

SOCIOLOGY IN ISLAM -  
A PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATION

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## What is Sociology?

Sociology is defined as the scientific study of patterned, shared human behaviour. The task of the sociologist is to analyze the ways in which people act toward one another, i.e. their social relations from a scientific point of view. The business of the sociologist is to find the existing patterns in social life. Unlike the physical scientist he does not invent things but merely studies the society in movement, including social changes and new forms of group life whenever they occur. It is only after men have learned to observe, describe, analyze and interpret social behaviour that we can properly speak of a science of sociology. Sociology focuses upon the fact of human "togetherness." As a body of knowledge, it centres around the fact of human relations.

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## The Content of Sociology

The content of sociology is mainly a body of knowledge about society. When we say that sociology is a "scientific study" of society, the word "science" immediately implies that there is something (content) which is studied and that there is a way of studying it. Sociology proceeds on the basis that our social behaviour is standardized and patterned. The phrase "patterns of social behaviour" expresses a prime idea in sociology. The behaviour of private individuals does not interest the sociologist. In essence, the sociologist studies social persons performing social patterns.

## Sociology as a Science

### The Conceptual Framework

Sociologists themselves have held that it would be difficult to study social behaviour occurs in the concrete, but in order to analyze and understand it we must learn to conceptualize it from the concrete occurrences. We are then able to distribute and arrange these generalizations or concepts, upon a framework. This provides us with two parallel sets of key concepts. The first set is made up of patterns, roles, institutions and culture. The other is a corresponding set made up of persons, relations, groups and society.

### Social Reality

In sociology, conceptualizations are not mere abstractions existing in our minds but exist in real order and correspond with the concrete social and cultural system in which human beings live, but it is not the function of the sociologist to evaluate the reality of the social phenomena.

### The Sociological Data

Sociology relies heavily on data usually obtained by field work, or from documents or statistics. Sociological methodology leads to selective description, and relies on evidence of samples rather than the whole. In sociology, statistics occupy the place of the laboratory of the physical scientist.

What I have described above is only a broad statement of those elements of sociology in which there is a general body of consensus. The sociologists have themselves recognized the highly complex nature of society and culture, even in the so-called simple or primitive forms of group life that it often eludes neat and clear-cut classification.

Let us now examine the general conceptual framework and tools of sociology in the light of the Islamic criteria.

### Sociology as a Science

Sociologists themselves have held that it would be difficult to give a straight forward answer yes or no to this question. "Rather the answer should be in terms of degree, the degree to which sociology is a science." In their view a science is to be judged by three criteria: the reliability of its body of knowledge, its organization and its method. As for the test of the reliability of knowledge, it was admitted that much knowledge in sociology is restricted as to time and place and hence defies generalization. As for the organization of knowledge, it was admitted that the existing apparatus was not enough to yield a very adequate synthesis of the whole field. The method in sociology too admitted of serious limitations. The question as to whether sociology is a science or not depends largely on the criteria adopted to define science. The word 'science' produced different meanings to different groups determined by the

thought-world to which they belonged. If sociological research is limited, as at present, to the empirical and quantitative methods, it would be totally inadequate to study and observe Islamic society at work; for the features characteristic of the Islamic community are basically determined by the neat absorption of a revealed value-system the bases of which are to be found in the Quran and Sunnah of the Rasul Allah. Those whose minds are conditioned by knowledge based on 'revelation' (wahy) alone could observe and grasp meanings in the organization of the human society beyond the narrow limits of empirical and quantitative data. Ibn Khaldun's sociological thought and his method of social analysis is often quoted in support of the so-called scientific and 'value-free' approach of modern sociology. Typical of what the Western sociologists think and write about Ibn Khaldun is echoed by Howard Becker and Harry Elmer Barnes. In referring to Ibn Khaldun these authors say:

"He possessed an almost completely secular attitude toward the state and in this respect can be compared only to the similarly secularized and diplomatically experienced Machiavelli of almost a century later."

