Book Review
**Studying Islam in the Arab World: The Rupture Between Religion and the Social Sciences (Sari Hanafi).**
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Education plays a central and pivotal role in the fabric of societies and is a crucial aspect of human development. Governments, scholars, and institutions have long worked to enhance systems that deliver both meaningful knowledge to learners and effective ethical guidance. This issue is particularly relevant in the Arab and Islamic world, where traditional Shariah colleges and Islamic education curricula have historically been foundational but often stagnant. These systems have increasingly faced criticism for failing to address contemporary realities effectively.

At this critical juncture, Sari Hanafi, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at the American University of Beirut, offers a compelling critique in his book *Studying Islam in the Arab World: The Rupture Between Religion and the Social Sciences*. He explores the tension between elites in the social sciences and humanities and religious scholars, highlighting how each group undermines the other's authority. For example, religious leaders have labeled social scientists as *kāfir* (disbelievers or traitors) (p. 5). In addition to employing critical historiography and institutional theory, Hanafi presents a robust scholarly analysis of reformist efforts within traditional Islamic institutions. His book focuses on Shariah and Islamic studies curricula in Arab academic settings, featuring case studies from Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, and Lebanon. This in-depth examination enables Hanafi to offer a nuanced understanding of how these programs operate and to propose thoughtful recommendations for reform.

Hanafi's main contention is that Islamic education should not be reduced to fatalistic sectarianism and rote memorization of texts. Instead, it should emphasize ethics and the applicability of religious practices, which requires compatibility with the social sciences and humanities. His concepts of *Separation/Connection* and *Pluralistic Praxis* (p. 287)—which support the epistemic contributions of both social sciences and Shariah disciplines while encouraging dialogue and interaction—are central to what he terms *SeCoPP*. By placing ethical reasoning at its core, Islamic education can remain effective in addressing contemporary challenges.

From a methodological standpoint, the book engages with systematic discourses on reform in Islamic education and the sociology of knowledge. Earlier scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and Tariq Ramadan have explored the modernization of Islamic education in depth. For instance, Rahman (1984) theorized the role of ethical practice and intellectual method in the Islamic tradition, while Ramadan (2003) called for a contextual re-appropriation of Islamic principles to resolve present-day crises. Building on this foundation, Hanafi offers an empirical and regionally grounded analysis of Islamic education in Arab countries.

Methodologically, the book falls within the socioeconomic study of knowledge and structured debates around change in Islamic education. It stands out by providing a nuanced regional perspective that expands on earlier theoretical contributions. In this review, I assess whether the book presents compelling central arguments, follows a sound methodology, and makes meaningful contributions to the study and evolution of Islamic education—as well as its implications for scholars, educators, and policymakers committed to its reform.

This book is divided into four parts, each containing several chapters. Part One covers the history of Islamic education, examining early institutions such as the first mosques, Al-Zaytouna, Al-Qarawiyyin, Al-Azhar, and other contemporary universities. These centers of learning once offered both sacred and secular knowledge, making them holistic intellectual hubs. However, Hanafi notes that colonialism, internal decline, and a resulting resistance to change have gradually isolated the Shariah sciences from other branches of knowledge.

He argues that the traditionalist approach—which focuses primarily on the interpretation of tradition—is ill-equipped to address contemporary issues. It tends to preserve rather than innovate. Hanafi views the Salafi literalist approach

as particularly weak in presenting a universal image of Islam (pp. 45–47). He contends that the current Shariah education paradigm is largely incapable of responding to ethical and social needs, as it is overly centered on rote memorization and jurisprudence. To address these limitations, he advocates for the integration of social science courses into Shariah curricula, enabling students to think critically about modern challenges.

