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Citation for final published version:

Wilkinson, Matthew L. N. 2013. Introducing Islamic critical realism. *Journal of Critical Realism* 12 (4) , pp. 419-442. 10.1179/1476743013Z.00000000014

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/1476743013Z.00000000014>

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# Introducing Islamic Critical Realism: a philosophy to ‘underlabour’ for contemporary Islam

BY

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*Abstract:* This article makes the case for the intellectual and spiritual need for a contemporary philosophy of Islam to help Muslims surmount the challenges of post-modernity and to transcend the hiatuses and obstacles that Muslims face in their interaction and relationships with non-Muslims. It argues that the philosophy of critical realism so fittingly ‘underlabours’<sup>2</sup> for the contemporary interpretation, clarification and conceptual deepening of Islamic doctrine and practice as to suggest and necessitate the development of a distinctive Islamic critical realist philosophy, social and educational theory and world-view, specifically suited for this purpose. This approach is called Islamic Critical Realism (ICR).

*Keywords:* critical realism, Islam, Islamic critical realism, humanities education

1. *Why does Islam need a philosophy? The geo-political, theological, sociological and educational background to Islamic critical realism.*

## 1.1 *The problem of modernity and post-modernity*

On all sorts of levels – geo-political, socio-economic, psychological and spiritual - modernity and post-modernity have been problematic for Muslims and the world of Islam.

The period from the fall of Granada, the last European Muslim foothold, to the Catholic Monarchs in 1496 has seen seismic geo-political change in the Muslim-majority world. This has been structurally transformed from a religious nation (*Ummah*) of heterogeneous peoples variously united more or less at different times under one or more spiritual and political Caliphates, through an expansionist militarised Ottoman Sultanate and debilitating European colonisation to a patchwork of nation-states. These have often been governed by dictators who evoked both nationalism and socialism to institutionalize economic inequalities and reduce the public influence and social ethos of Islam<sup>3</sup>. Of course, the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 after half a century or more of political and intellectual stagnation suggests the start of some sort of dynamic process of political and social transformation. But no one

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<sup>2</sup> Bhaskar 2013, 11

<sup>3</sup> Mansfield, P. 2003.

can as yet say quite where this will lead and what type of role Islam and those inspired by it will play in the political re-configuration of the Arab Middle-East<sup>4</sup>.

This political process of fragmentation has been paralleled by the decline of the intellectual and spiritual dynamism that enabled Muslim thinkers to be a significant element in the launch of the European renaissance,<sup>5</sup> at least in comparison to the resurgent intellectual, technological and political advance of the Christian and post-Christian West driven by the triumvirate of modernity: free-market capitalism, empirical science and eurocentric liberal democracy.

But in sharp contrast to the early modern and modern periods of rapacious European confidence and ascendancy, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Muslim-majority world has attempted to embrace the paraphernalia of modernity, such as banks and nuclear weapons, whilst by and large retaining a rigid, reactionary attitude to faith that has prevented much of the Muslim world from responding effectively to the essence of the technological, social and spiritual changes that have characterised the last three hundred years.

### *1.2 The conditions of modernity set up by the Christian Reformation are largely un-Islamic.*

Amongst other factors and mechanisms still much-disputed, the Reformation split of public legalism from private religiosity established by degrees social and legal conditions for modernity that are largely un-Islamic. Although Islamic rulings differentiate spheres of daily action such as governance, trade and marriage (*mu'amalat*) from the sphere of worship (*'ibadat*), both these spheres of Islamic law are derived from the primary religious sources of the *Qur'an* (the Revelation, lit. Recitation) and the *Sunna* (habitual behaviour) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)<sup>6</sup>. Hence, whilst the Islamic sphere of worship is more overtly 'religious' than the sphere of daily life<sup>7</sup>, the split between sacred and profane realms of action and experience is anathema to traditional Islamic understanding. The theological account that God is witness to everything that humans do<sup>8</sup> has also been enshrined as a basic jurisprudential principle of the Islamic Law (*sharia'*) and allows only for an uncomfortable accommodation of the idea of the sacred alongside that of the separately defined secular realm. Yet, this separation of public legalism from private religiosity, manifest, for example, in the relaxation by Calvin of the canon laws prohibiting usury<sup>9</sup>, facilitated commercial expansion of the Christian West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through an emergent banking system to which Islam had no legal or commercial response.

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<sup>4</sup> Ramadan, T. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Allawi, A. A. 2009 Al-Hassani, S. T. S., Ed. 2012

<sup>6</sup> Saeed, A. 2006

<sup>7</sup> Ramadan, T. 2009

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 10:61

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, N. 2008.

### *1.3 The impact of colonialism on Islamic law.*

Furthermore, the colonial period contributed to the already prevalent and increasing rigidity of the Islamic Schools of Law. These schools further atrophied and ossified under the pressures of the Western presence to turn from dynamic institutions that responded to the legal exigencies of their day and age into largely closed edifices of jurisprudential prescription. The schools of law ended up as family traditions that were passed on from father to son rather than as social institutions, as individual Muslims responded to the institutional break-up of the Muslim world<sup>10</sup>.

### *1.4 Artificial divisions.*

As a result of this relative intellectual stasis and institutional atrophy, throughout the Islamic world and in the Muslim Western diaspora the strong cultural residue of a medieval world-view of the world divided into *Dar al-Islam* (the Zone of Islam) and *Dar al-kufr* (the Zone of Unbelief) remains and is sometimes propagated by Muslim scholars at a time when it is both theologically and practically inappropriate. This is reflected in prevalent Muslim suspicion of, for example, facets of Western education and culture and even, in some extreme cases, of democracy itself<sup>11</sup>. It is no accident that the popular name of Nigeria's most violent Jihadist groups is 'Boko Haram', which is Hausa for "Western education is sinful". This is in spite of the fact that such monolithic divisions have been demonstrated convincingly to be historical accretions to the original Islamic message<sup>12</sup>, and the fact that many of the institutions, such as universities, that we regard as generative mechanisms of archetypically Western mindsets have at root a significant Islamic input,<sup>13</sup> for example in the idea of the formal structuring of degrees as a licence to teach.

