the way Muslims understand Islam itself. When Islam is understood solely as a set of personal rituals and rites that pertain to the affairs of the heart, we saw no need to comprehend the world around us. Adopting such paradigm diminishes the need for acquiring knowledge, and consequently, for critical thinking. The relevance of critical thinking diminishes when knowledge acquisition is relegated to a mere footnote in the chapters of our lives. In the same vein, when the Muslim world experimented with thinking and reasoning without engaging deeply under the guidance of "wahyu" and values, knowledge-creation became limited and lacked dynamism, contributing to widespread notion that ijtihad doors have closed. Therefore, if we intend to create a community of success, we have no alternative other than to revitalize the quest for acquiring knowledge and the judicious application of that knowledge through a healthy, robust, and critical thought process.

Islamic Thought Process

The Palestinian-American philosopher Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi stands out as one of the pioneering Muslim thinkers of the modern era to have had substantial influence on Western and Islamic thought processes. In broad terms, a thought process can be defined as a series of cognitive activities encompassing identification, reasoning, assessment, problem-solving, judging and decision-making. It entails the mental endeavour of analysing information, evaluating diverse perspectives, considering various options and ultimately arriving at a hypothesis, theory, or conclusion. Islamically, without over-simplifying Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi's contributions to the matter, the cultivation of thought processes is a disciplined pursuit of knowledge anchored in the concept of "Tawheed", thus ensuring knowledge understanding and application are complies with the will and seeking the pleasure of Allah. Such cultivation of thought-processes inherently incorporates values, shaped under the guidance of verses from the Quran and Hadith. It emphasizes that Allah's Laws serve as guidance to ensuring that a thought process contributes positively to existence and well-being of various forms of life.[3]

To Al-Faruqi, the thought process shaped by Islam is therefore different from those formulated by non-Islamic theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. A robust Islamic thought process involves deepening understanding of our existence in this world and the hereafter, as well as exploring the underlying phenomena that underpin and structure life as we know it. We ponder, assess, analyse, examine, and deal with singularities and complexities of issues

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[3] Al-Fārūqī, Ismī'īl Rājī. 1992, Al Tawḥīd: Its Implication for Thought and Life. Virginia: IIIT.

affecting us, with a view towards eradicating misunderstandings and untruths, and finding solutions and truths. This was the challenge when the Qur'an exhorts:

> Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding. Who remember Allah while standing or sitting or lying on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying), "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You; then protect us from the punishment of the Fire." (The Quran 3:190-191).

As evident in the Qur'anic verse above, the Islamic thought process is one which does not dichotomize the empirical from the unseen, the material from the experiential, the profane from the sacred, or the earthly from the hereafter. In so far as Islam is concerned, knowledge encompasses epistemologies that integrate and reconcile both what is acquired and what is revealed.

Key Challenges

Reviving this thought process and knowledge agenda poses numerous challenges. Paradoxically, we are constantly surrounded by knowledge yet we have taken it for granted, like the elephant in the room that we did not take notice for a very long time. For many Muslims, knowledge acquiring and the preceding thought process is akin to the metaphorical tale of blind men who misinterpreted parts of the elephant they touched, concluding that to represent the whole elephant itself. Information does not necessarily equate to knowledge, empirical evidence may not produce factual understanding, and for something to be true, they need not be tangible or visible. Being persuaded to believe in absolutes and false dichotomies, emphasizing either-or over both-and perspectives results in the hindrance to understanding and cultivating an Islamic thought process. This problem is further complicated when we limit the breadth and scope of critical thinking. All too often, we set-up boundaries in our thought process, believing that there is no room for critiques or reinterpretations of religious texts.

This suggests that many are not aware that the four major schools of thought in Islamic Fiqh adopted different interpretations which stemmed from differences in their ijtihad on many religious texts. The basic principle is that on matters not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith, they were entitled to disagree and perform their own ijtihad. None would make the claim that they were the only ones who were right, while the others were wrong.

In the contemporary context, a notable challenge arises from the widespread use of high-speed internet and social media. We live in a period where the omnipresence of information technology, and now the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) empowers anyone with an internet connection and a social media account to acquire knowledge independently without adequate training and guidance. This challenge hold significant implications on Muslim leaders, Islamic scholars, traditional jurists, intellectuals, and reformers who historically held a monopoly on knowledge-creation and the criteria to render a thought-process valid. In an ever shrinking world, information technology is dismantling traditional hierarchies and challenging the predominance of Muslim scholars as the primary bearers of Islamic thought and revivalism.[4]

While this may appear beneficial in the sense that it leads to the democratisation of knowledge, it also risks the thought process necessary for producing sound knowledge to be devalued. Should Muslim religious leaders and scholars fail to step up, the void in the thought process will inevitably be filled by others, whether qualified or not. This can be observed in recent frontier issues, such as the campaign for LGBTQ rights, where Muslim narratives challenging the movement and its activism are shaped by professionals who do not possess adequate religious training or credentials. It is undeniable that religious contestations as aforementioned emerge when Muslim leaders, scholars and thinkers are not well equipped to lead the Islamic thought agenda. In the near future, should such contestations persist, we will witness the emergence of many vying for authority as they compete to project themselves as the most authentic representatives of Islam.

Another challenge lies the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres. Historically, discourses were categorized based on these spheres, whereby, in the interest of a diverse and plural society, religious discourses are best confined to the private sphere. With the explosive growth of the internet and social media, we are experiencing the overlapping of these two spheres, with more and more people wanting to have religious discourses made public. One major concern arising from this trend would be the potential it has to undermine social cohesion in our multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

Conclusion

The contemporary challenges and the responses they elicit underscore the urgent need to revitalize the Islamic thought process to be the driving force behind our community's growth and success. The Islamic thought process equip us with the lenses to perceive this reality, which is crucial for our understanding of the world and the hereafter. It would equip us with

[4] For an extensive exposure on this, see Kluver, Randolph et al. 2008. "The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore." In *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng, 434-456. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). See also Anderson, Jon W. and Gonzalez-Quijano, Yves. 2006. "Technological Mediation and the Emergence of Transnational Muslim Publics." In *Public Islam and the Common Good*, edited by Armando Salvatore & Dale F. Eickelman, 53-71. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill.

the tools to make informed choices, analyse and interpret options, as well as better appreciate multiple perspectives before we arrive at conclusions or solutions with regard to any issue. Cultivating this thought process and mindset ought to serve as the keystone, symbolizing a sustainable and confident community of success in this modern and fast-evolving era.

About Author

Ustaz Dr Mohd Murat Md Aris is the Deputy Mufti at the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, MUIS). Currently Deputy Mufti, he oversees religious policies, public education, and engagement as well as giving support to the Mufti in providing guidance for the Muslim's religious developments.

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About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.