(Social Thought from Lore to Science (New York, 1961), Vol, I, p. 278.) This view appears to be based on the opinion expressed by Erwin Rosenthal (Ibid, p. 278) who came to the conclusion that in Ibn Khaldun there was a separation of state from religious influence, from the supremacy of the church and an untheological, fully secular method of observing political affairs." He further held that Ibn Khaldun "thought in a thoroughly realistic way and did not permit himself to be guided by ethical and metaphysical considerations and unemotionally observed the state as it really is." This is a case of misinterpretation of Ibn Khaldun. The fact that Ibn Khaldun did not say that he was adopting an Islamic perspective in his analysis does not make him or his method secular. There is one important aspect of Ibn Khaldun which appears to have been overlooked. He believed in the principle of revelation (wahy) and revealed knowledge and in the process of prophethood (nubuwwah). He has devoted considerable attention to this revelationed process in his Muqaddimah. In referring to the institution of Prophets and the knowledge that was revealed to them, Ibn Khaldun says:

"The knowledge that God gave these individuals and the wonders He manifested through their statements indicated that there exists things beyond the reach of man that be learned only from God through the mediation of (these individuals) and that (these individual themselves) cannot know unless God instructs them in them" (The Muqaddimah Vol. I., p. 184)

His is the perspective of one who had accepted the validity of revelation and believed that ultimate causality exists in the will of the Creator. In the preamble to his monumental Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldun states in no unmitigated terms that to Allah belongs power and omnipotence, and that it is He who created mankind and caused the structured settlement of society as nations and communities.

In the light of such statements it would be difficult to include Ibn Khaldun in the category of those sociologists who maintain Max Weber's 'value-free' approach.

One of the problems of contemporary sociological thought is that it is not aligned with any particular moral system. Ely Chinoy writes in his Sociological Perspective (p.8) that

"the chief characteristic of both scientific analysis and observation is objectivity. The validity of any conclusion and the reliability of any observation are - or should be - independent of the values and beliefs of the scientist. Two plus two equals four, whether calculated by a Communist, a Catholic, a Moslem or an African witch doctor."

The modern scientific sociology has divested itself of both moral and spiritual value systems constitutes its biggest drawback. Sociologists, it would appear, are not concerned with the development of the "good society": the question of what is good and bad is left to the conscience of the individual as a citizen of the world.

Sociological knowledge and findings about society may lack finality because it is in the nature of social sciences to change its theories from time to time. Although the sociologists accept the principles of constants and variables, they have not yet developed a method of comprehending the essence of those laws. As a result of this lack of finality, sociology has not "unearthed" any new knowledge or value systems which could keep human motivations

in balance and inject a measure of stability into the present day society which often seems to defy the most accurate predictions of the social scientists as a whole. Sociologists and social anthropologists who have worked in Moslem societies have observed 'revelation' at work in these societies and have invariably revised their orthodox sociological perspective of religion as a political or cultural phenomenon.

The concept of the sociology of religion as conceived by sociologists is limited to explaining religion in the light of sociological knowledge. Religion becomes a segment in the wider spectrum of the social system. This approach does not seem to be consistent with the real meanings subsumed under religion at least in Moslem societies. The real issue at stake here is not so much treating religion as an institutional phenomenon capable of social function and organization but the perception of revealed knowledge as a basis of any scientific knowledge which may flow from either society or an individual.

#### Religion and Civilization:

Modern sociologists tend to emphasize that a distinction ought to be between Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilization." In their view "Islam as a religion constitutes not only the divine precepts in the Quran and the reports concerning the divinely inspired actions and utterances of the Prophet Muhammed, the Hadith, but also theological statements generated by the ulamas and other religious thinkers". As a civilization the sociologists conceive of Islam as "consisting of philosophy, scientific knowledge, law, literature, the fine arts, and other products of human creativity." "When Islam is discussed" says a leading sociologist "it is necessary to keep the two manifestations of Islam analytically separate, although their close relationship should never be neglected".