Hanafi also explores the interplay of institutions, politics, and religion in the Arab world, placing special emphasis on differentiating between Arab secularism and the various processes of secularization from both above and below. His research highlights the emergence of reflective knowledge groups that challenge hierarchical power structures, and he investigates patterns in the post-secular behavior of religious actors. Hanafi classifies fatwa councils into three schools: the "Literalist," who relies solely on textual interpretation; the "Contextualist," who incorporates sociocultural factors into decision-making; and the "Maqāṣid" approach, which considers the higher objectives and purposes of Shariah (pp. 67–71). These distinctions are further illuminated through a case study of Friday sermons in Lebanon, offering an analytical profile of sermonizers, their sources, and the social and political issues they address. This analysis is based on 42 semi-structured interviews with preachers and a content analysis of 210 Friday sermons (pp. 75–94).

Sari Hanafi, furthermore, offers a critical evaluation of the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) movement, identifying six major flaws: (1) A lack of reference to or integration with other academic disciplines; (2) Insufficient methodological depth in normative prescriptions; (3) An inherent tension between variation and sameness in reported cases; (4) The absence of practical guidelines for applying Shariah in everyday functions and processes; (5) The general disconnect between epistemology and scholars' actual research environments; and (5) The near-total exclusion of scholars from the Global South (p. 281). While acknowledging that the movement aims to overcome epistemic divides, Hanafi argues that the proposed methods fail to demonstrate how this integration can be effectively achieved. He refers to this problem as one of "decolonizing," noting that IoK conceptualizations tend to rely too heavily on values, rather than addressing interests and motivations.

Drawing on the work of Samir Abuzaid and the classical paradigm developed by the Persian linguist 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jurjānī, Hanafi proposes the

*Separation/Connection and Pluralistic Praxis* (SeCoPP) model to address these issues. This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining the boundaries between Shariah and the social sciences while fostering dialogue and cooperation between them (p. 287). Furthermore, Hanafi argues that his reform paradigm represents a broader and more liberating outlook. Even as SeCoPP bridges the politics of identity and the politics of knowledge, it is grounded in an ethical perspective on social phenomena—where ethical considerations serve as the basis for addressing contemporary challenges (p. 117).

In Part Two of his study, Hanafi presents a critical analysis of textbooks used in Shariah courses across various Arab contexts, examining how they approach and incorporate modern social scientific topics. He argues that when Shariah sciences fail to engage with contemporary ethical and social challenges, they retreat into an academic bubble—autarkic and detached from real-world concerns. Hanafi critiques Shariah education in Jordan and Kuwait for systemic issues that prevent it from effectively addressing current social and ethical problems. In Jordan, institutions such as the University of Jordan and Al al-Bayt University include courses on Islamic culture, as noted by Muhammad and Al-Tamimi. However, these courses remain largely abstract and theoretical, revealing a lack of pluralism. Interviews with students reveal further problems, including an absence of encouragement for *Ijtihād* (independent reasoning), limitations on critical thinking, sectarian bias in classrooms, and a disregard for research methodologies. In Kuwait, Shariah education is significantly influenced by the Salafi movement, which emphasizes rote memorization and doctrinal rigidity over the integration of secular and practical knowledge for societal benefit.

Hanafi argues that the recent development in Shariah education can be attributed to the path-dependent evolution of faculty training and sociopolitical factors that have led to the creation of institutions conducive to change. Nevertheless, despite universities' official stance against extremism, courses such as *Political Islam* sometimes promote ideas that parallel those of extremist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. To address these challenges, Hanafi advocates for the integration of social sciences, the promotion of pluralism, and the expansion of research training. These measures, he believes, are essential to revitalizing Shariah education and situating it within a contemporary context (pp. 153–189).

Morocco, by contrast, presents a more liberal model, where the overarching goals of Shariah are aligned with modern ethical frameworks through the application of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). Institutions such as the Dar al-Hadith al-Hasaniyya Institute foster a dynamic educational environment that integrates Shariah studies with other academic disciplines and a global outlook. According to Hanafi, this interdisciplinary approach enhances students' argumentative skills and better equips them to confront present-day challenges. In his view, Morocco could serve as a model for educational reform across the Arab world (Hanafi, 2011, p. 103). However, Hanafi also acknowledges that socio-political conditions in the region pose significant obstacles to replicating and expanding this paradigm. Despite these challenges, he maintains that *maqāṣid* represents the most promising reformative path for advancing Shariah education in response to the demands of a modern, multicultural world. Ultimately, he argues, systemic reform is the key to renewing Shariah education in the era of globalization—an era in which the importance of multidisciplinary social sciences cannot be overstated.

