

Levels of Knowledge and Interculturation:  
Implications for Development and for the Islamization of Knowledge

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## **Abstract**

This paper develops a classificatory scheme of knowledge output: the philosophy level, the theory level, the model level, and the application level. I will use this scheme to illuminate on four, seemingly unrelated, issues: 1) While development is frequently seen as a mechanical process of low level structuration or cultururation, this paper argues that it involves philosophical dimensions too. 2) Development involves drawing on the products of “advanced” nations. Using the suggested scheme shows that this is possible only at the lower levels of knowledge. 3) Sustained development requires first a theoretical base built along the lines of the Islamization of Knowledge logic. And 4) The concept of the Islamization of Knowledge is misinterpreted by casual readers as an outright rejection of modern “scientific” output. This paper argues that the Islamization of Knowledge is a digestive process that calls for the interaction of world cultures guided by a specific philosophical prism.

If the title of this paper sounds confusing, then it is my duty to show that “development” is not a mundane practice that has no relation to philosophy, and that what is known as the Islamization of Knowledge is not an “armed-chair” discourse that has no bearing to reality.\* And Since my duty is to solve a puzzle, some degree of simplification is inevitable. I apologize for the highly learned reader for treating an abstract subject at the level of concrete examples.

## The Four Levels of Knowledge

When we examine the academic corpus we can discern at least four levels of knowledge product, which I will define as follows: (1) the philosophy level, (2) the theory level, (3) the model level, and (4) the application level. It is my contention that most of the misunderstanding of development and of the Islamization of Knowledge is due to the mixing between these four levels. Discourse will be only meaningful when participants agree on the scope of the discussed subject matter. The *philosophy* level is concerned with the framework of knowledge, with the way knowledge could be reached, with the goals of knowledge, and with the grand view of “man” and his mission in life. Knowledge, at the *theory* level, takes for-granted a certain view of the world and proposes certain relationships between the elements of this worldview. On the other hand The *model* level is an extraction of a theory; it is theory-specified. And finally, the *application* level is the model level applied in reality, focusing on elements and factors relevant to day-to-day operations.

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\* I am using the term Islamization of Knowledge because of its popular use, although I think that it is confusing, inaccurate, and misleading.

Table 1. presents examples of the four levels of knowledge production, some of which I will discuss here. To make the exposition more elaborate, I will start with examples from the physical sciences then I will move to examples from social sciences. Take for example “computer science” as a field of inquiry. At the philosophical level, computer science is reflected in the concept of “progress” as it relates to tool utilization. Some relevant questions at this level are: Why do we need computers? What are the priorities in their applications? Should the computer science field address industrial problems and explore how to produce more of comfort goods, or should it focus on agricultural problems? Should it orient itself to facilitate outer space exploration, environment preservation, or business applications? In what ways do computer applications affect how humans think? To what extent should machines dictate our choices in life, and where to draw the line beyond which we say that “machines are driving humans”? Obviously, such philosophical questions are shared by many other hard core physical sciences.

**Table 1. Levels of Knowledge**

	<b>Social Sciences</b>	<b>Physical Science</b>	<b>Communism</b>	<b>Capitalism</b>	<b>The Islamic Experience</b>
<b>Philosophy Level</b>	Civilizational type Paradigm	Habitat; Sustenance; Progress; Technocracy Human dignity	Conflict Hegelism	Pragmatism /utilitarianism Dewey; Hume	Khilafa Tawhidic episteme
<b>Theory Level</b>	Culture	System analysis Design; Eco study Preserving life	Marxism “class”	Adam Smith “the invisible hand”	Succession to the most-devout/less-devout Maqasid (goals of sharia)
<b>Model Level</b>	Customs	Flow chart Specifications Medical approach: chemical, Chinese, spiritual	Linenism	Republican-ism	Mu’awiya/Ibn Zubiari models of government Fiqh
<b>Application Level</b>	Behavior/ Action	Programming (coding) Maps Medicine	USSR government. system	USA government system	The Umayyad palace Fatwa

