

## Islamic Epistemology versus Postmodern Relativism: A Critical Refutation of Internalized Postmodern Hermeneutics in Contemporary Muslim Thought

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### Abstract

Contemporary Muslim thought has increasingly become postmodern in terms of how Muslims understand knowledge and truth. Postmodernism challenged the idea of objective truth and authoritative interpretation in religious contexts; yet, it has had far greater implications in recent years in how Muslims understand their scripture and law with regard to the application of identity-based, reader-centered and historicist approaches to the Qur'an and Shari'ah. The purpose of this paper is to identify the epistemological implications of such postmodern thinking and to argue that postmodern relativism directly challenges the fundamental principles of knowledge in Islam. This paper utilizes the basic components of classical Islamic epistemology - namely, wahy (revelation), Sunnah (Prophetic authority), ijma' (scholarly consensus), and qias (disciplined reason/aql) - to illustrate how they collectively form a coherent and durable system of knowing truth, morality, and interpreting the Qur'an and Shari'ah. In addition, the paper demonstrates that the reinterpretive movement in contemporary times that has been influenced by postmodern thought is not simply an attempt to offer alternative interpretations of the scripture and law, but rather creates a new set of standards for determining what constitutes meaningfulness and normativity in Islamic law. This, in turn, has the possibility of rendering the epistemological authority of revelation irrelevant, and to fragment the Islamic moral discourse. To counteract this trend the author of the paper argues that Islam possesses its own methods of renewal - i.e., through the use of ijtiḥād (independent reasoning), maqasid al-shariah (the purposes/goals of the Shariah), and tajdid (Islamic reform/renewal) - and therefore affords contemporary Muslims the opportunity to address their particular, contextual situations, while at the same time maintaining morally universal truths in an epistemically secure manner. Ultimately, the author presents a strategic counter-attack against postmodern relativism using Islamic epistemology, while also highlighting the need for renewed epistemological confidence amongst contemporary Muslim scholars. The author concludes that whether or not Islam will remain relevant in the modern world is dependent on Islam's affirmation of being a source of objective, transcendent truth as opposed to the relativization of the nature of revelation.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Relativism, Hermeneutics, Revelation, Sharī'ah, Authority, Ijtihād, Certainty, Ijma, Qias

### I. Introduction: Truth, Authority, and the Contemporary Epistemological Challenge in Muslim Thought

The contemporary strain of conflict regarding "the truth" in the field of Muslim intellectual thought is largely the result of differing interpretations of specific legal matters and/or religious beliefs. However, the present strain of conflict can also be attributed to an epistemic shift that has the potential to destabilize the foundational concepts of Islamic thought. This epistemic shift is postmodern relativism, a conceptualization of thought that denies the existence of universal truths and views meaning as unstable and socially constructed based on both the social context in which knowledge is produced and the power dynamics existing in those social contexts.<sup>1</sup> Given that Islam is a religion whose beliefs, laws, and ethics are founded upon divine truth (al-ḥaqq), the implications of postmodern relativism are profound and may challenge the foundations of much of Islam as a faith.

The concept of independent truth, in and of itself, is central to the construction of Islamic thought. The Quran represents the process of revelation as a clear, purposeful, and authoritative method of providing guidance to the

faithful. In addition, the Quran emphasizes the importance of certainty (yaqīn) when considering matters of religious belief and practice, and emphasizes divine will over human desire. Therefore, knowledge in Islam is viewed as a form of disclosure – truth revealed by God and preserved through disciplined means of interpreting the revelation. Conversely, postmodern thought views knowledge as emerging from the human experience, and thus views truth as fluid, conditional, and subject to revision. The rejection of the notion of a transcendent source of knowledge inherent in postmodern thought creates a direct conflict between Islam's claims of universal and final guidance and the postmodern critique of "grand narratives."