This separatist attitude is also oblivious of the more obvious contemporary reality of the close cultural and geographical interface between Muslims and non-Muslims, which make such divisions in any practical sense meaningless divisive abstractions. To use a critical realist term, these divisive ideas are demi-real:<sup>14</sup> that is to say they generate actual effects in the world although they have no real existence at the level of the physical or metaphysical structures of the Universe. These artificial divisions of the world are political exigencies of the early medieval world in which they were born; they have no grounding in either alethic truth or theological Qur'anic necessity and yet, despite (and indeed because of) their essential non-reality, they generate real global Muslim-non-Muslim misunderstanding and suspicion.

### *1.5 Inter-faith blindness.*

In addition, partly as a defence mechanism against rising anti-Muslim prejudice and residual cultural and ethnic racism, the accent of much Islamic teaching in the West has been on

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Azem, T. 2012

<sup>11</sup> Safi, L. M. 2001

<sup>12</sup> Ramadan, T. 2010

<sup>13</sup> Masood, E. 2009

<sup>14</sup> Bhaskar, 2000

Islam as a distinct, isolated religion that contains the absolute, exclusive truth rather than on Islam as a religion that is part of a family of faiths. This epistemic and spiritual isolation belies the historical reality that Islam has been at its intellectually most vigorous and politically most coherent when Muslims accepted that the pursuit of truth, both religious and non-religious, was not the exclusive preserve of Muslims or Islam but was distributed how and where God sees fit<sup>15</sup>.

This narrow outlook limits the cultural and educational options of many Muslims and also, conversely, sets up the barriers and obstacles to educational and social progress faced by many Muslims in the West. It reduces and confuses the educational and employment choices of young Muslim people and has created a Muslim diaspora culture that is often focussed on attaining less-than-essential religious rights rather than the more traditional Muslim preoccupation with human spiritual and intellectual fulfilment and social contribution.

This flawed engagement of the Muslim community with the contemporary world and a flawed ability of the secularising Western world to embrace people who are motivated by faith, as well as the complex socio-cultural dynamics of rural to urban Muslim migration, <sup>16</sup> has contributed to the existence of three related crises amongst a significant proportion of contemporary Muslims in the West.

1. **Entrenched political and cultural alienation** especially in France and Germany, but also in Britain. This has been manifest in ghettoised communities and a mutual fear of cultural engagement between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially in educational settings.<sup>17</sup>
2. **Widespread educational underachievement** especially amongst males at secondary level. In England, Muslim boys (73.5% of whom are of south Asian – of either Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin) in compulsory state schooling are ‘underachieving’ compared with white English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish (ESWI) children and every other ethnic or religious minority group in England, except Black African and Caribbean children, in English, Mathematics and Science at Key Stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.<sup>18</sup>
3. **Occasional violent extremism** which in Britain has been largely a ‘home-grown’ phenomenon: the 7/7 bombers were all brought up in Britain and educated in non-denominational, mainstream state schools.

#### *1.6 Inadequate school curricula.*

Moreover, as well as the negative impact of a diverse range of social, theological and historical factors on the life chances of Muslim young people in the West, it is reasonable to

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<sup>15</sup> Allawi, A. A. 2009

<sup>16</sup> Schiffauer, W.1988

<sup>17</sup> Haddad, Y.Y. (ed). 2002

<sup>18</sup> UK Government 2011

argue that the current school curriculum in England and other western democracies with which Muslim school children engage on a daily basis is wholly inadequate to help young Muslims understand and interpret their faith.

At the moment, the Humanities subjects, which could potentially help, are not prioritised by governments, schools or, indeed, Muslim parents due to a widely-held but mistaken notion that they do not contribute to national economic efficiency and personal employability.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, history and religious studies, two subjects that Muslim youth tend to like and feel can be relevant to making sense of themselves and the world around them, are under-developed and under-used.<sup>20</sup>

Religious education only superficially compares religious practice and belief and often does not help Muslim and other pupils think about and debate difficult religious issues.<sup>21</sup> The unintended outcome of the embrace of a multi-faith approach to Religious Studies has been the sociologization and flattening of the subject to one, sociological dimension of the religious experience. Indeed, Religious education as an academic discipline is under threat through its removal as a proposed Humanity for the gold-standard English Baccalaureate.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, there is an enormous hiatus between the central status and importance of faith as a feature of twenty-first century life and its marginal and irrelevant status on the school curriculum. This drives Muslim and other young people to other less responsible sources for their religious reflection, such as sites on the internet whose quality range from the sensible and informative to the downright pernicious.

History education in England does not deliver on the *history of Islam* that is available on the National Curriculum for History, nor does it address contemporary issues affecting the relationship between Muslims and the world in a deeper historical context. Indeed, in England, at the time of writing the Department for Education's current plans for the revised National Curriculum for history do not contain any historical reference to Islam at all. This will rob more than 400,000 Muslim children and their non-Muslim peers in English schools of any critical historical perspective on the Islamic contribution and experience.<sup>23</sup> This absence of the Muslim contribution and of its proper contextualisation within the history of humanity are likely to have negative consequences both in terms of national belonging and Muslim young people's and their peers' understanding of Islam, increasing the risk both of an increase in anti-Muslim prejudice and Islamist radicalisation.