The *theory* level is reflected in what is known in computer science as “system analysis.” At this level the programmer defines the overall flow of information, the command structure, and the relationships among the different units or elements of the specified universe. The *model* level corresponds to the “flow chart” phase, where different programmers design different solutions to the problem specified in the above level. And finally, the *application* level is reflected in the act of programming and “coding,” using a certain programming language. A similar analogy could be constructed for the science of architecture, where the *theory* level corresponds to the “design” phase of a project; the *model* level is reflected in writing the “specification,” and the *application* level is reflected in the actual “maps” that are drawn. The *philosophical* level in architecture focuses on the concept of “shelter” and what does it mean in different civilizational contexts—is it, for example, mere physical comfort or something else too? There will be more discussion of this example below.

The purpose of the above examples is to show that the four levels of knowledge are observable even in, seemingly, “neutral” sciences. Saying that, then it is not a far fetched idea to say that knowledge production in general, and in social science in particular, is reflected on different levels which dictates different possibilities for interculturalization. Drawing on examples from social sciences, we may say that capitalism is reflected in utilitarianism and pragmatism at the *philosophy* level (the level of Hume and Dewey’s writings); it is reflected in the concept of the “invisible hand” at the level of *theory*; it is reflected in Taylor’s principles of management at the level of *model*; and finally, at the *application* level it is reflected in the United State’s system (versus the European system, for example, both of which capitalists systems). Communism is

reflected at the philosophical level in Hegelism; at the level of *theory* it is reflected in Marxism or in the concepts of “class” or “surplus value”; on the level of *model* it is reflected in Leninism (a but one version of Marxism); and at the level of *application* it is reflected in the late USSR as a governance system.

From the Islamic experience, we can consider the concept of *khilafa* as a reflection of the philosophy level. Within this conception man’s duty on earth is to fulfill Allah’s will. It is neither the pursue of happiness (although that could be subsumed in different ways under the concept of Khilafa), nor is it the annihilation of material world for the service of mysterious cosmos forces. At the *theory* level we can point to the concept of *distributive-justice* versus *opportunity-justice*. That is, should the Islamic authority aim at maximum equality among all people, or is it enough to allow for equal opportunities despite that it might lead to considerable inequalities? Also, at this level we can talk about the concept of *succession of the devout/less-devout* (*wilayat al afdal* versus *wilayat al mafdul*) as it is known in Islamic jurisprudence. At the *model* level we have the model of *Ibn al Zubair* and that of *Mu’awiya*, both of which sought political stability in time of turbulence. The *application* level corresponds to the Umayyad Palace as concrete policies and way of governance. Finally, we can take *sharia*’ as an example (defined here as Islamic laws). There is “fatwa” at the level of *application*, superseded by “fiqh” at the *model* level, superseded by “maqasid” at the *theory* level, and superseded by the “tawhidic episteme” at the *philosophy* level.

It should be noted here that the same philosophy could generate more than one theory, and there could be more than one model that stems from a theory, and there could be more than one application that operationalizes a model. Also note, that in the example

of *sharia*’ I used the word “superseded” to stress that lower-level knowledge is always embedded in upper-level knowledge. In other words, *fatwa* necessarily draws on *fiqh*, and it is not a matter of personal opinion of an *alim*. Similarly, *fiqh* are rules formed to serve *maqasid* (goals of *sharia*’), and *maqasid* are embedded in the framework of *tawhid*.

The point so far discussed is that every form of knowledge could be located in the suggested classificatory scheme, and that these four levels are interrelated. I will argue below that depending on what form of knowledge-product you are talking about, Islamization of Knowledge becomes more or less relevant, and interculturalization becomes more or less comprehensible.

## Modern Knowledge and Neutrality

Neutrality of knowledge is comprehensible only at the lower levels of knowledge products. We may say that the specification of a building is neutral (application level). To a great extent that is true: material has certain strength-resistance to temperature, for example; or if you use certain type of home appliances you need to meet certain requirements in the wiring. Also, neutrality is comprehensible to some extent at the level of *model*. You can say that a certain model of building is transferable from one region to another. For example, homes made out of wood could be a model that fits California as well as Morocco. The question at the level of model is not that of neutrality as much as a question of suitability. For instance, if soil and weather conditions are very different between these two locations, the adoption of a model becomes useless. That is also true if the material for building such a model is not available, or if the labor in one location is skilled in building according to a different model of construction. In other words, at the model level some kinds of emulation could be meaningful but copying and blind

emulation are fruitless. It should be clear so far that there is a wide range of flexibility at the lower- levels of knowledge (the *application* and the *model* levels), but the matter is different at the upper-levels of knowledge (the *philosophy* and the *theory*).

