Methodological Impediments to Innovation on Political Thought of Islam

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Abstract. If research, knowledge production, and theorization are equal to innovation, we have to accept that Islamic political thought suffers from a slow movement in innovation. The small number of researches that exist in this field, repeat themselves using a different terminologies and word orders. This paper aims at a brief review of a number of obstacles that have been experienced during concrete research procedures by the author. The obstacles are categorized into four groups. Yet, being interrelated, the border between them is not clearly identified. The first group is related to the researcher. Tec second category is related to the cognitive and educational system of the Islamic world. The third group is affected by the scientific system of the West, in which the discussions are not defined by themselves. The last group is created in the concrete political situation of Islamic countries.

Keywords: Methodology, Islam, Political Thought, Islamic Research.

1. Introduction

If we consider research to mean innovation and production of knowledge as well as theorizing, this trend has been very slow and insignificant with regard to studies carried out on political thought of Islam. Discussing the issue that whether there is a political thought in Islam or is there sufficient grounds for innovation in the field and what are expectations from Islam in this regard[1], requires an independent discourse. However, our assumption is that under certain conditions, there is a political thought in Islam and we can find answers to our political questions in Islam by observing certain conditions. [2]

The current paper is a cursory glance at some impediments to innovation in this field most of which have been witnessed or experienced by the writer. These impediments will be discussed in four broad categories, though drawing sharp demarcation among those categories may be impossible because they are interrelated.

2. Impediments Related to Researcher

2.1. Non-Scholarly Caution

Knowledge only grows when a scientist dares to go beyond existing, accepted frames and present new discussions outside those contexts without caring for less important considerations and marginal restrictions. If for any justifiable or unjustifiable, wanted or unwanted, right or wrong reason, researchers focus on issues other than his research, the process of innovation will be interrupted or stopped. One of those issues is exercising too much care when confronting holy texts. Researcher would believe that since he is talking about the political thought of Islam, and his study is rooted in Islam, then anything that he writes is continuation of Islam and viewpoint of Islam, and therefore, he would believe himself unconsciously to be interpreter of divine revelations. Therefore, this will cause him to be very cautious and when talking about every issue, he will try to find scholars of the past who would uphold his viewpoints and avoids talking about anything about which he has the least suspicion or suffices to general topics about which a consensus does exist.

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2.2. Not Relying on Original Texts

Another impediment to research on the political thought of Islam is that researchers do not consult first-hand Islamic sources such as Quran and Nahj-ul-Balagha as well as the political history of the early years of Islam. Most knowledge and information of researcher on the political thought of Islam has been handed down to them by Muslim scholars belonging to middle centuries and it is naturally incomplete and one-dimensional. The first thing that can show us the nature of the political thought of Islam is political style chosen by the Holy Prophet of Islam (PBUH), Quran and the political history of the early years after the advent of Islam. Although, understanding the political thought of Islam through the said sources entails special problems, there is no better way and researchers have to resort to them to know and understand the political thought of Islam.

2.3. Attention to Large-Scale Topics and Lack of Repeated Reference to Text

If we embarked on studying Quran and Sunna with large-scale issues such as "politics and governance in Islam" in mind, we would find precious information and we would have a rich discussion ahead of us, but that discussion would not be of research value and would be probably devoid of innovation, production of knowledge, or presentation of scientific solutions. Today, it is clear that subject of a research should be accurate and to the point. Another important problem is that researchers in this field do not refer to Quran and Sunna for any independent research.

2.4. Attention to Abstract and Ethereal Issues

One of the most important impediments to innovation in the field of Islam's political thought is excessive attention paid by researchers to ethereal, abstract and intangible ideas. In other words, researchers do not begin with objective issued in their discussion of politics, but attend to large-scale issues related to Islamic tenets first, about which a consensus generally exists. Such issues include importance and necessity of justice, and the fact that some Quranic verses have paid attention to justice and consider it a pillar of the universe as well as social and political system. However, they never talk about practical solutions and objective examples as well as indicators of justice in political institutions and society.

3. Impediments Related to Educational and Epistemological System

3.1. Not Going through Knowledge Accumulation and Epistemological Stages

Various theories should be presented according to conditions of time and place or new topics should be discussed to solve political and social problems. After going through several periods of time, new theories would be based on previous ones and researchers would find newer solutions and achieve more up-to-date theories by searching through scientific texts and theories. Accumulation of texts and theories has not been done in the field of the political thought of Islam and with regard to political and social issues and concepts.