In addition, complementary after-school Islamic Education is often inadequate in terms of its meaningful input into the personal development of young people.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pring, R. 2013

<sup>20</sup> Wilkinson, M. L. N. 2011

<sup>21</sup> Wright, A. 2007

<sup>22</sup> Keast, J. 2013.

<sup>23</sup> UK, Government. 2013

<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson, M. L. N. 2011

## 2. The 'real, determinate' absence of a philosophy of Islam.

These inadequacies in formal education have been exacerbated by the absence of a contemporary philosophy of Islam, that is to say a systematic meta-theoretical reflective platform and coherent ethos of the Islamic faith,<sup>25</sup> to *mediate* between religion and daily life and the abnegation of one of the traditional roles of Islamic philosophy to explicate the Revelation for novel contemporary situations. This has been accompanied by restrictive modes of contemporary Islamic scholarship that have reduced the creative tradition of Islamic philosophical theology to often obscure and legalistic debate.<sup>26</sup>

### 2.1 Two default positions of faith.

This real determinate absence<sup>27</sup>, combined with the polarised Islamic scholarship referred to above and aggressive media representation of Muslims and Islam as the 'Other', has resulted in two default positions being available for contemporary Muslims:

- (i) *the defence of faith* in a way that often involves setting-up a range of false polar opposites to buttress faith: Islam v. The West, Global Brother/Sisterhood v. National Citizenship, in a way that is inconsistent with many Muslims' daily lives. In this dichotomised construction of Islam, Islamic piety has become synonymous with anti-Western-ness. In other words, the more anti-Western one is, the greater the proof of Islamic piety.<sup>28</sup> This means that a whole range of cultural and intellectual options ranging from full political engagement with democracy to the enjoyment of cultural forms such as theatre and classical music have been often quite unnecessarily denied or even 'outlawed' to young Muslims by ideologues of Islam.

This in turn has necessitated:

- (ii) *the abandonment of faith* by many Muslims in order for Muslims to 'fit in' to the professionalised, secularising world-view. In this default scenario, so familiar to professional Western Muslims, Islam merely remains as a cultural residue of an ossified parental religion; an identity that is neither a spiritually nourishing personal piety nor an empowering social ethic. Islam is often perceived as a rallying point from which to oppose ethno-cultural discrimination, but seldom as a creative starting-point for a coherent social contribution.

As a result of this, many Muslims today continue to perceive a mismatch between the practice of their professional lives in non-religious contexts and the articulation of their religious belief.<sup>29</sup> This act of rational compromise with the secular at the expense of the sacred is a process of dialectical disenchantment which has generated in many Muslims in

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<sup>25</sup> Hart, G. H. and J. C. Maraldo, eds 1976

<sup>26</sup> Averroes and I. trans. Najjar 2001

<sup>27</sup> Bhaskar, R. (2008), Chapter 2, section 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ramadan, T. 2010

<sup>29</sup> Imtiaz, A. S. M. 2011

the West a phenomenon closely akin to the Hegelian idea of the *Unhappy Consciousness*. The life of the Spirit which is essential to the identity and life-purpose of the Muslim believer is denied expression and even existence whilst at the same time remaining acutely conscious (or semi-conscious) of its own thwarted existence. In the words of Hegel:

Itself [the Unhappy Consciousness], because conscious of this contradiction, assumes the aspect of changeable consciousness and is to itself the unessential; but as consciousness of unchangeableness, it must at the same time, proceed to free itself from the unessential, i.e. to liberate itself from itself.<sup>30</sup>

Within this understanding, 'successful' Muslims have often 'succeeded' in life in spite of their faith by distancing themselves literally and ideologically from the Muslim community.

### *2.2 The need for greater theoretical coherence.*

At a practical and intuitive level, many Muslims in the West have now begun to make a successful negotiation of being a Western Muslim<sup>31</sup>. But these intuitive understandings have not been articulated coherently with a framework that enables them to be more broadly understood and followed through in the educational process. Also, there remain a range of highly complex issues, such as the position of *Shariah* in non-Muslim majority lands and the grey areas between public and private religiosity, that require detailed, systematic academic attention.

What is needed is a philosophy to knit together and revitalise traditional Islamic practice and belief in new multi-faith contexts and the tools to disseminate that philosophy into educational settings so that young Muslims can be encouraged to reflect on the meanings of their lives in peaceful, productive co-existence with people of other faiths and of none. The next section of the paper will suggest how the philosophy of critical realism can provide the basis of that revitalising and cohering philosophy.

### *3. Basic Foundational Principles: the levels of critical realism.*

The critical realist development of ontology, that is to say the systematic understanding of being, can be delineated as proceeding through seven levels, the first being the moment identified by original critical realism (OCR), that and the next three being described by dialectical critical realism (DCR) and all those and the last three by the philosophy of meta-Reality (PMR).<sup>32</sup> These levels may be described as follows:

1M (1<sup>st</sup> Moment), the original argument of critical realism thematizes being *as such* and being as non-identity and as specifically *differentiated* and *structured*.

2E (2<sup>nd</sup> Edge), understanding being as *process*, including absence and negativity;

3L (3<sup>rd</sup> Level), understanding being as involving internal, as well as external, *relationality*, as concrete and as a whole;

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<sup>30</sup> Hegel, G. W. F. (1807 trans.1977), 208.

<sup>31</sup> Ramadan, T. 2010

<sup>32</sup> Bhaskar, R. 2013

(4<sup>th</sup> Dimension), understanding being as incorporating *transformative agency*. This was already presaged in original critical realism.