The significance of the current intellectual landscape lies in the fact that postmodern thought is increasingly providing a framework of thought that is being used internally within Muslim thought, rather than being used as an external philosophical rival. In previous times, challenges to Islamic thought were generally recognized as having come from outside the tradition (i.e., colonial secularism, enlightenment rationalism). However, postmodern thought is now entering Muslim scholarship through methodologies and reformist language that, at least on the surface, are seen as compatible with Islamic goals and values. Concepts such as contextual meaning, power analysis, and reader-centered interpretations are being used to re-evaluate Qur'anic texts and legal norms, thus moving authority from revelation to the interpreter.<sup>2</sup>

The use of postmodern methodologies has led to changes in several major areas of contemporary Muslim thought. Feminist re-readings of scripture, identity-based interpretations of moral texts, and secular-liberal approaches to Sharī'ah all rely on an unspoken assumption about the nature of knowledge. That assumption is that meaning is derived from the social location of the individual making the interpretation,<sup>3</sup> the time period in which the individual is making the interpretation, or the power struggles occurring in the community. Thus, the revelation is no longer seen as a normative standard by which to judge the validity of an interpretation, but as a malleable text that may be re-shaped based on other external standards of ethics.

Therefore, the approaches mentioned above are not simply presenting alternative readings of scripture, they are changing the epistemic status of the revelation. These scholars are not simply saying that there are multiple ways to interpret scripture, but rather that scripture is just another one of many possible narratives that may provide insight into a particular issue. Therefore, if we reduce the revelation to just one of many possible narratives, then the central Islamic concepts of guidance, duty, and moral certainty become less meaningful.

This article argues that the uncritical acceptance of postmodern relativism within Muslim methodology erodes the coherence of Islamic epistemology by eliminating the distinction between divine truth and human interpretation. Once we view revelation as only one narrative among many, then the central Islamic notions of guidance, duty, and moral certainty lose their normative force. I suggest that Islamic epistemology which is based on the authority of the Quran; the authority of the sunna (Muhammad's sayings and actions); the stabilizing influence of ijmā' (consensus among scholars); and the proper application of reason, offers a complete theoretical model for dealing with the contemporary challenges we face while at the same time allowing us to remain consistent in our epistemological roots.<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to the trend of reducing the revelation to just one of many possible narratives, Islamic epistemology provides established means of renewing and adapting Islamic thought that maintain the transcendent character of the revelation. By rediscovering these epistemological principles, Muslim scholarship can address the needs of the modern world in a constructive manner, while rejecting the relativism that postmodern thought assumes.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the objective is not to interpret Islam so that it conforms to postmodern thought, but to evaluate postmodern thought using an epistemology that is grounded in revelation, certainty, and rigorous methodology.

### Methodology

The research will use a qualitative theoretical method based on a combination of critical textual and epistemological analysis. It will be a non-empirical study and therefore it will not include surveys, but instead will compare primary Islamic resources to selected postmodern philosophical works as a means of examining the premises regarding truth, meaning, and authority found within these two areas. The classical Islamic epistemological bases for the legitimacy of knowledge acquisition – specifically those based upon divine revelation (wahy), the authority of the Prophet, ijma' (scholarly consensus) and reasoning (i.e., rational inquiry) – will be evaluated via detailed analysis of the primary source texts. In addition, the principles of the classical Islamic epistemology will be systematically examined in comparison to the postmodern epistemologies based upon relativism, deconstruction, and interpretive subjectivity. Further, the methodology will involve an internal critique which includes evaluating contemporary Muslim hermeneutical methodologies against the standards for legitimate knowledge acquisition provided by the Islamic tradition. Combining a comparative philosophical analysis of the various epistemologies and a normative analysis of each provides a comprehensive analysis of the compatibility of each epistemology with that of the other; thus, allowing the researcher to make a valid determination of whether there is either compatibility or incompatibility between the two sets of epistemologies without making an assumption as to the validity of the postmodern or Islamic epistemologies.

## 2. Postmodern Relativism: Epistemological Assumptions and Hermeneutical Implications

This philosophical posture of Postmodern Relativism is primarily a result of a broader philosophical rejection of objectivity, certainty and transcendence as foundations of knowledge. Rather than providing an alternate truth-structure, postmodernism examines whether there is even truth outside of the confines of linguistic construction, cultural context, or power-relations. The postmodern view of knowledge is that knowledge is not "discovered" rather it is "constructed" in the history and negotiations between people. As such, postmodernism represents a significant departure from previous modern philosophies that though they were secular in nature, still had belief in reason, progress and objective inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

An important characteristic of postmodern epistemology is its skeptical attitude towards "universals". Truth claims are no longer evaluated based upon whether they correspond to an actual reality, instead they are treated as narratives vying for domination in various cultural contexts. Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to this as a loss of faith in large scale accounts of meaning, which includes religion, metaphysics and absolute morality. Consequently, all claims to universal or timelessness truth are viewed with suspicion because of their potential use as tools of exclusion or control. Religious doctrines are therefore seen as less an expression of divine will than as historically located discourses shaped by societal power.