Accumulated theories and viewpoints of the past form a firm basis for every science and as long as accumulation stage has not been completed, we cannot reach the stage to produce dynamic and up-to-date theories. Therefore, when we discuss the political thought of Islam, our discussion is not based on previous theories and researcher has to fill this vacuum all by himself. The basics for new discussion should be first shaped in the mind of researcher and, of course, references should be made to some verses of Quran and traditions too. On the other hand, new discussions never replace old, less valuable ones or cover their weaknesses because there are basically no previous discussions in the form of an epistemological system.

3.2. Excessive Attention to the Past

An impediment to innovation in the political thought of Islam is that the researcher, due to personal reason (his own mind frame) or because the atmosphere governing scientific circles and even political conditions would not allow him, cannot express his modern interpretation of Quran and Sunna and get response to his questions directly from Quran or Sunna. For this reason, they deem it necessary that to prove their rightfulness; they should quote similar cases in the written works of previous scientists and bring examples of past scholars in order to back up their own argument.

3.3. Dominance of Jurisprudential Approach[3]

Of course, the main goal of delving into religious sources from the beginning was to gain more knowledge about Islamic issues, as the realm of Islamic knowledge expanded through confronting new problems and answers were given to each of those problems, and as interpretations, written works and viewpoints of Muslim scholars were added to them, scientific domains were established and every one of those domains became qualified to be considered a specialistic field, with the most important specialistic field being *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. *Fiqh* found its rightful place more rapidly and became very influential due to a host of reasons. Therefore, there was no need for *fiqh* to get involved in complex scientific and abstract discussions and it was mainly based on quotes. The highest level of innovation and scientific complexity of *fiqh* was inferring answers to newly emerging problems, again on the basis of quotes from the past. Inferences about new problems should have been rooted in similar reasons in tradition and Quran and when there was no way to use indirect arguments or reference to similar cases when facing a new problem, finding an answer would have been very difficult. In this way, *fiqh* shunned scientific complexities from the beginning and had its roots in quotes with its goal being limited to inferring religious rules.[4] Therefore, it was natural for this discipline to stay away from complex issues related to creation, mankind, society and hundreds of other specialistic political and social issues and when discussing such issues, *fiqh* did not go past inferring religious rules related to them and showing people what to do when facing them.[5]Even jurists who pay attention to such modern issues as democracy, human rights, structure of the Islamic government, party politics, political participation, and so on; do not discuss such issues in depth.[6] Apart from that, *fiqh* has become basically stagnant with respect to new topics and it seems that there is no way to infer solutions to new problems from old texts.[7]

3.4. Generalizing Sanctities

As a divine religion, Islam is sacred, but the most important question is about range of that sanctity in human life and, especially with regard to politics and governance. There has been consensus among Muslims and Muslim scholars in the course of history about sanctity of Quran and Sunna and Shias have added traditions of Infallible Imams (AS) to them. Scientific arguments have been allowed in this field, but with due care for their sanctity. This emphasize is because every one of traditions pertains to certain conditions and in response to a specific problem and the necessity for paying attention to these topics has led to emergence of Quranic sciences, interpretation of Quran, *fiqh* of traditions and other scientific fields. Therefore, there is no doubt that Quran, traditions and Sunna are sacred, but does that sanctity apply to debates that Muslim scholars conduct on them?

4. Impediments Stemming from the West

4.1. Dominance of Essence and Frame of Western Political Thought

An important impediment to innovation in the political thought of Islam was dominance of the western political thought on the minds of researchers of political thought of Islam and sometime arguments related to political thought of the west or ancient Greece are used as the main tool for assessment.[8] At the same time, when it comes to discussions and lessons related to the political thought of Muslim scholars, only the works of few political thinkers including al-Farabi, Khajeh Nassir-ed-din Tousi, Avicenna and Khajeh Nezam-al-Mulk have been reviewed and it is always reminded that those thinkers were heavily influenced by political thoughts in ancient Greece. Meanwhile, according to a study carried out by Nasr Mohammad Aref, only the works of 18 percent of Muslim scholars in the field of political thought of Islam have been known by our researchers and 82 percent still remain unknown an none of the researchers of political thought of Islam have referred to more than 6 percent of the known sources in their studies.[9] According to this notion, western knowledge and wisdom is developed, global knowledge and a wisdom which should be accepted by other cultures and civilizations.[10] Political thought of Muslims both in the middle centuries and new period, has been based on Greece and western ideas, which has made this knowledge move in such a way as to conform to epistemological system of ancient Greece or the west. Now, a large part of studies on the political thought of Islam belong to philosophers of Middle Ages of Islam. Since they were influenced by Greek philosophy.[11] This trend has led to the firm notion that basically Islam lacks political knowledge and thought and no coherent and systematic political discussion could be tracked or compiled within frame of Islam.[12]

