Thought Paper No. 2

More Critical Thinkers for Islamic Governance¹

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Critical thinking is often misunderstood negatively as the unending pursuit of faults for criticism. Rather, it is a performative practice to develop critical judgements and produce impactful outcomes. It goes beyond higher-order thinking skills to also include strong commitments to one's core belief and purpose.⁴ Additionally, critical thinking is not confined to personal achievements, but also the collective drawing upon group criticality to reap abundant societal benefits. Muslim minds require such criticality, but socio-religious taboos surrounding the notion may hinder, as it is often associated with dissent and heresy. As such, the education system may not promote critical thinking and thus leads to backwardness. This is the current situation faced by many Muslim societies. Such misconceptions need to be addressed. Critical thinking has been discussed by Muslim and Western secular scholars for centuries, however, its necessity is arguably more important today than ever before. With the lack of advanced Muslim polymaths, as seen in older generations, and the increasingly sophisticated nature of various fields, Muslims require the knowledge and confidence to undergo such way of thinking, not as an end but a means to achieve the Maqāṣid or objectives of the Sharī'ah.⁵ In this paper, we will first argue that the inclusion of critical thinking is a religious obligation. Then, we propose that the foundation of these skills must form within early religious

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⁴ Sharon Bailin, Roland Case, Jerrold R. Coombs, and Leroi B. Daniels, "Common Misconceptions of Critical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): pp. 269–283.

⁵ Temporal or worldly success is not only a want or need for mortal humans, but a religiously-grounded necessity through the Maqāṣid of the Sharī'ah. The Maqāṣid are the objectives of the Sharī'ah, in other words, they are objectives derived from the Qur'an itself intended towards creating an environment conducive to the worship of Allah; the main purpose of humanity. These objectives are the preservation and promotion of faith, life, intellect, progeny and wealth; all of these goals must be achieved in order to create such a state of worship. One important aspect to note here is that none of these objectives are mutually exclusive, meaning all objectives possess a relationship with one another.

education to complement the existing rote-learning methods of learning. We conclude with a call for more critical thinkers for the Islamic system of governance.

Islamic Critical Thinking Framework

Critical thinking is ingrained in Islam, with numerous Qur'ānic verses and prophetic aḥadīth laying importance to seeking beneficial knowledge in order to ﴿enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong﴾¹. Polymaths such as Imam al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn 'Arabī and al-Suyūṭī were excellent critico-creative thinkers, masters of multiple disciplines, ranging from mathematics, physics, alchemy, and medicine to dialectics, philosophy and political science. They were proficient in synthesising diverse knowledge to provide innovative solutions to the Muslim Ummah. The tradition continued with many contemporary Muslims scholars, particularly within the reformist and revivalist movements,² calling for critical thoughts and dialogues for true progress. At a point in time, these pioneers came to address the toxic West-East dualism. However, with the rise of Eastern powerhouses (China, Korea, Japan and so on) and seamless technological connectivity and advancement, the world of imaginaries has expanded with a vigorous profusion of ideas and worldviews, resulting in many emerging issues. Muslims are then required to exercise critical thinking to help with performative navigations among the plethora of imaginaries, make wise decisions prudent for any particular situation, and still holding (firmly to the ropes of Allah.)³ Critical thinking is not a modern Western invention but can be traced back to Socrates and many other historic thinkers. However, the Islamic scholarship has its own robust intellectual traditions, placing critical thinking within all available means of knowing “from sensual knowledge, reason, intellection and the knowledge of the heart.”⁴ Beyond the intellectual facility, critical thinking also involves the dialectic interaction between the inner authentic self and the wider society.⁵ Hence, an Islamically-oriented, critical thinking analytical framework not only entails the methodological examination of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, but also the wisdom of the 'Ulamā throughout the Muslim history, the sourcing of expert opinions in certain fields,⁶ and extensive consideration of social benefits and local customs. Only then performative criticality can manifest through the application of critical thinking to address emerging issues, resulting in substantiation of personal and societal justice.

Critical Thinking for Global Competitiveness

¹ Surah Ali-'imran: 110

² See Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and reform in Islam* (London: Oneworld Publications, 1999).

³ Surah Ali-'Imran 3:103

⁴ Syed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006): 95.

⁵ Yedullah Kazmi, “Historical consciousness and the notion of the Authentic self in the Qur'an: Towards an Islamic critical theory,” *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 375-398.