In addition, postmodernism's views about language and meaning are closely tied to its skepticism.

Heavily influenced by Derrida's deconstruction, postmodern thought contests the idea that texts have stable or determinate meanings. According to this postmodern understanding, meaning is viewed as fluid, always deferring, and is entirely dependent on the reader's interpretive horizon. Texts do not convey fixed truths; they produce many possible, and equally valid, interpretations. As a result, the reader's role in producing meaning replaces the author's intention or the structural integrity of the text. Similarly, when applied to sacred texts, this view dissolves the possibility of interpreting the meaning of scripture definitively, making all claims to scriptural authority unstable.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Postmodern relativism has a profound impact on how Ethics is dealt with as well. In terms of ethics, since there is no longer an appeal to either objective truths (or) Divine Command as bases for ethical judgments; ethical judgments are now based upon the freedoms of the individual, and/or the cultural values that exist within a particular society and/or the agreements that can be negotiated among members of a given community. Therefore, "right" and "wrong," are social constructs and therefore do not possess any inherent authority as such. The legitimacy of ethical judgments is established through appeals to one's own identity, experiences, and/or perceived suffering and not by reference to a higher moral law. While, the above fluidity may provide individuals the opportunity to break free from what some see as overly restrictive and/or oppressive moral constraints; the fluidity simultaneously eliminates the ability to establish any meaningful criteria for determining the validity of ethical claims.<sup>8</sup>

The implications of the epistemology of postmodern relativism go far beyond philosophy in terms of how we perform interpretative tasks. What was once an attempt to uncover the author's intent and thereby reveal the meaning of the text; has become an act of critique and reinterpretation. Rather than seeking to be faithful to the text, readers seek to expose the underlying structures of power; and/or to make meaning compatible with our current perceptions. Consequently, in religious contexts, readings are often given priority to issues of social justice, identity confirmation, and/or political resistance, over issues of textual cohesion and/or continuity of doctrine. Under such hermeneutics, revelation loses its status as a normative authority, and is instead viewed as a symbolically available source for continuous revision.

What further complicates postmodern relativism's relationship to Islam is that it attacks the very foundation of epistemology in Islam. That is, Islam does not simply provide ethical guidelines, or spiritual symbols; it provides truth that has been revealed by God, and that applies universally, regardless of time and space. When postmodern relativism's denial of stable meaning, and universal truth are accepted (even implicitly) this claim to truth cannot be understood. The conflict between postmodern relativism and the epistemology of Islam is therefore not a matter of methodology, but a matter of the basic nature of both of these perspectives. Any effort to find common ground between the two without first addressing their inherent incompatibility regarding epistemology runs the risk of eroding the very foundation upon which Islam exists as a system of belief and practice.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. The Internalization of Postmodern Hermeneutics in Contemporary Muslim Thought

The greatest influence of postmodern relativism on Muslim intellectual life is not the external critique of religion, but the increasing internalization of postmodern assumptions within the interpretive discourse of some Muslim scholars and activist groups. Muslims have traditionally approached the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Shar'iah as divinely-revealed sources of knowledge that should be interpreted within established epistemological boundaries. However, the increasing number of Muslim scholars and activists who are influenced by postmodern thought are increasingly interpreting the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Shar'iah from the inside out. This shift in perspective has been a major departure from the methods of traditional Islam (which relied on well-defined boundaries between epistemic areas). In this regard, the boundaries between the epistemic area of the authority of revelation and the epistemic area of the authority of the scholarly community have always existed.