It is rather understandable that the design of a home (the theory level) is related to the customs of the people who will live in it. It is intimately related to the way society structures its kinship relations for example. Visitation among relatives relates strongly to how homes are designed and where they are located. The grand design of city-planning is definitely a theoretical matter: Should every neighborhood include some affordable housing, or should the city have some upscale areas and others for low-cost housing? The Islamic historical experience was that the poor of the cities lived among the well-to-do; cooperation and welfare was partially facilitated through this kind of arrangement. The point is that these are *theoretical* positions; “neutrality” is not comprehensible at this level.

The matter of home architecture is equally crucial at the philosophy level. At this level the issue does not become merely a “home” but what we mean by home. Is tranquillity (*sakan*) is a basic ingredient in the concept of “home,” or is it a matter of mere physical shelter? What constitutes beauty, dignity, and humbleness in home building? Obviously, at this level neutrality is not comprehensible. Note however, that the point is not that neutrality is not possible because of prejudice or human bias; the question of neutrality itself is not comprehensible precisely because we are talking on a level where preferences have already been established. The social universe contains many elements, and in a specific theory only certain elements are considered “relevant” and tagged as important. Why do only certain elements get selected and others

considered undesirable, pathologic, or irrelevant is exactly decided by an embodied worldview.

The problem that faces many beginners in acquiring knowledge is that the philosophical basis of knowledge is mostly implied and hidden in knowledge output. The American academia, in particular, is unfriendly, if not hostile, to philosophical questions. Interestingly, this American “evasion of philosophy” is in itself philosophically driven; i.e. it is a reflection of pragmatism as a dominant philosophy in the American academia.

The call for Islamization of Knowledge is concerned primarily with the philosophical level, and has only some contributions on the level of theory. Whether one agrees or not with its views, one cannot expect an answer from the Islamization of knowledge to specific applications, or even specific models. The standard answer of any reformative thought (whether Islamic or not) to such class of questions is a dismissal. Interestingly, this inability to give an answer is exactly what obscures it in the eyes of the public (the public here is the average person in the academia). Whether it is a question on practical women issues or on democracy as a majoritarian concept, the reply of the Islamization of knowledge is a non-answer. That is because the interest of the Islamization of knowledge in the women issue is the social system, not the daily irritants. The focus of the Islamization of Knowledge in the second issue is “liberal democracy” as a system of thought that defines sovereignty and ultimate authority.

## The Possibility of Interculturation

The issue of taking advantage of the accumulated and available scientific knowledge is rather straight forward at the lower levels of knowledge. You have a specific problem and there is a known workable solution, then you can use the same tool

to solve your problem. That is sound as far as the definition of the problem is correct, otherwise it is like using a good medicine for the wrong disease. Not only it does not cure the disease, it may cause damage. Put it in other words, the definition of a problem is philosophically and theoretically determined. Once defined, then there is a fair chance to use a model from another system; and if the model deemed to be consistent with one's own theory, then applications can be liberally borrowed.

Thus far, I argued that both applications and models are adaptable. However, they serve their purpose only when they are consistent with the theoretical and philosophical basis of a society. Obviously, adopting knowledge at the level of philosophy or theory is possible—we talk then about civilizational and cultural change. The problematique that this paper is trying to comment on is not whether a nation can adopt communism, for example, but whether adopting some of its applications and models without its philosophy and theory is possible. It is rather clear that accepting knowledge on the upper two levels necessitates accepting its products at the two lower levels in order not to reinvent the wheel—if you accept the origins of a knowledge, why not accept its hard-won products? What is not clear, however, is whether adopting knowledge at the two lower-levels is possible without adopting the higher levels. And the answer that this paper suggests is the affirmative, but a conditional one. Adopting knowledge-product of the lower levels is favorable only if it is consistent with the host upper level knowledge, as the examples have shown.