⁶ Surah al-Baqarah: 269

A good case to examine criticality is Brunei's implementation of the Syariah Penal Code Order on April 2019, where the country received international 'backlash,' framed for breaching 'international human rights norms' by two United Nation agencies.¹ In response, Brunei affirmed her commitment internationally in promoting and protecting human rights, followed by her mandatory review at the United Nation Human Rights Council in May. The result is that 90% of the countries spoke praised of Brunei's many signs of progress.² The Prime Minister of Brunei even ensured not only the citizen but also the global community, that the Sharī'ah law is "...full of Allah the Almighty's mercy and blessings."³ Arguably, Brunei's performative implementation of a dual legal system – the Sharī'ah and the British common law – is her natural development as an Islamic state to further establish societal justice for her citizens.⁴ This is Islamic criticality. Of course, there are other Muslim voices 'critical' against the implementation, especially from those coming from different socio-political and socio-culture contexts.^{5,6} The worth of these can be examined against the Islamic critical thinking framework in manifesting social justice.⁷

Indeed, there are many more cases of critical thinking within the framework of Islamic governance and applied to contemporary issues. In the field of bioethics, some scholars may regard the aesthetic changes to the creations of Allah as unlawful. However, the status of cosmetic surgery is ambiguous: it is detested due to exaggeration and extremism in one's physical outlook and is permissible to address critical health issues.⁸ We can also see the application of the Islamic worldview in economics, where profit-centred capitalism is left unchallenged since the decline of the Soviet Union. Instead of succumbing to general trends of deregulation and privatisation of the West, or even

¹ UN News, "UN agencies urge Brunei to repeal new 'extreme and unjustified' penal code," April 4, 2019. Available online: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/04/1036121> (accessed on 5 April 2020).

² UN Watch, "Brunei praised in UN Human Rights review despite new stoning of gays penal code," May 10, 2019. Available at: <https://unwatch.org/brunei-praised-in-un-human-rights-review-despite-new-stoning-of-gays-penal-code/> (accessed on 5 April 2020).

³ Hakim Hayat, "MoFA shoots down UN criticism of Syariah Penal Code Order," *Borneo Bulletin*, April 14, 2019. Available at: <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/mofa-shoots-down-un-criticism-of-syariah-penal-code-order/> (accessed on 5 April 2020).

⁴ Historically, old Brunei used two legal scripts: 'Hukum Kanun' (Canon Law) and 'Undang-undang dan Adat Brunei Lama' (Old Brunei Law and Custom), derived from Islamic teachings and local customs. These has been used even during the British interventions in early 20th century, however constrained

⁵ Zack Budryk, "Omar introduces bill sanctioning Brunei over anti-homosexuality law," *The Hill*, May 16, 2019. Available at: <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/444120-omar-introduces-bill-sanctioning-brunei-over-anti-homosexuality-law> (accessed on 4 July 2020).

⁶ Mehdi Hasan, "Stoning Gay People to Death in Brunei is an Outrage and Not My Definition of Islam," *The Intercept*, April 9, 2019. Available at: <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/09/brunei-stoning-gay-sex-anti-lgbt-law/> (accessed on 4 July 2020).

⁷ Islamic Insight, 'Mehdi Hasan, Brunei and His Problem with Islamic law.' Available at: <https://www.islamicinsights.com/news/community/mehdi-hasan-brunei-and-his-problem-with-islamic-law.html> (accessed on 4 July 2020).

⁸ Bishara Atiyeh, Mohamed Kadry, Shady Hayek, and Ramzi Moucharafieh, "Aesthetic surgery and religion: Islamic law perspective," *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 32, no. 1 (2008)

employing planned economies such as in the Far East, Muslims can gain their independent solution that revolves around their faith and context.¹ Another would be the inclusion of Islamic values of equity and compassion to public policies, which would result in a more empathetic and just society.² For corporate social responsibility, adopting the lens of the Maqāṣid of the Sharī'ah as the organisational strategic objectives have the capacity to consider not only corporate profitability, but also holistic community development, climate change, and a sustainable business model.³ Employees within would also be religiously motivated, hence an increase in productivity, with the inclusion of Islamic universal values.⁴ Even in one's personal affairs, the ability to weight pieces of evidence, evaluate statements, and come to wise decisions will help realise happiness in life. Indeed, there are many benefits to exercising Islamic critical thinking.

Developing Criticality from Early Religious Education

Education is key to developing critical thinking. Many contemporary Islamic religious educations continue a culture of conveying information through rote learning, where students are dependent on teachers to provide information and materials, consistent with many other Asian cultures.⁵ An example would be the Bruneian approaches to teaching '*amali*, focusing on the recitation and recollection of *zīkr* (remembrance), and is not subject to much change. This mode for retention and regurgitation does have its positives, such as for habit-forming and technical fields, relevant for novices. However, a Muslim's worldly obligations extend to other responsibilities, such as environmental preservation, urban planning, and corporate organisation. These tasks require more than rote, into higher-order learning and thinking. This is why Islamic religious education should also incorporate the development of critical thinking. Additionally, once formal early religious education is concluded, many, if not most, Muslims undergo continual information loss as newer information take precedence, the majority coming from non-Islamic subjects. Their religious reference in later years is mainly informed through social or independent contributions. This all leads to the necessity of a more all-rounded mode of thinking that they can employ, consequently making them competent, relevant, and trustworthy to implement religiously motivated and Islamically considered solutions in a world dominated by non-Islamic, or even non-religious, alternatives.