The internalization of postmodernism into Muslim thought may happen quietly. Postmodernism is typically introduced to Muslim scholars as a method of understanding rather than an explicitly relativistic worldview. As such, it can be brought into Muslim discourse with moral appeal via concepts and ideas like justice, inclusivity, freedom, and reform. While these values are not unique to Islam, the frameworks through which they are pursued in many cases reflect the epistemologies of secular critical theory, rather than the epistemologies of Islamic *usul al-fiqh*. Therefore, the authority of the interpreter shifts from the divine communication found in the text to the interpreter as an actor within social and political struggles.<sup>10</sup>

An example of this trend in action is evident in feminist reinterpretation of Qur'anic texts. Feminist reinterpretations of the Qur'an typically start from the assumption that classical *tafsir* was a product of patriarchal power structures, rather than an attempt to understand the divine communication contained in the text. Consequently, verses associated with family roles, legal testimony, and inheritance are reread through egalitarian lenses that give priority to modern notions of gender equity. In doing so, the intention of Allah in providing those verses is understood to be historically conditioned, and the modern moral ideal is seen as the final measure of meaning. Therefore, the authority of the Qur'an is reconceptualized as a negotiable text that is relevant only insofar as it conforms to moral criteria that exist outside of the Qur'an as a source of moral direction.<sup>11</sup>

A similar epistemological structure is evident in queer hermeneutics and identity-based readings of Islamic texts. In both cases, the framework for understanding identity and sexuality that informs postmodern assumptions about identity and sexuality shapes the outcome of interpretive activity prior to engaging with the text. When scriptural passages clearly define moral limits, they are reinterpreted as culturally contingent stories, rather than as universal moral imperatives. Therefore, the basis for evaluating morality is transformed from obedience to divine commands to affirming one's personal identity and experiences. The change that occurs here is not simply a matter of developing new interpretations, but fundamentally changes the logic of moral reasoning by subordinating revelation to subjective self-interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to particular forms of hermeneutical movement, postmodern relativism also influences broader attempts to historicize *shar'i* law. Legal rulings are now more commonly characterized as the products of the culture of seventh century Arabia, rather than as authoritative expressions of eternal divine guidance. Although Islamic jurisprudence has long recognized the significance of context, postmodern historicism tends to extend recognition of context to the extent of reducing all of *shar'i* law to a product of culture, and thereby subjecting it to revision based on contemporary political and ethical sensitivities. Therefore, the ultimate standard of judgment for *shar'i* law is now replaced by revelation with human rights discourse or liberal moral consensus.<sup>13</sup>

The cumulative effect of the trends described above is the epistemological fragmentation of Muslim authority. The traditional mechanisms that formerly provided stability to the meaning of the text—including scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), methodological rigor, and transmission-based knowledge—are increasingly rejected as overly restrictive or exclusionary. In their absence, interpretation becomes individualized and ideologically-driven, resulting in multiple, often conflicting versions of Islam, without a common criterion for resolving truth claims. This situation parallels the postmodern celebration of pluralism, however, it is incompatible with Islam's self-conception as a single pathway to truth that is grounded in divine revelation.<sup>14</sup>

So the acceptance of postmodern hermeneutic interpretation as part of Islamic scholarship reflects much more than a methodology of interpretation. It reflects an epistemological break. The shift of authority from divine revelation to the interpreter and from certainty to possibility in these methods undermines the legitimacy of Islamic knowledge. Recognizing this shift is therefore essential to developing any meaningful responses. Without identifying and addressing the epistemology behind contemporary reinterpretations of the texts under consideration, attempts to discuss the specifics of particular rulings or social issues are most likely to be superficial and unable to effectively identify the underlying crisis of authority.

#### **4. Islamic Epistemology: Foundations, Sources, and Structure**

Islamic epistemology differs from postmodern relativism in how each views knowledge. Relativism holds that the "truth" is historically and contextually dependent upon the person doing the interpreting. Therefore, the "truth" is whatever you want to believe. Islamic epistemology, however, has at its base the belief that there is an objective truth derived from divine revelation (the word of God), which is the absolute source of and standard for what is true. Based on this epistemology, the truth about reality exists independently of human perception or belief; therefore, moral truths exist independent of human construction and are not relative to culture. Additionally, human reason will be used to the fullest extent possible when it is guided by revelation. Moreover, the knowledge gained through this epistemology is not created through human discourse; instead, it is received, protected and applied through serious intellectual effort.

Islamic epistemology relies on the Qur'an as the first and last authority for all knowledge. The Qur'an refers to itself as *al-haqq* (the truth); *Hudan* (direction); *Bayyan* (clarification). It states that it is not relative to time or culture. Therefore, the revelation of the Qur'an is the basis for all other knowledge. Consequently, the Qur'anic world view



assumes that certainty (yaqin) can be achieved, and that to elevate doubt to the level of an enduring epistemic position is to demonstrate that a person lacks guidance and not that he is intellectually virtuous.

