

Defining the Core Identity of a 21st-Century Islamic University

Osman Bakar, PhD

Introduction

In the post-colonial Muslim world, especially since the 1980s following the historic First World Conference on Muslim Education in 1978 held in Mecca, universities and colleges carrying the label “Muslim” or “Islamic” in their names have rapidly increased in number. These institutions are either public or private and are either national or international in character. These universities and colleges may be described as new institutional creatures in the modern world of education, since they are experimenters on the hybridization of traditional Islamic and modern Western educational curricula. The rapid growth of this category of educational institutions is phenomenal. In one sense, this is a positive development that we can only welcome and be proud of. It shows that many Muslims are fully aware of the importance of higher education to the future of the ummah.¹ This awareness is all the more significant when viewed in the context of our time when the ummah is still a witness to rampant illiteracy and semi-literacy, a glaring social phenomenon that is contrary to the essential characteristics of Islam as a religion, a community, and a civilization of knowledge.

The rapid growth of these educational institutions also shows that many Muslims are sensitive to the ummah’s needs to preserve the traditional Islamic curriculum and at the same time to provide an adequate curriculum in modern knowledge. In other words, they are sensitive to the challenge of how to achieve a hybridization of the two curricula that would best serve the interests of their respective national Muslim communities and of the global Muslim ummah at large. Some Muslims refer to their form of hybridization as “integration”. Some others call it “Islamization”. No matter what term is used, the whole hybridization exercise is conveying the common message that what the ummah needs is not higher education of just any kind, but rather one that would help give shape and meaning to the identity of Muslim educational institutions. The search for this institutional identity is ongoing.

But in another sense, the springing up of all kinds of universities and colleges in the Muslim world, which is partly inspired by rapid changes in the

Western higher education landscape itself, raises problematic issues to which their founders and builders, educationists and scholars, and local educational authorities, need to pay heed. It appears that, as a result of the rapid physical expansion of Muslim higher education institutions, the stakeholders, especially curriculum providers and their scholarly critics, hardly have time for a reasonable pause for reflection to examine if they are creating the right kind of universities—notwithstanding their wearing of the “Muslim” or “Islamic” label, and producing the right kind of university graduates needed by the 21st-century ummah. Based on preliminary investigations it appears that we have simply been moving forward in the educational sector during the last several decades by “producing more of the same” in terms of “types” and “identities” of higher Islamic educational institutions and, by inference, as well as in terms of academic and professional qualifications of “Islamic studies” graduates.

The Dilemma of the Modern Muslim University

The typical modern Muslim university is thus caught in a dilemma that is partly the product of its own making. On the one hand, it is burdened with the ummatic task of rediscovering its own heritage, learning the best and the most useful knowledge from the most advanced modern cultures, Eastern and Western, and integrating them into some coherent whole within the framework of its educational curricula. It is granted that the burden is not its fault; rather, it is part of the destiny of the modern Muslim ummah. However, the success of the modern Muslim university’s search for an identity that is in keeping with the Islamic intellectual tradition is closely identified with its success in the curricula-integration enterprise, which it can shape and influence. On the other hand, the integration work has not made much headway since it is deprived of the precious time needed for the more concerted effort and more ingenious approach to its accomplishment due to the university’s imbalanced physical growth and expansion. To be sure, there were a few exceptional cases, which relatively succeeded in projecting to the public their high-profile Islamization-Integration agenda during the first two decades or so of their existence. But even with these relatively successful ones, for various reasons the agenda in

¹ To promote inter-institutional cooperation on Islamic higher education in the Muslim world, we founded in 2010 a series of international conferences titled ‘International Conference on Islam and Higher Education (ICIHE)’. The First ICIHE was held on 8-9 November 2010 at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), Kuala Lumpur.

question has come to a halt and been put on the shelf. Furthermore, the literary output inspired and generated by the Islamization-Integration was far from impressive. Nonetheless, on the setback to the integration agenda that we now observe, the claim may be made that all modern Muslim universities have a share in its failure.