¹ Khurshid Ahmad, "The Challenge of Global Capitalism: An Islamic Perspective", in *Making Globalization Good: The Moral Challenges of Global Capitalism*, ed. John H. Dunning (Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Basma I. Abdelgafar, *Public Policy: Beyond Traditional Jurisprudence: A Maqasid Approach* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2018)

³ Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki and Nurdianawati Irwani Abdullah, "Maqasid al-Shariah, Maslahah, and corporate social responsibility," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 24, no. 1 (2007): 25

⁴ Omar K. Bhatti, Uzma S. Aslam, Arif Hassan, and Mohamed Sulaiman, "Employee motivation an Islamic perspective," *Humanomics* (2016)

⁵ Chee Yen Raymond Loh and Teck Choon Teo, "Understanding Asian Students Learning Styles, Cultural Influence and Learning Strategies," *Journal of Education & Social Policy* 7, no. 1 (2017): 194-195

To develop such quality in thinking, there have been many research centres and teaching institutions developing their own curricula and methods of assessment. Pearson's RED Critical Thinking Model is another, focusing on Recognising assumptions, Evaluating arguments, and Draw conclusions, with the goal of enhancing strategic thinking and decision-making for businesses.¹ There are also multiple assessments developed, either based on recognition (e.g. Cornell Critical Thinking Test), recall (Watson–Glaser II Critical Thinking Appraisal), or both (e.g. Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment).² However, after using a wide variety of critical thinking assessment methods on their students from 1990 to 2009, Hatcher concluded that critical thinking – the attempt to “arrive at a judgement only after honestly evaluating alternatives with respect to available evidence and arguments” – is “only a dream.”³ This is due to over-reliance on rationality in the decision-making process, and their neglect of the role of values, emotions and intuitions. There are Critical Thinking Competency Standards, posited to be universal and more holistic as it takes consideration of additional factors on top of the cognitive ability.⁴ The standards include developing virtues (e.g. humility, courage, empathy, integrity), reasoning capabilities (e.g. awareness of differing point of views), and various learning skills (e.g. reading, writing, asking essential questions). The Standards offer a more holistic developmental agenda, not only focusing on intellectual virtues, but also other virtues necessary to develop critical judgements and produce impactful outcomes.

These models and standards complement the Islamic critical thinking framework, necessarily striking the balance between developing the critical head, the virtuous heart and the skilful hand. Imam al-Ghazali advised that although the sciences and critical thinking are important, purifying the spiritual heart is equally imperative.⁵ This is because the heart is the king of the body, making moral decisions with the assistance of the head and hands, towards fulfilling one's purpose. This kingship is evident in the following ḥadīth:

The Prophet ﷺ said to a man who approached him. “You have come to ask about righteousness? Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favour].”

¹ Judt Chartrand, Heather Ishikaw and Scott Flander, “Critical Thinking Means Business: Learn to Apply and Develop the NEW #1 Workplace Skill,” *Pearson Education* (2009). Available at: <https://talentlens.in/PDF/Critical-Thinking-Means-Business.pdf> (accessed on 7 August 2020).

² Heather A. Butler, “Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment predicts real-world outcomes of critical thinking,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 26, no. 5 (2012): 721-729

³ Donald Hatcher, “Critical thinking instruction: A realistic evaluation the dream vs. reality,” *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 30, no. 3 (2015): 4-19

⁴ Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *A Guide for Educators to Critical Thinking Competency Standards: Standards, Principles, Performance Indicators, and Outcomes with a Critical Thinking Master Rubric*. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)

⁵ al-Ghazali, “*Aja'ib Al-Qalb* (Wonders of the Heart),” in *Ihya Ulum Al-Din* (Revival of the Religious Science) ed. Walter James Skellie (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2007): 41-4

Consideration needs to also be given to age, as it is an important factor in developing criticality. At a young age, the spiritual heart is not fully developed, thus unable to comprehend certain subjects in greater depth.¹ Thus, rote learning that is prevalent in Asian cultures is a necessary process. But as one grows older, the development of criticality is imperative as outlined above. These can be operationalised in higher education institutions and organisational settings by incorporating Islamicity, as well as religiosity, within the curricula and training programmes respectively. Necessarily, additional standards need to be in place on top of the prevalence of rote learning: develop the ability to read and understand the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth, cultivate awareness of the Maqāṣid of the Sharī'ah, purify one's spiritual heart with the inculcation of virtues, study extensively with reliable sources of knowledge in relevant fields, update skill-sets to use cutting-edge technology, examine critically the societal and environmental conditions, and interact ethically with the outside world. Doing so would potentially generate transformative solutions to address personal and societal problems, thus substantiate justice on both levels.

Conclusion

We have presented the compatibility of critical thinking with Islamic systems of governance and its potential in global competitiveness. We call for an enhancement to the quality of education beyond rote learning to include higher-order learning and thinking, in order to improve human capacity-building Islamically for future generations. Development of the curricula should not focus solely on developing intellectual capabilities (e.g. deductive reasoning, innovative thinking), but also their character and their skill-sets. Additionally, critical thinking requires development alongside with the society to be able to manifest personal and social justice, not isolated as often seen in the academic world. On that note, we invite the audience to join the Journal for critical dialogue in order to fully realise the main purpose of Muslims in this world, inshāAllāh.

¹ *Ibid.*