To this the philosophy of meta-Reality adds:

(5<sup>th</sup> Aspect), understanding being as *reflexive*, as inward and spiritual;

(6<sup>th</sup> Re-enchantment), understanding being as involving *re-enchantment*, as meaningful and valuable in its own right; and

(7<sup>th</sup> Zone), understanding being as involving the primacy of *identity and unity over difference and split* and, moreover, as essentially incorporating *non-duality*.

Islamic critical realism (ICR) pertains at all these ontological levels. Thus, the full exposition of ICR will involve, *inter alia*, a dialectical critical realist reading of the life-story (*Sira*) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), a meta-Real interpretation of the meanings of *Sharia'* Law and as well as, crucially, the application of ICR as an interpretative tool for critical reflection for Muslim and non-Muslim students in history, religious education and citizenship (humanities) education.

This introductory paper endeavours to lay the groundwork for the relationship between Islam and critical realism at the level of original critical realism (OCR), that is at the level of being-as-such, and makes an introductory suggestion as to its educational application.

#### 4. *Original Islamic Critical Realism.*

*Original Islamic Critical Realism* is based upon four foundational principles that demonstrate the commensurability of critical realist thought with Islamic doctrine and practice and how the two may mutually enrich one another:

- (i) A shared commitment to 'Underlabouring'.
- (ii) A shared commitment to 'Seriousness'.
- (iii) A shared commitment to a core philosophical framework: Ontological Realism, Epistemological Relativism and Judgmental Rationalism.
- (iv) A critical realist understanding of a *Qur'anic* world-view.

These form the conceptual platform for the 'underlabouring' of Islamic Critical Realism at its original moment. The exploration of dialectical and meta-Real moments is a task for another time.

##### 4.1 *A shared commitment to 'underlabouring'.*

Bhaskar, the originator of the philosophy of critical realism and meta-Reality, has stated that 'underlabouring is most characteristically the task of critical realist philosophy. Philosophical 'underlabouring' was described by the English philosopher John Locke as 'clearing the

ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge'<sup>33</sup> in the case of critical realism for a) natural and social science and b) practices of human emancipation :<sup>34</sup>

The philosophy of critical realism has 'underlaboured' for natural science by demonstrating inter alia the natural necessity of causal laws and deep natural structures for the intelligibility of experimental activity and by the disambiguation of ontology from epistemology; it has 'underlaboured' for social science by demonstrating inter alia that social structures, e.g. languages and education systems, precede and cannot be reduced to individual agency and yet can also be transformed by them (Bhaskar, 1979); it has underlaboured for linguistics by reclaiming inter alia the referent, alongside the sign and the signifier (Alderson, 2013); it has underlaboured for environmental studies by showing inter alia that multi-factored, 'laminated' systems at the sub-atomic, biological, physical, socio-economic, geo-political and cosmological levels need to be taken into account when considering the impact of humans on the environment and that human beings exist on four-planar social being (Bhaskar, 2009). Critical realism has 'underlaboured' for disability studies by showing that reductionism in understanding of disability has prevented the implementation of proper strategies to ensure the well-being of disabled people (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006).

This philosophical commitment to conceptual ground-clearing and clarification and to the practices of human emancipation is precisely shared by much traditional Islamic philosophy, which was traditionally one facet of the work of holistic, inter-disciplinary scholars making sense of contemporary reality with recourse to both Reason and Revelation.<sup>35</sup>

This shared ethos to perform acts of philosophical service is a good starting point for the articulation of an Islamic critical realism. Islamic critical realism makes no pretension to re-write core Islamic doctrine and practice as established by centuries of Islamic tradition. It is designed to underlabour for the meaningful interpretation of Islamic doctrine and practice for the multi-faith contexts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that have been hitherto unknown to the Islamic experience, with particular pertinence to the fields of education, culture, economics, law and gender-relations.

It is best described as an educational philosophy in that it is not a comprehensive programme of Islamic reform, of which there have been enough failures in the last 150 years.<sup>36</sup> It does seek to open pathways into critical Islamic reflection, especially for young people, in the fields listed above in order to transform and transcend the types of impasses and hiatuses identified in the introduction to this paper. It aims to reframe the phenomenon of Western education for Muslims and reframe the discourses of Islam for educationalists of the West and to reopen a pathway from the Unhappy to the Happy Muslim Consciousness.

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<sup>33</sup> Locke, J. 1690/1959, Vol. I, 14

<sup>34</sup> Bhaskar, R. 2013,11

<sup>35</sup> Averroes trans. Najjar 2001

<sup>36</sup> Armstrong, K. 2000

#### 4.2 A shared commitment to 'Seriousness'.

Second, both Islam, authentically-understood from its primary sources, and critical realism share a foundational commitment to philosophical and existential 'seriousness'. 'Serious' in the critical realist sense means that your behaviour is consistent with your beliefs, and that your practice is consistent with your theory and knowledge. It is built conceptually out of Bhaskar's critique of Humean actualist orthodoxy, and thus much modern and contemporary philosophy, as 'unserious' in its denial of deep structure. Humean actualism took Hume to a position where he could not philosophically sustain the rational belief that to leave a building by the ground floor door was better than leaving it by the first-floor window! This was an 'unserious' position since, if Hume had believed it, he ought to have left buildings from the first-floor window at least 50% of the time!

Moreover, a Bhaskarian immanent critique based on the intelligibility of experimental activity has shown that Humean actualist empiricism is weakest at the very point that it regards as its greatest strength, namely experimental activity.<sup>37</sup> In critical realist parlance, this form of critique is called an Achilles Heel Critique.

