

Nota Penyelidikan/Research Note

A Fundamental Flaw in the Construction of Islamic Economics: Providing Islamic Justifications within Conventional Framework

Muhammad Syukri Salleh
Abdul Fatah Che Hamat

INTRODUCTION

This paper has a simple objective. It attempts to highlight a common but fundamental flaw in the construction of the present Islamic economic discipline. The flaw relates to the long-standing practice of using Islamic justifications to rid the conventional economic discipline of the so-called "unIslamic" elements as the basic approach used in constructing and extending the Islamic economic discipline. This flaw is fundamental because such efforts, short of dismissing its framework in its entirety and replacing it with a completely Islamic one, would not yield a truly Islamic entity in its place. This is because the conventional concepts, definitions and framework do not come with independent attributes, but are rather attached strongly to conventional philosophical and epistemological underpinnings. Merely furnishing Islamic justifications, but yet basing on and presenting within the conventional philosophical and epistemological framework embodied by conventional concepts and definitions, cannot yield a discipline that can be considered truly Islamic in its full sense.

THE ISSUE

The development of Islamic economics, since its inception in the late 1970s has been very encouraging indeed. The emergence of a substantial number of researches, conferences, academic programs and discourses, publications and other endeavors is a clear manifestation of this phenomenal development. But in the midst of such rapid developments, a common trend emerged in the basic approach taken by most economists who work in the area. These researchers tend to overlook the need to change the

overall framework of their analysis, from the conventional to the Islamic one, and thus, appear to accept and retain the conventional economic framework as the basis of their analysis, while continuing to provide Islamic justifications as to whether to retain the parts that do not contradict Islamic principles or dismiss whatever parts deemed un-Islamic. In other words, the framework of analysis used in the construction of Islamic economics is essentially the conventional framework, one which is based on economic ideas and thinking, and philosophical underpinnings that goes back all the way to Adam Smith and beyond. It is within such frameworks that Islamic justifications – normally in the form of Qur'anic verses and Hadith, or arguments of past and present Islamic scholars – are provided and used in forming and developing Islamic economic discipline as we find today. Since these so-called Islamic arguments and analysis do not emerge from within a distinctively Islamic framework, but rather represent attempts at giving Islamic justifications for the existing conventional economic thinking and ideas, the resulting discipline cannot be claimed to be an authentic Islamic model and framework.

Such an Islamic economics is actually an end-product of the blending of Islamic justifications with the basic ideas of conventional economics. As these basic ideas are unchanged, so are the conventional concepts and definitions into which these ideas get translated. That too has crept into Islamic economics. In such a scenario, one may not regard the so-called Islamic economics as being the real Islamic economics, since in truth, it is not. Ideas that are based on conventional framework using conventional concepts and definitions, no matter how much Islamic justifications are given, will never be turned into Islamic ideas. The conventional concepts, definitions and framework do not come with independent attributes, but are rather attached strongly to conventional philosophical and epistemological underpinnings. Merely furnishing Islamic justifications, but yet basing on and presenting within the conventional philosophical and epistemological framework embodied by conventional concepts and definitions, cannot yield a discipline which can be considered truly Islamic in its full sense.

A real Islamic economics therefore must emerge from within an Islamic own distinctive framework where its very construction is supported by Islamic concepts and definitions based on Islamic philosophy and epistemology. Such a construction of Islamic economics must involve redefinition of concepts viewing from Islamic perspectives of philosophy and epistemology, and as such this calls for a total rejection of conventional frameworks. It is only by adopting such an approach that a disci-

pline can become truly Islamic, one that conforms to Islamic viewpoints and judgments.

THE CASE OF THE SCARCITY OF RESOURCES AND THE UNLIMITED WANTS

One example which can be used to illustrate the point in contention is one regarding the basic economic assumption made by conventional economics, that is, the resources are assumed to be scarce while human wants are assumed to be unlimited. Regarding this matter, many scholars of Islamic economics, usually either take an easy way out by simply agreeing with assumptions outright, or trying to provide some kind of Islamic justifications for them. One obvious example for the latter case is an article entitled: "Ekonomi Islam – Ke Arah Pengurusan Sumber Yang Terhad Dalam Memenuhi Kehendak Yang Tidak Terhad" (Islamic Economics – Towards the Management of Limited Resources in Fulfilling Unlimited Wants) (Mohd Riduwan Wahab 2001: 63-64). From the title itself, it conveys clearly the impression that the author is in total agreement with the two assumptions made by the conventional economics, and further, he even views Islamic economics as solving the issue of managing resources to fulfill those objectives.

From the author's 'Islamic' perspectives, the resources are scarce for two reasons. Firstly, consumable goods are confined to only *halal* and beneficial goods, and secondly, public resources such as water, sunlight and air are subject to mismanagement and wastefulness. Human wants, on the other hand, are said to have been unlimited as are reflected in al-Syatibi and Imam al-Ghazali's hierarchies of human needs, from the lowest *daruriyat* (basic needs) to the higher *hajiyyat* (comforts) and the highest *tahsiniyat* (luxury).

