

Space-Time Correlation in Inferring Islamic Rulings



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In inferring rulings related to a particular spatiotemporal setting, **classical Islamic jurists** invariably emphasized a close correlation between the primary texts of Islam and local realities.

Giving opinions or passing verdicts only based on the letter of the texts, without understanding the spirit and without considering circumstantial factors, can be detrimental and create controversies. This may even make a particular Islamic teaching irrelevant to society.

Two kinds of reading

In this regard, what **Taha Jabir al-Alwani** says in his essay "**The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today**" (1995) is pertinent. He proposes two kinds of reading which are necessary and important to understand Islamic

teachings: reading God's revelation (the **Quran** and **authentic Sunnah**) and reading His creation (the real-existential). He argues,

“To undertake a reading of either without reference to the other will neither benefit humanity nor lead it to the sort of comprehensive knowledge necessary for the building and maintenance of civilized society or to knowledge worthy of preservation and further development or exchange.” (P. 85)

Local scholars and local issues

This particular principle of **Islamic jurisprudence** became clearer to me when I attended a talk by renowned Malaysian academic and public intellectual Mohd. Kamal Hassan (1942-).

Speaking at a discussion at Kamal Hassan Library at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in late 2019, he told the audience about his meeting with **Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi** (1903-79) at Columbia University in New York City in 1974.

Kamal Hassan was at that time, pursuing a Ph.D. at Columbia in contemporary Islamic thought. He was also the president of the Columbia University chapter of MSA (Muslim Students' Association). In that capacity, Kamal Hassan invited Mawdudi (who was in New York then) to deliver a speech in front of the university and the local community.

They held the event at the auditorium of the main library of Columbia University and many people attended the event.

During the Q & A session after Mawdudi's speech, Kamal Hassan, in the form of a question sought advice from the South Asian revivalist thinker on matters related to Malaysia. In reply, Mawdudi said that scholars of Malaysia were better informed about, and were in a better position to give solutions to local issues. Mawdudi believed that first-hand understanding of the circumstances, problems, and needs of a society was important to offer a remedy for its (social) ills.

Understanding the spatiotemporal variations

Referring to Mawdudi's response, Kamal Hassan stressed that understanding the spatiotemporal variations is imperative to formulate effective policies and infer Islamic practical rules. True Islamic scholars over centuries have always considered local conditions before offering opinions and interpretations of relevant texts.

In this respect, to elaborate the argument further, Kamal Hassan shared with us a famous anecdote involving Imam

Ash-Shafi`i on whose interpretation of Islamic teachings, the Shafi`i school of [Islamic law](#) is built.

An example of spatiotemporal variations

According to the Shafi`i school of thought, the [recitation of qunut supplication](#) (while standing) in the second *rakah* of the [Fajr prayer](#) is a *sunnah muakkadah* (a stressed sunnah or a strongly recommended act of Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him]).

If one misses to do it, they have to perform *sajdah sahw*, that is, extra prostrations as compensation for the inadvertent error. Conversely, in the Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali *madhhabs* (schools of thought), the *qunut* invocation in the Fajr prayer is not essential.

However, when the eponymous founder of the Shafi`i school of thought migrated from Iraq to Egypt, he led prayers with a congregation comprising mainly followers of the Hanafi school; so he did not recite the *qunut* in the Fajr prayer out of respect for the Hanafi practice.

By narrating this anecdote, Kamal Hassan intended to drive home the message that, in issues of opinion differences (*khilafiah*), one should not be fanatical or dogmatic; rather, one should be flexible in approach, humble, and accommodating in attitude.

How Imam Ash-Shafi`i approached Quran and Sunnah

In the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam Ash-Shafi`i developed his methodology of Islamic jurisprudence and his own way of approaching the **Quran** and Hadith. He first introduced his own school of thought - *qawl qadim* (old opinion) - in Iraq. He then significantly modified his interpretations and introduced a different set of jurisprudential theories and rulings - *qawl jadid* (new opinion) - once he settled in Egypt. Thus, his *madhhab* in Egypt had different paradigms and assumptions owing to the variant social dynamics of his new country of residence. The differences between the two phases of the development of his thoughts were owing to the specific local conditions where they evolved.

Socio-cultural contexts and forming opinions

The above and similar examples in the Islamic juristic tradition suggest that knowledge of Islam's primary texts (the Quran and Hadith) and that of socio-cultural contexts are very important to offer an informed opinion. Such knowledge is also crucial to adjudicate and pass a reliable verdict - involving a specific location.

This important principle of Islamic jurisprudence is often forgotten. Many half- or ill-educated people in religious garb dare to pass verdicts based on the literal interpretation of Islamic texts. Such decontextualized views or verdicts do a severe disservice to Islamic law and societies, as they cause confusion and misapprehension among people about Islamic teachings.

Forming opinions based on social sciences only

Conversely, there is another group of people with an inadequate understanding of Islam's primary texts. They dare to give definitive Islamic rulings or juristic opinions

only based on their knowledge of social sciences or social conditions.

In the aforementioned essay, Taha Jabir al-Alwani implies that both these groups are ineligible to infer proper Islamic rulings. He argues that a one-sided interpretation of Islamic teachings can cause catastrophes and major disasters.

Conclusion

Time-space dimensions are crucial in understanding social realities and in the application of Islamic teachings in everyday life. Hence, true scholars of Islamic jurisprudence must be conversant with the text and context of Islamic teachings.

In his essay titled "[A return to the Quranic paradigm of development and integrated knowledge: The Ulu al-Albab model](#)" (2010), Kamal Hassan uses the Quranic term of *Ulu al-Albab* to describe such "intellectuals and scholars *par excellence* who combine the understanding of the Book of Nature with the Book of Revelation and integrate human reason with Divine revelation."

References

Al-Alwani, Taha Jabir. 1995. "The Islamization of knowledge: Yesterday and today." *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 12(1): 81-101.

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