Bhaskar shows that a scientific experiment is necessary precisely to the extent that the pattern of events forthcoming under experimental conditions would not be forthcoming without it. In an experiment, we produce a pattern of events to identify a causal law, but we do not produce the causal law, which, for the experiment to be meaningful, must exist outside the closed system that has been created for the experiment. Thus, the intelligibility of experimental activity presupposes the categorical independence of causal laws discovered from the patterns of events produced. So the intelligibility of scientific activity presupposes the intransitive and structured nature of the objects of scientific knowledge. Actualist empiricism is 'unserious' because it is impossible to act on its own most important intellectual premise, namely that phenomena are the product of constant conjunctions of events rather than deep structures.

#### 4.3 'Seriousness' and Islam.

Islam, taken on its own primary terms from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* is 'serious' in this philosophical sense in that it demands *a priori* a consistency between a statement of belief and a commitment to act. Once a Muslim has committed to the first 'Pillar' of Islam – the witnessing that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Final Messenger from God – they have also committed to practice the other four 'Pillars' of Islam – the Daily Prayer (Salah), the Poor Tax (Zakah), the Fast of Ramadan (Sawm) and Pilgrimage (the Hajj).

The outcome of this *praxis*, if it is 'serious', ought to be a relationship with and guidance from God and peace and harmony with oneself and fellow humankind. In other words, Islamic 'seriousness' entails the movement away from the Unhappy Consciousness to a condition of realised essential (concretely singularised) unity in which the individual destiny is (albeit to different degrees of self-consciousness) aligned with the Divine Decree (*Qadr*).

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<sup>37</sup> Bhaskar, R. 1975, Chapter 1, section 3

It would not, in fact, be over-stating the case to claim that ‘seriousness’ in this profound philosophical sense is Islam’s defining characteristic. It is the foundational principle of both of Islam’s core primary sources, the Book of the Revelation from God (*Al-Qur’an*) and the recorded Sayings and Behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (*As-Sunna*).

#### 4.3.1 Serious-ness in the Qur’an.

‘Seriousness’ is evidenced *Qur’anicly* by the fact that belief and practice enjoy an intrinsic and inseparable relationship in the Revealed Text.<sup>38</sup> The phrase used to characterise believers, ‘those who believe *and* do right acts’<sup>39</sup> is the most repeated of all *Qur’anic* phrases.<sup>40</sup> The Arabic pronoun for ‘and’ (*wa*) in this characterisation indicates an inseparable,<sup>41</sup> internal and necessary partnership not an external, contingent one. In other words, a relationship like father and son rather than like that between two friends.<sup>42</sup>

As a further indication of the ‘seriousness’ of this inseparable partnership, it needs to be noted that the root Arabic letters - Sad-Lam-Ha - to act correctly, not only have the sense of morally good action, but also of contextually-appropriate, sensible action. Thus sound belief Quranically-speaking entails a sound, contextually-appropriate relationship with the world. Worship-knowledge-obedience-love of God is inseparably related to respect-service-love-justice for humanity.<sup>43</sup> Recognition of the Transcendent Majesty of the Creator is contingent upon the harmonious quality of core human relationships.

Those who believe and do good works shall be the Companions of Bliss, eternally, forever. Remember that We took a covenant from the Children of Israel to worship none but God; to be kind to parents, kin, orphans and the needy; be steadfast in prayer and perform regular acts of charity.<sup>44</sup>

In this Qur’anic ayat, the covenant of the children of Israel with God is contingent upon the respectful enactment of core human relationships to parents, extended family and the most needy in society. Similarly, in the Chapter 23, The Believers, believers are characterised not as those who know or believe certain things but as those who perform or who abstain from performing certain actions:

The believers are successful, Those who humble themselves in Prayer; Those who avoid idle gossip; Those who pay the Poor-tax; Those who abstain from sexual relations except with marriage partners[...]Those who faithfully observe their trusts

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<sup>38</sup> Sayer, A. 1984

<sup>39</sup> Qur’an, 2: 82-83

<sup>40</sup> Sherif, F. 1995

<sup>41</sup> Bewley, A.A.1992

<sup>42</sup> Sayer, A. 1984

<sup>43</sup> Bhaskar, R. 1997, Chapter 2, section 7

<sup>44</sup> Qur’an, 2: 82-83

and their contracts, and who perform the Prayer in its time. They will be the heirs of Paradise<sup>45</sup>.

Or as Ibn Al-Arabi put it, 'It is impossible to love God without loving His Creation', since *Qur'anically*-speaking the purpose of Creation is to witness the reality of God.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Serious-ness in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunna).

The hadith material is also replete with sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that reinforce the idea of the necessary serious-ness of the intrinsic Islamic relationship between action and belief expounded in the Qur'an.

For example, the companion of Muhammad, Abu Hurairah (may God be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), said:

Let him who believes in Allah and the Last day, either speak good or keep silent, and let him who believes in Allah and the Last Day be generous to his neighbor, and let him who believes in Allah and the Last Day be generous to his guest.<sup>47</sup>

In each phrase the connection between belief and sound action is seamless; right action is the inevitable outcome and proof of 'serious' belief. Conversely, wrong action, such as, for example, gratuitous 'religious' violence towards innocent people within this Islamic critical realist understanding, is proof enough that the beliefs underpinning it are 'unserious', or flawed and unreal. As a widely-quoted hadith says, 'he is not one of us who does not show tenderness to the young and who does not show respect to the elder'.<sup>48</sup>

Inappropriate behaviour is the evidence of faith whose 'serious-ness' is wanting. In this respect, the critical realist concept of the demi-real is again important. Wrong action as the outcome of wrong knowledge/belief may effect enormous superficial and structural change in the world which, for a time at least, may even bear all the hallmarks of being positive and beneficial for human well-being. However, if these actions are not grounded in alethic truth and a sound ontology, they will inevitably have a profoundly negative eventual outcome. An obvious example of this is Hitlerian National Socialism which for a while (1933-1936) may have appeared to be the answer to Germany's economic and social travails but which, because it was at the level of alethic truth a false racialized ideology driven by a war economy, lead eventually to war and genocide (1936-1945).