Elsewhere in my writings I describe the present dilemma of Muslim universities as the problem of an “expanding body” and a “shrinking spirit.”² What I mean by this is that under external pressure the university is expanding too fast, as alluded to earlier, so much so that it could hardly cater to the spiritual and intellectual needs of its campus community as understood by its founding fathers. It ought to be appreciated that a university’s spiritual and intellectual needs can only be fulfilled under a certain cultural environment. What is widely happening is that while the body of the university—its physical infrastructure, student population, and academic and administrative staff—is continuously expanding, its original spirit, which motivates its own birth, is shrinking as it is no longer adequately internalized not only by its students but, even more bothersome, by its academics. The implied failure in the university’s Islamization-Integration programme is the inability of its leadership at all levels to maintain an enduring dynamic and healthy balance between continuity and change, especially between its continuing commitments to the philosophy of its founders and its openness to development and change in the university educational curricula.

In light of the foregoing introductory remarks, this article argues for a revisit of the educational curricula integration enterprise in contemporary Muslim universities that appears to have lost its momentum. Given that this article is short, the revisit is limited to an overview of the main issues that are found to

be stalling progress in the integration enterprise. The main objective of the review is to arrive at a new epistemological framework, replacing the current widely used one, within which the Islamisation-Integration exercise could be enhanced to a more advanced level in both theory and practice in terms of comprehensiveness, sophistication, and problem-solving capacity. It is further argued in this article that the new epistemological framework in question would be none other than what we term *tawhidic epistemology*, which would serve as the defining element of an Islamic university.

Outstanding Problems Common to Modern Muslim Universities

Modern Muslim universities and colleges are currently faced with many common issues and challenges, which understandably would call for inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration. The most important of these are issues of the quality of education that is purportedly being provided to the students in an Islamic academic and scholarly setting and thus in the name of Islam, the societal value of this education, and the very character and identity of the Muslim institution of higher education in question. As such, it is pertinent to ask what the role of Islam would be in each university or each college’s attempt to effectively address these issues. It is our contention that, in this respect, the fitting role of the religion of Islam would be epistemological in nature. According to the Qur’an, Islam is a religion of truth (*din al-haqq*)³, which Muslim philosophers understand as synonymous with religion of knowledge. Islam is thus rich in epistemological teachings. These teachings include such doctrines as the principle of the unity of knowledge, the unity and hierarchy of the sciences, knowledge as at once the foundation and the goal of

2 See Osman Bakar, “The role of Islam in higher education policies of Muslim countries,” Osman Bakar, Eric Winkel, and Airulamri Aman, eds., *Contemporary Higher Education Needs in Muslim Countries: Defining the Role of Islam in 21st Century Higher Education* (Kuala Lumpur: IAIS Malaysia, 2011, 21-38).

3 Qur’an, 61:9.



Islamic learning culture, and the necessity of ethics of knowledge of which professional ethics is an important application.

Since the core problem of Muslim higher education is basically epistemological in nature, as is true generally of higher education in the global community, it is most appropriate to speak of the fitting role of Islamic epistemology. From the Islamic perspective, the most pertinent epistemological principle to the attempt to address the outstanding problems in Muslim universities is the epistemological idea contained in the first pillar of Islam. This pillar asserts the two testimonies of the Unity of God and the Muhammadan apostleship. Those scholars are right who say that the two testimonies are statements of knowledge. As such, they deserve to be treated as epistemological principles, indeed the two most fundamental ones. Traditionally, these twin principles serve as the most fundamental sources of all other epistemological ideas, both theoretical and applied. Inasmuch as the two principles and their derivatives constitute the core content of Islam's *tawhidic* teachings, we may refer to the resulting body of knowledge as *tawhidic* epistemology.

This *tawhidic* epistemology is presented here as instrumental to the success of the quest of the modern Muslim university to secure the best higher education curricula integration model possible. By the best curricula integration designable we mean first and foremost that it is coherent, sound, and of great practical utility. Such a model also means an integration scheme that possesses an ability to balance between a university's capacity for intelligent responses to perennial human needs and its capacity for pragmatic responses to changing human needs in conformity with the dictates of changing times and spaces. The changing human needs are usually addressed by the "secular" sciences or academic disciplines that are founded on some newly emerging epistemologies. Accordingly, the changing needs are seen as capable of posing an epistemological challenge to the university authority, particularly the department that is entrusted with occasional curricula reviews. But with the help of *tawhidic* epistemology, it is strongly believed that the challenge in question could be adequately addressed by the university. It is to be noted that the epistemological challenge would be an ongoing thing since the university's academic expansion would mean there will always be new academic disciplines added to the university's educational curricula that require an appropriate epistemological response.