The Sunna (Prophetic tradition) serves a secondary but necessary epistemic role in relation to the Qur'an. The Sunna is not a secondary or optional source of knowledge, but rather an explanatory revelation that clarifies, defines, and implements the guidance provided by the Qur'an. For example, the Sunna translates the general principles of the Qur'an into specific moral, legal, and spiritual practices. The Sunna acts as a prophetic authority providing closure to interpretation of the Quran, thus eliminating fragmentation of meaning caused by separating a text from its lived experience. In terms of Islamic epistemology, the Prophet is not merely a historical personage but is the authoritative interpreter of the Quran and is there to guide and provide limitations on the arbitrary nature of interpretation.

Another factor of Islamic knowledge that assists in stabilizing Islamic knowledge is scholarly consensus (ijma'). Collective scholarly consensus represents a form of epistemic protectionism that maintains the continued cohesion of the meaning of Islamic knowledge among successive generations and limits the potential for radical deviations from basic premises. Although Islamic scholarship acknowledges disagreement (ikhtilaf) as a normal occurrence of jurisprudential reasoning, such disagreements typically occur within commonly accepted epistemological boundaries. Therefore, collective scholarly consensus (ijma') represents a protective mechanism that preserves the ties of interpretation to the accumulated body of knowledge of the scholarly community as opposed to relying upon solely individual subjective interpretations. Thus, ijma' directly contradicts postmodern hermeneutics that view the disintegration of authoritative consensus as a source of liberating intellectual freedom.

Reason ('aql) also has an essential function in Islamic epistemology; however, the role of reason is strictly defined. Reason is neither totally dismissed nor is it viewed as absolute, as reason is viewed as a means to help interpret revelation, and not as a substitute for it. For centuries, the classical scholars of Islam have held that reason and revelation represent complementary, and not competitive, sources of knowledge. Provided that reason is utilized appropriately, it may act as an aid to interpretation, analogy and application; however, reason cannot supersede explicit revelation. By limiting reason, Islamic epistemology avoids reversing the process of epistemology found in both modern and postmodern thought whereby human judgment is the final authority to determine what is true.<sup>15</sup>

Islamic Epistemology is characterized by an emphasis on achieving Certainty (Yaqin). This does not signify that a person who achieves Yaqin will be unable to continue exploring their own thoughts, nor will they be less aware of the complexity of the world around them. Rather, this is indicative of a person's trust in divine guidance. The Quran continually differentiates between certainty (Yaqin) and speculation (Zann), and repeatedly cautions against the use of speculative forms of knowledge which are not based upon epistemic justification. As for skepticism regarding truth, Islamic epistemology views skepticism as a sign of both moral and intellectual instability, rather than intellectual sophistication. Therefore, Islamic epistemology represents an alternative to relativism, as it affirms that truth is attainable, authoritative and binding.<sup>16</sup>

Together, the four components of Islamic epistemology — revelation; Prophetic authority; scholarly consensus; and reason — represent an interconnected epistemic system. This system allows for Islam to continue to respond to new issues and challenges while remaining committed to the foundational tenets of the faith. While Islamic epistemology is adaptable enough to accommodate ongoing interpretation and revitalization; yet, it resists the postmodern tendency to reduce truth to an infinite number of competing perspectives. Therefore, understanding the above-mentioned system is necessary in order to evaluate contemporary reinterpretive movements and develop a principle-based response to relativistic epistemologies.

### 5. Islamic Renewal without Relativism: Ijtihād, Maqāṣid, and Tajdīd

The most common reason for employing postmodern hermeneutics in Islamic thought is based on the belief that Islam must be able to evolve with changes in the world around us so as to stay pertinent. The acknowledgement that Islamic societies may undergo historical change, and that this is a valid rationale, is often accompanied by the nearly always false dichotomy between being faithful to the divine message and making legitimate reforms.<sup>17</sup> That Islamic intellectual history has shown renewal (tajdīd) to be possible and necessary to continue the Islamic tradition, while at the same time distinguishing principled reform from relativistic reinterpretations of Islam, is significant.<sup>18</sup>