### 5. *A philosophical framework for an Islamic critical realism: Ontological Realism, Epistemological Relativism and Judgmental Rationalism.*

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<sup>45</sup> Qur'an, 23:1-11

<sup>46</sup> Qur'an, 51:56

<sup>47</sup> Narrated in Bukhari and Muslim

<sup>48</sup> Narrated in at-Tirmidhi

This shared commitment to philosophical ‘underlabouring’ and ‘serious-ness’ provides the conceptual platform for further consideration of how critical realist philosophy can provide a theoretical framework to interpret the Islamic faith in a way that both does justice to the traditional understandings of Islamic practice and belief, such as belief in God, the Books, the Prophets, the Angels and the Decree, and to the facet of critical reflexivity that was an essential component of Muslim thought in the past.<sup>49</sup>

This authentically Islamic critical realist approach is grounded in three interrelated critical realist principles: ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationalism. This has been called the ‘holy trinity’ of critical realist philosophy<sup>50</sup> and is the core outcome of the critical realist disambiguation of ontology from epistemology.<sup>51</sup>

### *5.1 Ontological Realism.*

A basic understanding of critical realist ontology is that natural-social reality exists independently of our ability to describe it and cannot be reduced to discourse, nor is it merely contained or constructed in the semiotics of our speech.<sup>52</sup> Natural-social reality means that humanity’s social being is natural and nature’s being is also – at least in part – socially constructed.<sup>53</sup>

That being does not equal knowing is proved by the fact that the globe did not suddenly change shape when it was discovered not to be flat and neither did the experience of living on it.<sup>54</sup> An extension of this is that beings, entities and phenomena can exist without being known or even if there is no possibility that they even come to be known.<sup>55</sup> This is, of course, pertinent to the possibility of the existence of unseen immaterial realms as described in the Qur’an and in the belief systems of other faiths, which are philosophically equivalent to scientific fields, such as gravity, whose effects can be experienced but not directly perceived.

#### *5.1.1 Ontological realism when applied theologically to ICR.*

When applied to Spirituality and God, ontological realism pertains to the essential reality of spiritual phenomena. God can be said to exist (or not exist) independently of our knowledge of or belief in Him, or lack of knowledge or belief in Him. Unseen spiritual realities, such as the human/divine spirit, or divine providence, can be allowed to exist (or not to exist) independently of our knowledge of or belief in them. Ontological realism about God does not claim that God exists, but that the fact and realities of His existence and the existence of other types of metaphysical being are not dependent on our knowledge of Him/It.

### *5.2 Epistemological Relativism.*

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<sup>49</sup> Winter, T. 2008

<sup>50</sup> Hartwig, M., Ed. 2007

<sup>51</sup> Bhaskar, R. 1975; Bhaskar, R. (2013). Chapter 1, section 5

<sup>52</sup> Sewell, W. H. 2005

<sup>53</sup> Castree, N. and T. MacMillan 2001

<sup>54</sup> Bhaskar, R. 2000

<sup>55</sup> Bhaskar, R. 1975

The taxonomic and causal reduction of being to knowing, prevalent in all manner of anti-realist discourse theory (e.g. Wittgenstein<sup>56</sup>), has been described by critical realist thinkers as the 'epistemic fallacy'. According to Margaret Archer:

Critical realism does not deny the value and theory-ladenness of knowledge. What it does is counter the epistemic fallacy. The epistemic fallacy involves the fallacious inference that because there is no epistemologically objective view of the world, there is no objective world ontologically. Such an inference leads to the extravagant and relativist claim that to the extent that we embrace different world views, we inhabit objectively different worlds.<sup>57</sup>

That the world is experienced and known differently by differently instantiated individuals is undeniable. The contribution of hermeneutics and interpretivist and post-structuralist epistemologies has been to insist on the necessity of disclosing, articulating and, if necessary, deconstructing those instantiations in order to allow the true nature of social phenomena to be accessed through the medium of research.<sup>58</sup> Critical realism articulates these understandings philosophically by showing that epistemological relativism is distinct from ontological realism and that knowing is constellationally-embedded in being; that is to say that knowing is dependent on being, but being is not dependant on knowing.<sup>59</sup>

#### *5.2.1 Epistemological relativism when applied theologically to ICR.*

Epistemological relativism pertains to beliefs, knowledge and interpretations of spiritual phenomena that usually take the form of religious traditions. To espouse the idea of epistemological relativism is to say '...that a belief about the reality or existence of God is quite consistent with ...the idea that God manifests Himself in a variety of different ways or is accessed by different people in different traditions in a plurality of different ways...'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the fact that God has been known differently does not mean that the God that is known is different.

#### *5.2.2 Human interpretative fallibility.*

Crucially, for an Islamic critical realist understanding, the distinction between ontological realism and epistemological relativism makes theorising the status of Revelation a genuine philosophical possibility. The revelation of the Qur'an itself, the *matan* – the text revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) before any human interpretation – lies squarely in the realm of ontological realism, in the words of classical Islamic theology, it is the uncreated word of God.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, every single act of reading and interpreting the text of the Qur'an falls into the realm of epistemological relativism and is, therefore, potentially fallible, but without this human fallibility implicating the divine infallibility of the revealed text itself. This is crucial to an Islamic critical realist perspective because it allows

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<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1922, Proposition 6.35

<sup>57</sup> Archer, M. S., A. Collier, et al. 2004 ,2

<sup>58</sup> Gubrium, J. F. and J. A. Holstein, Eds. 2003

<sup>59</sup> Norrie, A. 2009, chapter 4

<sup>60</sup> Bhaskar ,200027

<sup>61</sup> Saeed, A. 2006

for the potential fallibility of *all* human judgements and decisions about God and Revelation, including many of those that have traditionally been the most revered.