The Quest for an Excellent Educational Curricula Integration: From Piecemeal to Tawhidic Epistemology

Educational curriculum integration exercise is essentially an epistemological work. The quality of the integration produced would be greatly dependent on the quality of the epistemological framework within which the integration is performed. It is not difficult to see why we can make this important conclusion. There are four elements that need to be present in any work of knowledge integration: knowledge elements that need to be integrated; the mind that is doing the integration; integration principles and tools; and the conceptual framework into which the integrated elements are to be integrated. It is quite clear that there is a quality factor that is associated with each of the four elements in question. While all these elements are important, especially the mind of the human integrator, the focus in this article is on the quality of the epistemological framework for the integration at hand. This is the key issue confronting the academia in modern Muslim universities. A Muslim university needs to pay serious attention to this qualitative demand of curricula integration works.

Admittedly, since the beginning of the academic responses of Muslim responses to modern knowledge decades ago, some changes could be observed in the curriculum sector where attempts have been made to produce a semblance of curriculum integration of traditional and modern knowledge. However, from the traditional Islamic perspective of what counts as the true institutional identity of a university—as the symbol of *tawhidic* epistemology—these changes can only be described as cosmetic in nature. By and large, the curriculum integration in question is sought to be achieved by loosely incorporating into the "traditional" curriculum of Islamic studies parts of "modern secular knowledge" that is thought to be useful to the current job market. However, this sort of integration exercise appears to be arbitrary and superficial and without the proper kind of epistemological basis that the Islamic tradition of learning seeks to put in place and champion. The so-called curriculum integration is nothing more than a loose combination, epistemologically speaking, of selected traditional disciplines as well as selected modern courses that are dictated by two main considerations: to appear as still being faithful to the traditional curriculum and thus to appear as Islamic; and to appear as being sensitive to the needs of graduates as job seekers. Unfortunately, these mere considerations in the thoughts and practices of leaders of Muslim universities are nowadays



to be viewed as too ordinary and commonplace as to be taken seriously as achievers in integration works. What is needed is for us to help elevate them and even the better achievers to the rank of leading international universities that are championing the spirit of *tawhidic* epistemology and taking pride in it as the essence of the true institutional identity of Muslim universities.

In the path to excellence in curricula integration works, it is necessary for Muslim minds in the universities to be open, those of academics and students alike. Only with an authentic opening of their minds, which is basically epistemological in nature, would the Muslims be liberated from what the late Saudi Arabian international scholar and intellectual-activist AbdulHamid AbuSulayman (1936-2021) called “The Crisis in the Muslim Mind”⁴ and what the American political philosopher, Allan Bloom (1930-1992) referred to as “The Closing of the American Mind”.⁵ Both scholars were, in fact, speaking of the phenomenon of the closing of the modern mind but in two different cultural settings. Both attributed the closing to some epistemological reasons, to the narrowing or closing of the door of *ijtihad* or “free thinking” in the case of AbuSulayman, and to the deeper intellectual crisis resulting from a “dangerous narrowing of curiosity and exploration by the university elites”. Similarities and differences in their thoughts notwithstanding, I argue that the common opener of the “closed” human mind to which both referred, to various degrees of openness, would be *tawhidic* epistemology. As such, it is of utmost importance for every Muslim university to teach this academic discipline together with the science of Divine Unity (*ilm*

al-tawhid) of which the former is a branch. The nurturing of the *tawhidic* mind has been central to the traditional mission of Muslim universities since it is precisely this kind of mind that defines their institutional identity.