A key component to the Islamic ability to adapt to its environment is the practice of ijtihād independent, rational reasoning. Ijtihād enables qualified scholars to apply revelation to new realities that were not articulated in the foundational texts, and in doing so, they do so within a rationalized methodology. Historical jurists did not use ijtihād independently of revelation; rather, they arrived at conclusions regarding the applicability of revelation to new realities through a process of direct interaction with the Quran, Sunna, and established legal principles.<sup>19</sup> The process of arriving at conclusions via ijtihād was a means by which jurists could ensure that their conclusions remained consistent with the divine will, while simultaneously applying those conclusions to specific contexts in a manner that was consonant with

those contexts. In contrast to postmodern reinterpretations of religious text, which begin with the assumptions of the current era and then work backwards to the original text, *ijtihād* begins with revelation and applies it to lived reality.<sup>20</sup> *Ijtihād* is closely related to another Islamic methodology for addressing new realities in a way that maintains the integrity of revelation: *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, or the higher purposes of Islamic Law. *Maqāṣid* articulate the ultimate goals of *Sharī'ah*, including faith, life, intellect, lineage, and property, and provide the ethical coherence and flexibility necessary to allow scholars to address new social and technological challenges. The important point about *maqāṣid*, however, is that they serve as interpretive frameworks rather than independent sources of legislation. Thus, they do not override express provisions of revelation, and they do not permit the suspension of absolute moral standards based upon shifting social norms. If *maqāṣid* are disconnected from their revelatory foundations, they risk being reinterpreted in terms of secular ethical paradigms, and therefore lose their unique characteristics as Islamic concepts.

The understanding of *tajdīd* (renewal) serves to illustrate the Islamic view of renewal, also. Traditions from the Prophet Muhammad identify *tajdīd* with returning to an accurate understanding and practice of Islam after periods of decline or corruption of belief, and knowledge. While historically, those who have been renewers of the faith did not seek to establish Islam in terms of the prevailing intellectual trends of the day; rather they sought to correct the beliefs, knowledge, and practices of the community to reflect the pure teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. In the Islamic view, the process of renewal is restorative, not constructive. *Tajdīd* assumes the divine guidance is eternal and that humanity may at times go astray from it; rather than assuming the message of God is obsolete.

In comparison to both the restoration based models of *tajdīd* and the flexibility to adjust ethics provided by *maqāṣid* and *ijtihād*; postmodern relativism has approached reform through the inversion of the epistemology. Postmodern relativism seeks to evaluate current values against the backdrop of the divine revelation, whereas postmodern relativism seeks to evaluate the divine revelation against the backdrop of the values of the current era. In addition, the center of authority for ethics shifts from divine will to individual preference and, as such, the stability that comes with the divine revelation is replaced by the fluidity of human desire.<sup>21</sup> Through this methodology of reforming Islam, it is not revitalized but transformed. Furthermore, in removing fixed meanings and boundaries of what constitutes moral behavior, relativistic reinterpretation removes the very benchmarks that allow for the distinction between reform and distortion. In the absence of a set of objective reference points for epistemology, calls for renewal are essentially indistinguishable from ideologically driven revisions.

Therefore, Islamic epistemology provides a clear counterpoint to relativistic reinterpretations of Islam: a model of renewal based on certitude, continuity and methodological rigor. Scholars use *ijtihād* to develop responses to new conditions and circumstances; they use *maqāṣid* to create ethically coherent responses to the issues of the day; and they use *tajdīd* to ensure that the faithful remain committed to the revelation of God. Both *ijtihād*, *maqāṣid* and *tajdīd* do not necessitate the abandonment of objective truths and/or the relativization of divine authority; rather the effectiveness of each of these methodologies depend upon an acknowledgment of the reality that the revelations of God are authoritative across time and space.

Understanding renewal in this manner creates a foundation for Muslim scholarship to respond constructively to modern challenges without succumbing to the skepticism of postmodernism. In this manner, it reinforces the idea that Islam's capacity to adapt to changing realities is a reflection of strong intellectual maturity rather than a weakness of its epistemology. When properly grounded, renewal allows for the strengthening of the tradition, rather than the weakening of it, and allows for the ability of the faithful to continue living in the world of today while continuing to maintain their relationship with divine truth.