Based on these arguments, the author contends that Islam in general acknowledges the problems of the scarcity of resources and the unlimited wants as embodied in the basic assumption of the conventional economics. In this situation, he said, one has to make a reasonable choice and every choice involves opportunity costs, that is the very similar notion advocated by conventional economics. He suggests two solutions to the problems. Firstly, in fulfilling unlimited wants within the constraints of the scarcity of resources, Muslims shall make use of fiqh maxims (*qawaid fiqhiyah*), such as "rejecting bad things is better than accepting good

things” and “taking smaller risks”, as a guides. Secondly, the management of resources has to be done efficiently and brilliantly.

The same is done, and in fact worse, in his other article (Mohd Riduwan Wahab 2002: 58-60). While maintaining his stance on the scarcity of resources, this time around he uses a theory by a western psychologist, named Abraham Maslow, to justify his acceptance of the notion of the unlimited wants. Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs, starting from physiological needs (basic needs such as food, clothes and dwellings) to protection and security, social needs and acknowledgements, and finally needs for a successful life, is used as a framework for his argument. Within this framework, the author quotes various verses from al Qur’an and includes views from one contemporary scholar of Islamic economics, M.A. Mannan, regarding the principles of consumption. All these are said to have assured the optimum utilization of the scarce resources in order to fulfill the human unlimited wants.

Such writings and many others in similar grains, have definitely overlooked the essential ingredients of Islamic economics. In the very first place, these writings are founded on conventional philosophical and epistemological underpinnings instead of on the corresponding Islamic counterparts. Consequently, the concepts used are not properly redefined so as to suit the Islamic perspectives, hence direct usage of such conventional concepts conveys conventional meanings and purposes. Even more seriously, such concepts may run counter to the perspectives taken by Islam. In the case of the conventional concept on scarcity discussed here for instance, resources are considered as being scarce despite the fact that Allah SWT has guaranteed everyone with provisions (*rizq*), and that the concept of *barakah* (blessings of Allah SWT) in Islam goes beyond quantitative considerations. Clearly, the conventional concept of scarcity is not consistent with these Tawhidic concepts of *rizq* and *barakah*, where the latter connotes adequacy of provisions for every living creature.

Likewise, conventional economics considers wants as being unlimited despite the fact that in Islam, unlimited wants only emanate from bad desires (*nafs*) such as *ammarah*, *lawwamah* and *mulhamah*, and that these unlimited wants can be overcome by raising the inclination to better good desires such as *mutmainnah*, *radhiyyah*, *mardhiyyah* and *kamilah*. Unlike conventional economics which always regards wants as being unlimited, Islam provides ways to limit it. Therefore, in the Islamic system, it is not impossible for someone who has successfully conquered the bad desires, and in its place, acquired the good desires, to face limited wants instead.

CONCLUSION

The issues and cases highlighted in this paper are some of the examples of flaws plaguing the field of Islamic economics, which were constructed by applying Islamic justifications within the conventional framework. By extending similar arguments, it is not impossible to expect similar situation existing in other fields as well, be it in the discipline of pure sciences or the rest of social sciences.

In pure sciences, a great deal of researches are done and logical arguments put forward in attempts to prove and verify some of the predictions and allegations made in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. In many instances, the researches and arguments commence from within the framework of conventional sciences, with attempts to prove or disprove the Truths based on the conventional findings made. While there are some of these efforts which have proved to be commendable so far, there may be others which may turn out to be controversial if they do not directly support the Truths. The latter case should be viewed with utmost concern while the whole exercise with appropriate caution. This is because the conventional framework of pure sciences cannot and should not be used to verify and prove the Truths as laid out in al-Qur'an and Hadith. The 'scientism' approaches adopted by these pure sciences have obvious limitations. They can not yield perfectly "viable" findings which can withstand the course of time, since facts about the world always keep on changing, and there will always be differences in findings amongst researchers. In Islam, the Truths laid in al-Qur'an and Hadith will always remain as Truths even though the scientific findings at any particular point in time may prove to be otherwise.

In the realm of social sciences, one also finds cases where conventional theories of social sciences are used to analyze Islamic issues. In one instance, for example, a structural functional theory is used as a theoretical framework to analyze Muslims' problematic couples (Zainab bt Ismail 2001). While all of the respondents of the said study are Muslims, the values underlying the questions which are used to seek information from the respondents are clearly conventional values, even though the researcher, being a Muslim herself, would have been well aware of the fact that there are big differences between Muslim values and conventional values as far as responsibilities are concerned.

Worst still, there are Muslim authors who are critical of the conventional approach, and have gone to a great length to argue against it in their writings, but yet cannot completely rid themselves of the need for such

methods when coming to analyze issues involving Muslims. One such writer has opted for a clearly conventional (read western) approach to determine whether the Muslim-Malays have deviated from their faiths (*aqidah*) or not, even though he has apparently rejected such methods (Wan Mohd Azam bin Wan Mohd Amin 2002). In this study, he has used the western concepts of “thinking” such as deduction, induction, analogy, and fallacy to categorize the Muslim-Malays into various groups, and has arrived at the conclusion that some Muslim-Malays have been found to deviate from their faiths. However, the validity of such a conclusion is debatable, since he has used inappropriate tools, namely the western (or conventional) approach to study issues about the Muslim’s level of commitment to their faiths. He should have used instead, the Islamic approach to come out with the appropriate criteria to properly measure the Muslims’ commitment to their faiths. However, even on simple technical ground, his conclusion appears faulty, since it was reached without any empirical evidence as no fieldwork was carried out to collect the necessary data.

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