But in reality, models carry the genes of their theories. Thus, only at the application level, cultivation is possible with minimum difficulties. The human history is full of examples of successful diffusions of applications. In fact the opposite is what is

hard to achieve: it is hard to prevent the diffusion at the level of applications. Then, the critical issue that remains is interculturalism at the level of model: Is “safe” cultivation possible at this level or not? The position of this paper is a middle-road. That is, while fitting a foreign model to an indigenous theoretical level is rarely easy, foreign models should be the object of contemplation. Recognizing that models carry the soul of their civilizations should not prevent from their examination. On the contrary, they can serve as examples that help in building original models. And at this point different strands of reformative thought differ. Some, pressured by the urgent demands of reality, apt toward adapting models by modifying them. Other, more original, apt toward designing their own models with an eye on models from other civilizations. If we take the example of democracy again, the techniques of managing voting procedures are at the level of *application* and are the easiest to adopt. When it comes to *models* and how to carve districts and insure fair representation for different social strata and ethnic groups, the issue becomes entangling. And while closing the eye and out-rejecting existing models is an inexcusable stubbornness, blindly adopting and hastily embracing models may prove to carry the seeds of its failure.

To summarize the argument so far, there is no escape from forming a crystal clear philosophical and theoretical stance for every issue, problem, or solution, whether it is in the realm of development or otherwise. Once this upper-level of knowledge is constructed and defined, then we can speak of models and applications, which must have a place in the upper-level design if they were to be considered for adoption. Applications are the most readily exchangeable, and models are points of examination. Finally, it is

the duty of the Muslim academician to settle the issue on the theoretical level first to be able to insightfully benefit from knowledge-product of others.

## Development and Interculturation

A developmental question is often put in something like this: “Why don’t underdeveloped countries follow the example of those who have succeeded.” As naive as it is, many arguments about development implies such an argument. Even after *Modernization Theory* has long been discredited, its compelling superficiality surfaces in the deep logic of many arguments. In this section of the paper one notion is stressed: development is a process that is philosophically related. If this notion is established, then what has been said before about knowledge exchange applies to development too.

Kamakahi and Heather-Jo (1994) suggest that there are four orientations in the theories of international development: demographic, commodity, resource, and political (see Table 2). The *demographic* orientation focuses on variables such as population sizes and rates of growth, urban and rural distribution, and literacy rates. The *commodity* approach looks for anything that can be exchanged in a market regardless of its intrinsic value. This orientation is consonant with *egoistic utilitarianism* since the developmental position of countries are defined solely in terms of their own actions which facilitate the use of “things,” and where the “invisible hand” of the market is in itself a mark of development. The *resource* orientation focuses on the planned utilization of commodities and resources. The problematic here is the very allocation and uses of resources, and thus the philosophical foundation of such an orientation could be called *rationalist utilitarianism*. Finally is the *political* orientation in international development, in which

egalitarian practices in a nation are the central concern; *humanism* then could be adequately said to be its philosophical foundation.

**Table 2. Metatheory and International development**

<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Philosophical Foundation</i>
Demographic	Population, Health, Cultural & behavioral practices	Materialism
Commodity	Anything that can be exchanged in a market	Egoistic Utilitarianism
Resource	Limitations in natural and/or human resources	Rationalist Utilitarianism
Political	Civil liberties, Legal status, State organization, Social benefits	Humanism

\* Adopted from Kamakahi, Jeffrey J. and Heather-Jo Hammer. "Metatheory, Models, and Policy." *Paper presented at the ASA 1994*. Los Angeles.

The above summarization of schools of international development and their philosophical foundations exactly highlights the problematic that this paper tries to address: knowledge output can be classified into different levels, one of which is philosophical. Then we are faced with the question of which of the four developmental orientations should we pick, if any. Once we engage in such a discussion, it becomes clear that there are philosophical issues or options that have to be settled first. The role of the Islamization of Knowledge is exactly giving answers at this level.