This deep philosophical recognition of human fallibility lies at the heart of the Islamic message as much the notion of the perfection of God. The Qur'an makes the human-ness of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) clear.<sup>62</sup> The companions of Muhammad would question whether his decisions were a part of Revelation or his own judgement.<sup>63</sup> If they were the latter, they were recognised to be human, fallible and therefore potentially wrong. They understood this core distinction between ontological realism and epistemological relativism, even if, of course, they did not articulate it as such.

Epistemological relativism also embraces the historically-conditioned and context-specific nature of all human decisions, including those which are made about Revelation itself. This geo-historicity and concrete singularity, which is essential to the human condition, necessitates the continual, on-going process of contemporary exegesis (*tafsir*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) as part of a continual conversation between revealed principles, eternal truths and shifting contingent geo-historical circumstance.<sup>64</sup> It is this interspace (*barsakh*) of on-going spiritual reflection that is uniquely occupied by humanity which is the realm of judgmental rationalism.

### *5.3 Judgmental rationality.*

The quality of the necessary and intrinsic relationship between being and knowing, and ontology and epistemology, is dependent upon the quality of the third element of the original critical realist 'Holy Trinity', judgmental rationality. This is a rational process of deciding between the accuracy and validity of competing accounts of phenomena according to sets of scientific and experiential criteria. Judgmental rationality is itself embedded in epistemological relativism in the same way that epistemological relativism is embedded in ontological realism. Judgmental rationality, like epistemological relativism, is grounded in our situated-ness and our geo-historicity.

Nevertheless, the fact that our decision-making is grounded in geo-historicity does not mean all judgments, though fallible, are equally so. Judgmental rationality says that we can make judgments about relative, fallible knowledge. All perspectives and interpretations are not equal.<sup>65</sup> The position of judgmental rationality is that 'human beliefs are potentially true and, second, that there are standards of belief evaluation that permit us to assess the likelihood of any given ensemble of beliefs'.<sup>66</sup> Judgmental rationality is mediated through detailed attention to the processes of logic, discourse and debate that pertain to any particular field or discipline, the operation of effective and coherent research methods and design and personal introspection and reflexivity.

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<sup>62</sup> Qur'an, 3: 144

<sup>63</sup> Ramadan, T. 2007

<sup>64</sup> Ramadan, T. 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Collier, A. 2004

<sup>66</sup> Little, D. 1993

### *5.3.1 Judgmental rationalism when applied theologically to ICR.*

Epistemological relativism does not implicate the reality (or not) of the Divine and His Guidance for humankind, but it does suggest that the most rigorous and self-critical standards of judgmental rationality are necessary for the interpretation of it. The interspace between the Essentially Unchanging and the realm of essential change, the intransitive and transitive, demands to be negotiated by the continually refined principles of reason.

Judgmental rationalism, therefore, in this context pertains to deliberation and deciding about the plausibility of spiritual phenomena and the traditions connected with them. The compatibility of ontological realism and epistemological relativism necessitates judgmental rationalism. There must be coherent rational (doctrinal), emotional and experiential grounds for choosing one mode of spiritual access (religious tradition) as opposed to another for choosing one mode of religious behaviour as opposed to another. The quality of rational spiritual decision-making is an essential part of the religious experience.

Therefore, it is possible with these basic principles to claim both that God has been accessed and has revealed His Being through a variety of traditions and to choose one tradition or position within a tradition as opposed to another, whilst still drawing on the insights of other faiths or other traditions within one's own faith.

This framework can be a conceptual framework for faith grounded in a spiritual quality of self-confidence that is wedded to humility towards others. This means that this framework can be the basis of an approach to Islam which situates the faith and its community within the family of faiths and in which the emphasis shifts from Islam as the only true religion, to Islam as the truest (for the Muslim believer) of a number of truthful religions, and which is open, as it once was, to drawing upon a diverse range of spiritual and intellectual insights.

### *6. The use of the ICR Framework for humanities education in the multi-faith context.*

Returning, therefore, to the educational theme that is a core component of the background to this paper, this framework can also be applied to revitalise Humanities education in such a way that allows for enormous diversity of belief and opinion and at the same time provides the tools for pupils to avoid a formless moral relativism, a dangerous lack of personal ability to commit, and an unreflective fundamentalist literalism.

In history, for example, at the level of ontological realism all teachers can agree with their pupils that events in the past have actually happened independently of what people know or do not know about them. Indeed, the fact that the vast majority of events in the past are not on historical record is further proof of the independence of being from knowledge/knowing.

This distinction can be liberating in the classroom. That there was a rebellion against British rule in 1857 in Central India is real, and whether it is viewed as India's First War of Independence, the Great Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, the Revolt of 1857, the Uprising of 1857, the Sepoy Rebellion, or the Sepoy Mutiny falls squarely within the realm of epistemological relativism. This clear distinction ought to enable teachers, with the

appropriate curricular material, to create robust interpretative debates. The outcome of these debates will be based on the quality and articulation of pupils' judgmental rationalism in the constructive use of sources, their ability for argument and the development of a reflexive ability for self-interrogation into any biases and unwarranted prejudices of ego that may hinder arrival at more truthful accounts.

Here is a framework which will enable school history to deliver the type of knowledge that will allow pupils to decode information in the digital age and negotiate competing, often dangerous and skewed historical narratives that drive prejudice and radicalization of all types. It will also enable them to relate effectively to a world in which they will need to engage with people of widely divergent backgrounds.