This dichotomy of Islam into a religious system and a civilization is certainly not compatible with the Islamic perspective of either religion or civilization. Muslim scholars have already expressed themselves on this point in no unambiguous terms. In the Islamic perspective Islam is both an aqidah as well as a shariah mutually complementary and indivisible as a totality. What is called the 'Islamic Civilization', therefore,

is the continuous and ever-expanding manifestation of the revealed base.

### Social realities

In developing the theory of 'social realities', sociologists often come to the conclusion that "the social realities manifested by the believers of Islam are not always in accord with the teachings of Islam" and that Islamic expositions never took cognizance of "social realities". This is a gross distortion of realities. Any student of Islamic thought would know that the early Muslim theorists who pioneered the elaboration of the principles and substance of the master - criterion of Islam, the shariah, developed a whole set of subsidiary principles especially so in fiqh to deal with the manifestation of diverse social realities in the great expansion of Islam which embraced adherents born and bred in the social milieu very different from those in the Arabian Peninsular. From the beginning Islamic religious thought concentrated on the problem of the practical social order the order of doing (af'al/a'mal) as it existed in the Islamic community. As Islam expanded beyond the immediate boundaries of the Arabian peninsular, the fugaha found themselves confronted with the problems of custom (urf) and habitual observance (adah) and consequently devised secondary Islamic concepts to surmount these problem. This concern was the immediate result of their interest in the study of concrete social situations - an interest which led to the consideration of the problem of public interest (masalih ammah), of social necessity (darurah) and a number of other secondary principles and rules of Islamic jurisprudence.

### The Islamic Perspective

In Islam the term 'science' or 'ilm (pl. 'ulum) connoted both 'revealed knowledge' and the knowledge that followed from the revealed base. In the Islamic context the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet represented the sources of revealed knowledge. It is essential to bear in mind that neither the Quran nor the Hadith is a work of theology in the sense that theology is a discipline which sets out the rational and philosophic arguments

for belief in God or describes the nature of Divinity. The Quran presents the principles of the world order in a series of concrete Āyāt (Signs) of Allah. The criteria of revealed knowledge does not ask "What is goodness, truth or beauty?" It asserts that an action or thought is good or evil, or just or unjust in particular circumstances.

The revealed sources themselves depict a complete structure of knowledge, faith and practice: it enunciates the principle of the rational criteria in knowledge; it also alludes to the knowledge which brings instant certainty; there is reference to the patterned behaviour of social groups and society. It admits of the principle of constants and variables; but these are not viewed as unrelated entities. This complex conceptual framework is anchored to a value-base. In the Islamic perspective, preoccupation with knowledge is not just an aimless intellectual exercise or mental sport.

Whereas modern Western-oriented sociology does not proceed on the basis of the existence of a body of irreducible value principles, the Islamic scientist conversant with revealed knowledge not only recognizes them but endeavours to identify them in the individual and group behaviour of people. The central characteristic of this body of revealed knowledge is that there is a finality in the meanings and ends it sets out. The endeavour of the human mind in grasping the complex organization of knowledge enunciated in the revealed sources led to the formal exposition of the 'sciences' of the revealed knowledge in the form of the 'ūlūm al-Qurān' (the science of the Qurān) and the 'ūlūm al-Hadīth' (the science of the Hadīth). These constitute the nucleus of what may be called the 'ūlūm al-wahy or 'the sciences of the revelation'.

It fell to the lot of the Muslim scholars to evolve a methodology to reduce the terms of this revealed knowledge into mutually complementary systems which dealt with and conceptualized a wide range of material relating to all aspects of human behaviour patterns and relations.