## Spheres of Focus

There are always people who are not interested in theoretical matters at all. That is understandable and excusable as far as they recognize that they are working in a certain theoretical space congruent with the nature of their civilization. Nothing more regretful than application-oriented discussions that accuse metatheoretical thinking of being irrelevant and a waste of time. Application-oriented focus should not fail to be cognizant

that whatever it does has a theory and a philosophy in the background. What is called “practical” actions are not, and could not, be neutral.

What is undesirable, I agree, is to restrict our whole academic activity to the philosophical level. Indeed, knowledge production on the level of theory has to build on the elaborated philosophical foundations. The “Islamized” knowledge is simply that which brings to the level of academic consciousness the broad goals of Islam in constructing a theory. As for the developmental orientations discussed above (the *theory* level in my scheme) the Islamic perspective could be one of the discussed four, none of them, or a mixture of all of them plus additional elements.\* The scope and purpose of the this paper does not allow any elaboration on what are those “Islamic” developmental elements. However, I like to note here that the very comprehensiveness of Islam necessitates that its view deals with the elements covered in the four developmental orientations, and other elements too. Consequently, Islamization of Knowledge could not mean an outright rejection of “modern” science. What concerns the Islamization of Knowledge is the relevance of the included elements, their properties, the interaction among them, and their relative weights. Moreover, the concern of the Islamic perceptive is the very conceptualization of elements, where some factors become non-factors, subsumed and dissolved in a different environment which alter their very nature.

Once this upper-level of knowledge is established, then *models* (in this paper’s terminology) could be built. At this level, a closer look at knowledge developed by other civilizations is indispensable, for they are objects of contemplation and lesson drawing. The nature of models gives them more of a temporal status than the upper-levels of

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\* I appologize again for such simplificaiton.

knowledge. Thus, neither model developers should be fixed on their models nor theory dignitaries should be impatient with the impurity of models. I suggest that the Islamic scholarship has accumulated enough of upper-level knowledge of which reformers and Muslim specialists can try to build upon. That is, contemporary Islamic scholarship has provided basic postulates that, although dispersed and not formalized, is viable enough, at least temporarily, to anchor research projects. Put differently, there is no justification any more to pursue research that is not anchored to an Islamic worldview, then try to “fix” it with some qualifications, only to result in end products that do not work and that obscure both the host and the receiving frameworks.

## Conclusion

I argued in this paper that knowledge could be classified into four levels from the most abstract to the most applied. Using this classification as a heuristic device allows us to draw a clear view of the process of interculturalization among different civilization. Thus, while the nature of the upper-levels of knowledge, philosophy and theory, make them close to be mutually exclusive, the lower-levels of knowledge are more adaptable and more prone to civilizational exchange. The paper illustrated the classificatory scheme through two subjects: international development and the Islamization of Knowledge. The paper argued that a sustained development necessarily needs a solid theoretical framework, which, in the case of Muslim countries, has to be Islamically informed. On the other hand, I argued that what is known as the Islamization of Knowledge (mostly an obscured concept for many reasons, not the least the choice of the term itself) is not more than an academic activity on the upper-levels of knowledge. Finally, the paper touched on the point that these four levels of knowledge production are interrelated and affect

each other. The implication is that any lack of work at any level negatively reflects on the growth in other levels.

Maintaining the spirit of this paper I wish to conclude with a “convincing” example from a children’s movie. *Pocahontas*, a Disney film, tells the story of early Englishmen sailing to America searching for gold, cutting trees and disturbing nature. The young Indian girl responds to the expedition’s leader in the following song:

You think you own what ever land you land on;  
The earth is just a dead thing that you can claim.  
But I know every rock and tree and creature;  
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name.

Young children are exposed to philosophical positions through films. The famous Indian chief’s wisdom: “Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to earth,” is a philosophical statement that is full of developmental implications. It is not too much for an Islamic view to have one.

## References

Kamakahi, Jeffrey J. and Heather-Jo Hammer. 1994. "Metatheory, Models, and Policy." *Paper presented at the ASA 1994, Los Angeles*