In religious education (RE), ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationalism can be simplified for the classroom into spiritual being, spiritual knowing and understanding and spiritual decision-making which, in turn, can be explored in the equivalent extra-faith, inter-faith and intra-faith modes. This adds two dimensions of religious educational experience to the current inter-faith mode that prevails in many RE classrooms and leaves children stranded in the realm of epistemological relativity. The extra-faith mode would allow children to identify the Big Issues of God, Life after Death, the Spirit, Destiny, Good and Evil independently of any prism of commitment to faith. The inter-faith mode would bring these issues into the realm of religious tradition and comparative experience and the intra-faith mode would invite an exploration of how these issues play out in the lives of believers, including the lives of the children themselves. Thus the 'Holy Trinity' sets up the conditions for effective religious education in a secular society in which faith is still an appreciable and important component.

The distinction between ontology (and with it the realm of alethic truth) and epistemology (and with it the realm of contingent truth) might be used to explore, for example, how Muslims can respond creatively to concepts and even doctrines from other faiths such as the idea of *dharma*, realized concretely singular selfhood from Hindu philosophy, or the values of Christian compassion in a way that enriches but does not compromise core Islamic belief and creates a platform for the rich, mutually enhancing interfaith thought. In this way, Islam can once again become conducive to nurturing suitable attitudes of mind for people of faith in a multi-faith society such as that of contemporary Britain as it once was in early medieval Baghdad or Cordoba.

Thus, the British multi-faith context can through well-conceived humanities education be re-framed as an opportunity for religious renewal for Muslims and those of other faiths rather than a threat to religious survival. It also places the onus on the adherents of Islam, as an equal member of the family of faiths, to be able to explain why we believe our faith is the truest and most convincing, if we do, indeed, believe this to be the case. In a multi-faith rational, educated democracy, it is not good enough just to say, 'Islam is the truest faith because God says so'. Believers of all types need to be able to justify why in a democracy, when it is all human beings are (in theory at least) morally equivalent to one another, it is still possible to select and be committed to one tradition of faith as opposed to another.

#### 7. *The Qur'an: A Critical Realist Document.*

Based upon this tri-partite critical realist approach to reality and following on from the identification of the 'seriousness' of the Qur'an, it is possible to articulate the fourth Islamic Critical Realist premise that the Divinely-revealed text of Islam, *Al-Qur'an* (the Recitation) can authentically and creatively be understood as a critical realist document. This is not, of course, to claim that God Almighty, its source, is a critical realist! It is to claim that both the vision of reality described by the Qur'an, its ontology, and the means described for coming to know that reality, its epistemology, map onto a critical realist world-view in a way that facilitates the productive use of the philosophy of critical realism as a rich interpretative tool.

### *7.1 The Qur'an: Transcendental Realism.*

The *Qur'an* is 'transcendentally realist' in its references to the real events and natural structures of the Universe. According to Qur'an, the Universe is both divinely created and materially and humanly real. Therefore, on the principle of ontological realism both God and creation have an ontology that is real and exists independently of what can be known and said about them by human beings.

At the same time, the essential knowability of the created universe is embedded inseparably in its being. The *Qur'anic* Arabic word used for reality – *Haqq* – contains both the ideas of real being and alethic truth embedded within it:

We have created the heavens, and the earth and everything between them with Truth-and-Reality (bil Haqq).<sup>67</sup>

### *7.2 Emergence and Judgmental Rationalism.*

The *Qur'an*, like critical realist philosophy, speaks of the stratified ontological structures and stages (emergence) of Creation.<sup>68</sup> Yet the situated-ness, contingent and finite quality of human beings means the reality of these emergent stages can only be apprehended through a process of deep critical, personal and social reflexivity, involving judgmental rationalism. The approach of humans to knowing about created being suggested by the *Qur'anic* verses is critical. That is to say that reality does not disclose itself easily and requires both spiritual and intellectual work if it is to be understood. Refrains such as these are the *leitmotif* of the *Quran*:

There are signs on the horizon and in the self for people who reflect...<sup>69</sup>

In the creation of the heavens and earth and the alternation of night of day...are signs for people who use their intellects...<sup>70</sup>

The natural-social signs are objectively real and yet the meanings of them do not disclose themselves without reflection, hard intellectual work, spiritual purification of the eye of the heart, and the availing oneself to a range of interpretative possibilities at social and individual, emotional and spiritual levels. The application of criteria of reasonable-ness and

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<sup>67</sup> Qur'an, 15: 85

<sup>68</sup> Qur'an, 71:13-14

<sup>69</sup> Qur'an, 41: 53

<sup>70</sup> Qur'an, 2:164, 3:190

of the probability of truth is a necessary part of understanding the relationship between Universe and the Creator. This process of spiritual judgmental rationality opens up the possibility of transcendent understanding both within the self and in communication with other people and with God.

## 8. Summary

Thus the Qur'an presents a vision of reality that is consistent with the original critical realist disambiguation of a realist ontology from a relativist epistemology that necessitates judgmental rationality. Creating and created reality exists objectively for all, but they are apprehended and experienced relatively, differently and unequally through the complex, intersecting prisms of individuality, identity, relationships of power and concrete singularity of differing properties and tendencies in a way that necessitates a deep, spiritual logic for decision-making. At the root of this process is a necessary personal commitment to 'seriousness' and an understanding that faith 'underlabours' for divine knowledge and human well-being. As Heidegger has written, '...the holy, which is the essential space of divinity...only shines...with long preparation. Being itself has illuminated itself and been experienced in its truth'<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, 1947/1977, 246

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