## 6. Strategic Refutation of Postmodern Relativism from Within Islamic Epistemology

An Islamic reaction to postmodern relativism will be based on the understanding that merely expressing moral opposition to postmodern relativism or relying upon historical authority are insufficient responses to relativistic thought. Rather, an Islamic response to postmodern relativism has to challenge those foundational epistemological commitments that underlie relativistic thinking. An Islamic epistemology can accomplish this by demonstrating the internal contradictions of relativistic thought and offering an alternative model of truth, meaning, and authority grounded in divine revelation. As paradigms of knowledge and reality, the postmodern and Islamic paradigms do not provide different methodologies of doing scholarship. Rather, they demonstrate fundamentally different models of knowing and conceiving of reality.<sup>22,23</sup>

Postmodern relativism claims at the level of epistemology that it is impossible to have certain or authoritative knowledge of anything. Postmodern relativism claims that all knowledge claims are narratives constructed by humans based upon power and context, thereby removing any conceivable criterion for distinguishing between competing interpretations of events.<sup>24</sup> However, the denial of any possible way to know anything finally or authoritatively true is

self-contradictory. The claim that "all truths are relative" functions as a universal assertion that is exempted from the very skepticism that relativism applies to other assertions. Therefore, Islamic epistemology establishes the contradiction between relativism's denial of any possible way to know anything finally or authoritatively true and its own ability to establish a stable criterion for determining what is morally and theologically correct.

Without the existence of a truth that is independent of subjective preference, concepts such as justice, oppression, and reform become meaningless. Islamic epistemology resolves the problem of how to ground meaning and determine what is morally and theologically correct by establishing that truth exists because it has been revealed by God. Because Islamic epistemology locates the origin of truth in divine revelation and not in human construction, revelation serves as an external, non-contingent reference point for establishing the meaning of moral judgments and for determining what is just or unjust. The Qur'ān presents its guidance as definitive and binding.

This does not mean that interpretation is eliminated; rather, it means that interpretation is limited to discovering an objective moral order that has been established by God. Therefore, interpretation is an act of discovery and not an act of invention. Therefore, Islamic epistemology precludes the interpretive indeterminacy that postmodern hermeneutics promote.<sup>25</sup>

When postmodern relativism reduces ethical norms to social consensus and personal identity, postmodern relativism creates an unstable and inconsistent moral framework. When the norms of justice and injustice are determined by social consensus and personal identity, it is impossible to develop a consistent moral framework. Ethical norms shift according to social and cultural trends, leaving no basis for critiquing actions except on the basis of preference and power.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, Islamic epistemology establishes that the foundation of ethical norms is in divine command. The categories of lawful and unlawful, right and wrong, etc., are not negotiable constructs but expressions of a higher moral order that has been established by God. Therefore, Islamic epistemology establishes a moral framework that is stable and consistent, even though it acknowledges the importance of compassion and contextual sensitivity. The stability and consistency of the moral framework established by Islamic epistemology allow for compassion and contextual sensitivity to be exercised in a manner that is meaningful.<sup>27</sup>

Islamic epistemology has rejected the postmodern emphasis on the reader as the principal author of meaning and recognizes that interpretation is a human activity. However, Islamic epistemology identifies the authority for interpreting divine revelations in the context of a structural tradition of knowledge. The Quran, the sunna and the accumulated body of scholarship by the ulama form a collective framework which limits the degree of arbitrary interpretation and maintains the coherence of doctrine. Although Islamic epistemology accepts the value of diversity of thought, Islamic epistemology rejects the collapse of meaning into unlimited subjectivity. In contrast to postmodern hermeneutics, postmodern hermeneutics typically celebrate fragmentation as an end in itself, and develop no means to distinguish between insightful or unwise interpretations.<sup>28</sup>

The strategic Islamic response to postmodern relativism is therefore not a retreat from the world, but a confidence in the authority of Islamic epistemology. Instead of using postmodern categories to justify Islam, Islamic scholarship should critique those categories using their own intellectual resources. That would require a renewed commitment to the authority of revelation, a renewed trust in certainty (yaqin), and a renewed commitment to the legitimacy of the traditional scholarly method. A positive view of the authority of revelation, etc., will enable Islamic scholars to engage with contemporary issues of concern (such as justice, human dignity and social change) in ways that do not absorb them into the relativism that destroys the meaning of those terms.