From the developmental point of view, it is understandable and permissible for a new modern Muslim university to commence its curricula integration enterprise with the elementary type of hybridization of traditional Islamic knowledge and modern secular knowledge that employs a piecemeal epistemological approach. An example of such an approach is by providing quotations from the Qur’an or prophetic hadiths in support of harmonizing modern with traditional knowledge wherever appropriate. However, as we progress towards more advanced and more sophisticated curricula integration works, we need knowledge intervention from *tawhidic* epistemology, which is viewed in the Islamic intellectual tradition as universal, most comprehensive, holistic, and inclusive.

Islamic Applied Epistemology: Empowering the Identity of a Muslim University

If Islam is to play a key role in the ummah’s agenda of advancing the cause of higher education in the 21st century, then I would argue that we need to turn to Islam that is understood as a religion of knowledge and as an intellectual tradition. Based on our understanding of this dimension of Islam, we can describe its role in three main areas. First, there is the role of Islam’s institutional values; second, the role of Islamic epistemological teachings with specific reference to its applied epistemology in its capacity to empower

4 AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*, trans. Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993), 1st edition.

5 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (Simon & Schuster, 2012 Reissue Edition).

the identity of a Muslim university; and third, the role of Islamic ethics of knowledge.

In reference to the first role, we are thinking of Islam as a source of ideas for organizational theories and perspectives that could enlighten Muslims on the issue of the ideal size and the ideal character of a university. In this respect, we are reminded of Ibn Khaldun's theory of the "moderate size" of cultural organisms, particularly of cities. The practical implication of this theory is quite clear. A university cannot go on growing physically without limits. Moreover, the issue of the physical size of a university can have serious implications for the quality of its governance. With respect to the ideal character of a university, Islam is relevant to its quest by virtue of being a source of institutional values in relation to the theory and practice of leadership and followership and sense of social belonging.

In reference to the second role, some general aspects of the significance of Islamic epistemological teachings to the institutionalization of Muslim higher education have previously been discussed. What is now sought to be discussed are the more detailed aspects of Islam's applied epistemology in relation to the function of empowering the *tawhidic* identity of a Muslim university. There are seven such functions listed below:

1. Providing ideas for the philosophy and design of educational curricula.
2. Formulating the epistemologies of individual academic disciplines and pointing out the similarities and the differences between them.
3. Providing a *tawhidic* vision of a university's academic programme: this vision can be translated into the kind of academic programmes that would not only ensure a rationalized and efficient academic governance, but would also save costs.
4. Providing a balanced curriculum between *fard 'ayn* and *fard kifayah* knowledge.
5. Providing a balanced curriculum between perennial and ephemeral knowledge.
6. Serving as a basic source of intellectual-rational and scientific values such as truthfulness,

rationality, objectivity, and certainty, especially for the purpose of creating a healthy knowledge culture.

7. Serving as a source of research values for the creation of a healthy research culture.

In reference to the third role, we are emphasizing the following aspects of the ethical role and responsibility of a Muslim university, which is conceptually related to its identity:

1. Ensuring that the creation or production of new knowledge, its applications, and its dissemination in all its forms are in accordance with Islamic ethics.
2. Serving as a source of professional ethics: this is to ensure that graduates in every profession are imbued with the best standard of professional ethics.
3. Committing the university to observing this practical wisdom: "It is the ethical knowledge itself largely shunned in contemporary higher education curricula on the excuse of needing more time to promote graduates' marketability that would best guarantee their marketability."

Conclusion

The nature of Islam as a religion of knowledge *par excellence* has left a profound impact on the field of education, including higher education, that extended beyond the Muslim world. Islam predated the West by centuries in creating a robust higher education and knowledge culture. This culture, which was an outstanding aspect of classical Islamic civilization, mirrored the identity of the religion of Islam itself, which is *tawhidic* in the sense of being founded on the principle of absolute monotheism (*al-tawhid*). The traditional Muslim university reflected this truth in its institutional identity, particularly in its educational curricula. For contemporary Muslim universities in the 21st century, the main challenge is how with the guidance from traditional Islamic epistemology they can create a curricula integration model that synthesises traditional Islamic and modern secular knowledge and yet display a *tawhidic* character.

Professor Osman Bakar is the Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Al-Ghazali Chair of Epistemology and Civilisational Studies and Renewal, ISTAC-IIUM, and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Science, Universiti Malaya. Email: osmanbakar@iium.edu.my