The province of what is called fiqh dealt with everything which would interest a sociologist of today. Whereas the science of fiqh represented the product of a process of conceptualizing and structuring the aspects of the revealed knowledge which dealt with the laws of human behaviour and the social co-relates



arising from it, the science usūl-al-fiqh and the qawa'id al-fiqh (rules of positive law) set out the rational constructs which furnished the tools of scientific analysis and deduction in the elaboration of the substance of the Islamic fiqh; the term fiqh literally means 'insight' or 'understanding' but does not connote the sense of 'Verstehen' used in sociological literature, but represents a process of understanding and processing the material of the revealed knowledge. The entire range of processed data concerning society and group behaviour contained in the countless works of fiqh is excellent material for those interested in the study of society. It is indeed a pity that Muslim sociologists have not given to fiqh the attention it deserves in the pursuit of sociological knowledge.

It might not be correct to say that the study of the social system in Muslim society began with Ibn Khaldun; he developed a different perspective in the analysis of the world Muslim community as a prelude to his voluminous work on the history of the Muslim people. Long before he was born, the Muslim fugaha had engaged themselves in the study and observation of the Muslim society for with the rapid political expansion of Islam and the emergence of the international Muslim community, the study and examination of the practical problems of the Muslim society and the state, human relations, political, cultural and economic institutions, individual behaviour and group behaviour made the most urgent demand on the intellectual resources of the Muslim community. From the early times Muslim scholars had endeavoured to develop a series of perspectives in which they endeavoured to capture the conclusions of the revealed knowledge through a process of analysis and observation. The works of fiqh as developed in the different mazhabs coupled with the other works of individual scholars like Ābū Hanifah, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Taimiyah, Al-Ghazali, Ash-Sharani and a host of others, including modern scholars like Hasan al-Banna, Maududi and others represent contributions of enormous interest to any student of society.

I would like to single out Al-Ghazali for brief reference in this connection. He conceptualized the study and observation of human behaviour patterns - collectively described as 'a'māl - identifying a category called 'external behaviour' and another called 'internal behaviour'. The originality of his contribution lay in the fact that he based his observation on

methods consistent with the revealed criteria. He saw an essential connection between the empirically observable world the ālam ash-shahādah and the supra-empirical world the ālam al-malakut. (See his Kitāb al-Arba'īn fī Usūl al-Dīn (Cairo, 1344 A.H.), pp. 2, 27.) In determining, therefore, the materials and data before him, he employed a measurement-technique which was capable of identifying the reality posited in the revealed knowledge.

If modern sociological thought and methods are Islamicised to the extent that it is brought in line with the revealed principles, it might perhaps cease to be the science of sociology which is now being taught in the major universities of the world. This is a challenge to the proponents of modern sociology as much as to the Muslim social scientists.

Despite the resistance of the Muslim mind to accept the basic premises of modern sociology or the qualified support given to it by other Muslim scholars, the disciplines of the 'social sciences' have seen rapid expansion in the curricula of the major universities in the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia where an entire Faculty of Social Sciences<sup>1</sup> has been in existence for sometime now. The challenge has, therefore, been flung at the very doorstep calling for a careful and critical appraisal of the methods and ends of the social scientific disciplines of which sociology occupies a central place. It would certainly be to the good of sociology that it be subjected to the searching examination of the Islamic thought-world, and allowed the test of survival within the framework of the revealed criteria of Islam.

The history of the expansion of Islamic thought is a clear testimony to the assimilative and the creative capacity of those Muslim savants who had understood the first principles of the revealed knowledge and had observed its operation in the Community of believers. The present generation of Muslims too are confronted with new challenges, the vast expansion of knowledge in the modern era in the natural and social sciences, which call for the same vigilance and intellectual exertion as displayed by the earlier generation of Muslim scholars in the utilization of the potential of knowledge and the powers of observation to communicate the explicit and implicit organization of thought and behaviour enshrined in the revealed sources of Islam.

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1. In the University of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud in Riyadh.