

Teaching hermeneutics and reflexivity while meeting the needs of the students

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Abstract

Very soon after the prophet Muhammad, the new community leaders were confronted with new challenges. The cultural life went further and the social relations were getting much more complex while the instructions of revelations were limited. This meant a gap between the social reality and the immediate demands of the revelations. During the first centuries of the Islamic history, the Islamic sciences developed in order to overcome this gap by arranging the daily actions of Muslims. Therefore the Islamic religious sciences have always been aimed to regulate the human action to bring them in accordance with the demands of the revelations.

It is a common perception of many social and religious scientists that the rise of the natural science and modern society increased this gap. That means new challenges for the Islamic religious sciences. Are they adequate equipped to overcome this gap again? Or will Islam lose connection with the social reality? While many Muslim theologians in the Islamic world have been trying to find answers on these kinds of questions, thousands of Muslims have left their homeland to find a better future in the Western societies.

Immediately after their arrivals, they come into a social reality which has nothing to do with Islam or its cultural manifestations. In this case it is not realistic to talk about a 'gap'. It is just another reality. Is this a new challenge for the Islamic sciences, or should we say this is a new reality which should accommodate the rise of a new Islamic theology? At this stage it is not possible to see the direction. Therefore we need a stable and professional environment not only to understand what is happening but also to develop authentic reactions which can be attributed to the Muslim citizens.

In 2006, one such attempt has been done at the Hogeschool InHolland (the Netherlands). It was an attempt to develop a balanced education program between the traditional Islamic sciences, social reality of Muslims in the Netherlands and professional education system. It was done in a way to assure the support of the Muslim community, to create a safe education approach for the Muslim students while also answering the central quality demands of the Bachelor level.

In some way, we can say it was not possible to balance the three, because InHolland decided to stop with this program. It is, however, also defensible to say that the job has not finished. For such a challenge we need more time. Moreover, many steps have already been made. In this contribution, I will sketch a picture of our policy and approach how to balance between classical exegesis, modern hermeneutics, and how to cultivate reflective professional skills. The last point refers to the professional space which could be mobilized in order to connect the Islamic orientations with our own social reality. Changing perspectives, using diversity in theology, and using the relevant social issues as a starting point have become central in our didactical approach. Our final goal was to make the students familiar with several perspectives of hermeneutics in order to relate the sources to the social reality. Maybe not to instruct the Muslim at action level but to exchange perspectives, meanings and connections.

This approach was very innovative. In dominant Islamic theological discourse there is an unbridgeable gap between historical understanding of Qur'an and the traditional text centered understanding. The same counts for the normative and reflective approach to the holy sources. In this contribution, I will try to show how the issues derived from the real life help us to overcome these contradictions and make them even useful.