Thus, Islamic epistemology refutes postmodern relativism and shows the limits of postmodern relativism. Islamic epistemology supplies a coherent theory of truth, morality, and interpretation and shows that certainty and universality are necessary conditions, rather than barriers to morally and ethically engaging with the world. Thus, the strategic issue facing Muslim scholarship is not to reconcile revelation with relativism, but to establish revelation as an alternative epistemological paradigm capable of responding to the intellectual and moral uncertainty of the postmodern era.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Conclusion: Reclaiming Certainty in an Age of Epistemic Doubt

The current research has shown the increasing influence of postmodern relativism on Muslim thought today, and that this influence presents a significant epistemological problem for Islam. Unlike previous encounters with other religions and intellectual traditions, postmodernism challenges Islamic beliefs, laws, and values at their most fundamental level; namely, in the way they define truth, authority, and meaning. Thus, when Muslim scholars adopt relativistic modes of interpretation, the Qur'an and Hadith are no longer seen as objective guides to action, but as texts open to ideological re-construction based on the interpretations of readers.

Therefore, the adoption of relativistic ways of interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith does not represent a reform of Islam, but a separation of the new ways of thinking about Islamic truths from the basic tenets of Islam's epistemological framework.

Through the examination of the epistemological characteristics of postmodern thought and their representation in modern movements to re-interpret Islamic teachings, the author has demonstrated that relativistic modes of

interpretation threaten the unity and consistency of all three aspects of Islam: belief, law and ethics. As well, since these forms of interpretation rely on the interpretations of individual readers' experiences, identities, and/or power analyses, they eliminate the idea of divine intention from Islamic scripture, and thus eliminate the normative force of those scriptures. Therefore, because they eliminate the divine as the basis for truth claims, the various forms of postmodernist interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith present multiple competing moral narratives as equivalent, and eliminate any fixed criteria for evaluating the truth of any given claim.

Thus, as a result of the postmodernist approach to interpretation, the Islamic tradition undergoes fragmentation rather than renewal, and ambiguity replaces guidance.

On the contrary, the author of the article argues that Islamic epistemology provides a robust and internally consistent alternative to the relativistic approaches to understanding Islamic truths presented by postmodernist thought. Islamic epistemology is rooted in revelation, clarified by the authority of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), preserved by scholarly consensus, and justified by rational inquiry. Therefore, Islamic epistemology holds that the truth is not only knowable but obligatory.

Islamic epistemology likewise recognizes the need for an historical and dialectical understanding of knowledge but refuses the view that meaning can be determined by contingency and individual whim. The principles of *ijtihād*, *maqāṣid*, and *tajdīd* show that Islam has developed its own processes for adapting to new conditions, processes which enable Islamic teachings to be renewed and adapted in response to changing circumstances without sacrificing the certainty and moral clarity of those teachings.

In the end, the difference between Islamic epistemology and postmodern relativism represents two different conceptions of knowledge. Postmodern thought validates skepticism and makes certitude a form of oppression. In contrast, Islam considers certitude (*yaqīn*) to be essential to moral responsibility and religious guidance. In addition, modern (and more particularly) postmodern ideas undermine authority in the name of reason, while Islamic tradition establishes the authority of divine revelation as mercy which protects humans from being at the mercy of their own subjective judgments. These two stances are therefore not just intellectual disagreements, but also affect how Muslims view duty, justice, and the purposes of human existence.

Thus, whether or not Muslim scholarship can continue to provide itself with an opportunity for serious intellectual exchange will depend upon recognition of this epistemic border. If there are attempts to make Islam relevant again by making it conform to postmodern paradigms, then Islam may lose precisely those features that make it valuable. A more positive way forward is to reaffirm epistemological confidence: to use rational inquiry to deal with the issues of the modern world and to maintain Muslim intellectual debates in terms of the original texts and methodologies of the Islamic tradition that have been a source of stability and continuity to the tradition for centuries. Affirming certainty is not equivalent to intellectual rigidity; rather, it is to say that the truth is not something which exists because humans want it to exist, but is something that has been revealed to humans by God so that they may find their way to Him.

In a time of intellectual uncertainty and moral instability, therefore, Islamic epistemology offers a unified conception of knowledge based upon transcendence, accountability, and significance. It is thus the central issue for contemporary Muslim scholarship, not to reinterpret the message of Revelation into relativistic oblivion, but to show that the message of Revelation is still relevant today as truth, authoritative, and transformative.



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