4.2. Lack of Self-Existent Discussions

Another important impediment to innovation in the political thought of Islam is lack of a self-existent theory. The current political though of Islam which is being discussed by Muslims has emerged under the intellectual and epistemological atmosphere of the west and is trying to retrieve or bolster itself under that intellectual atmosphere or to make itself distinct from other types of political thought. However, the more it tries to retrieve its independent identity, the more it loses that identity because it has distanced from its own grounds and is based in alien ground.Nasr Mohammad Aref and Hassan Hanafi correctly refer to the fact that the European wisdom made the world believe that its culture and evolutionary course of its ideas is tantamount to culture and ideas of all humanity and called on others to find their place in the circle with others accepting that offer. Under those conditions it was natural for books on political thought to rise from ancient Greece and after passing through Rome, Middle Ages, renaissance and period of Illumination end in contemporary western political thoughts. This means that the history of Europe has been taken to mean the history of the whole world while history, ideas and civilizations which once existed in ancient Iran, India, China, Egypt and Mesopotamia were easily ignored and had to retrieve themselves in the course of the European history.[13]

4.3. Non-Specialized Discussions on Both Sides

An impediment to research on political thought of Islam is presence of presumptions of western political thought in the minds of researchers active in this field. To put it more precisely, researchers of the political thought of Islam can be divided into two broad groups. First, a group who know political sciences and prevalent political thought in the west and have studied in that field before embarking on research on the political thought of Islam. The second group is those who have not studied the existing political science and philosophy and are not specialists in that field, but deal with the political thought of Islam and write papers on it.

5. Political Impediments Related to Government

5.1. Ideologizing and Politicizing Original Political Concepts of Islam

Another impediment to innovation in political thought of Islam is ideologizing some original political concepts of Islam. Since the rule of Umayyad up to the collapse of Ottoman Empire in 1924, Muslim rulers always governed a vast Islamic country in the name of Islam and they were outwardly committed to religious rites and rituals. The exploitation of religion had two features: Firstly, it lasted for a very long time and more than 1,000 years and that long period led to institutionalization of that culture. Secondly, it was very widespread in such a way that it covered all people in the society as well as scientific centers and schools. Meanwhile, if few scholars or few centers dared to express viewpoints contrary to the mainstream, their viewpoints failed to produce an effect and were not followed by practical results. Therefore, the basic political concepts of Islam were turned into an ideological weapon for more than 1,000 years and over a wide expanse to suppress those who opposed tyranny of caliphs and kings and provided rulers with a sacred and efficient tool through which they could dupe people; threaten, exile or kill opposing scholars; and buy courtier scholars while making them believe that killing and prosecuting the opposition would deserve divine rewards in the Afterworld. Distancing Original Political Thought of Islam from Specialization

Another impediment to innovation in the political thought of Islam is reducing original political concepts of Islam to a handful of slogans. Contrary to the political thought of the west whose political discussions are carried out in academic circles among thinkers and philosophers, the fields of practical and theoretical politics were mingled in the Muslim world since the very beginning and this was a result of the indispensable role of people in political fields. The ruling system had to keep in touch with ordinary people and convince them that it is based on the Islamic tenets.

It was from this point that the basic and original concepts of Islam, before being discussed by scientific circles and scholars, turned into a tool to cement relationship of rulers and ordinary people. Meanwhile, preachers played the main role for delineation of such issues. They had to speak in such a way as to be suitable for their sermons, take expediencies of the ruling system into consideration, and appease the lay people. Therefore, Islamic concepts were reduced to very low levels and continuation of this trend for more

than about 1,000 years prevented basic political concepts of Islam to find their way into scientific circles and to be discussed in depth and seriously by scholars. Subsequently, those concepts did not attain epistemological depth. Also governments dominate over science and knowledge.[14]

6. References

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[7] See: Ali Akbar Rashad, op. cit., pp. 53-78; Hassan Abbas Hassan, Logical Structure of Political Thought of Islam, Mostafa Fazaeli, *Qom: Boustan Ketab Press*, 2004, pp. 236-342.

[8] See: Sharif Lakzaei, "A Study of Situation of Political Philosophy in Iran", *Pazhouhesh va Hozeh (Research and Seminary) quarterly*, No. 21-22, p. 115.

[9] See: Nasr Mohammad Aref, op. cit.; pp. 40, 46-48.

[10] See: Hassan Hanafi, "The Middle East, in Whose World?", the Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle East Studies: The Middle East in Globalizing World, Oslo, August 13-16, 1998.

[11] See: Nasr Mohammad Aref, op. cit., p. 54.

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