In Part III of this book, the author presents prospective models for Shariah education. He discusses how multidisciplinary approaches and ethical integration could contribute to the reform of Islamic education. One such example is the College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, which prioritizes interdisciplinarity and ethical values. The institution offers several programs that combine Shariah studies with contemporary issues, such as *Islam and Global Affairs*, *Islamic Finance*, and *Applied Islamic Ethics*. A key element of the curriculum is its focus on moral dilemmas, helping students learn how to appropriately navigate complex issues. Additionally, the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) serves as a pioneering research hub, exploring topics such as environmental ethics and bioethics (pp. 227–240).

Hanafi considers this college to be among the most promising examples of the reforms he advocates in Islamic education. However, he also identifies several challenges that may hinder its leadership in the field. These include a focus on international indexing standards over local relevance, job insecurity among faculty, gender-related concerns, and language barriers in the offered programs. The institution's innovative role is further jeopardized by the marginalization of traditional Islamic sciences and the suspension of comparative religion studies. These foundational issues risk derailing the institution's efforts to sustain its

pioneering Shariah education model. While the potential of the college is evident, Hanafi's analysis could have been strengthened by examining instances of academic resistance from conservative scholars and considering the applicability of such models in resource-constrained contexts.

Hanafi also examines the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), one of the early pioneers of the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) movement. IIUM was initially founded as an experiment in incorporating secular disciplines into the Ummah's intellectual framework in an Islamic manner. Assessing the main critiques of the initiative, Hanafi argues that the institution was overly reductionist and theoretical in its early years. However, he acknowledges that it has since evolved into a more pragmatic and even postmodernist educational model. For instance, programs like *Islamic Economics* have received international recognition for blending Islamic perspectives with modern economic theories. The integration of spiritual frameworks into psychological research is another notable example of IIUM's interdisciplinary success (pp. 246–263).

Hanafi notes the generational shift within IIUM's faculty, with younger academics embracing more multidisciplinary and pluralistic approaches. While these developments offer hope, they also raise questions about how Islamic identity can coexist with mainstream academic norms. Although this chapter offers a thorough and nuanced evaluation, it would benefit from a deeper exploration of the political and cultural dynamics that have shaped IIUM's trajectory.

Ultimately, Hanafi's case studies illustrate that meaningful reform in Shariah education is both possible and effective. He argues that institutions such as IIUM and Hamad Bin Khalifa University exemplify how ethical orientation and interdisciplinary integration can address the challenges facing Islamic education in a globalized world. Both models demonstrate that Shariah sciences can respond to contemporary issues when they are grounded in modernity. However, Hanafi stresses that such progress requires institutional commitment, adaptability, and a willingness to overcome resistance from traditionalist factions (pp. 227–263). Thus, Chapters 8 and 9 serve as a ray of hope, presenting the reader with models of transformation in Shariah education, driven by pluralism and interdisciplinary engagement.

Part IV of the book addresses the systemic issues within Shariah colleges and offers a strategic roadmap for transformative change. One of the most significant challenges lies in the institutional-level, biphasic approach—simultaneously supporting and resisting interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges—due to deeply entrenched ideological inertia. Hanafi highlights the disparities between curricula rooted in Islamic learning traditions and those informed by modern academic disciplines. He also critiques traditional teaching methods, which rely heavily on memorization and passive instruction.

The divide between theory and practice is exacerbated by "over-specialization," which restricts students' ability to tackle diverse problems and places undue emphasis on textual or literal interpretation at the expense of critical thinking. This stagnation is further illustrated by the lack of creativity in graduate theses. While there has been an increase in female enrollment in Shariah colleges, Hanafi notes that women's authority to influence and shape the field remains constrained by sociocultural limitations. Additional obstacles include bureaucratic rigidity and insufficient funding to support innovative ideas— factors that contribute to the continued marginalization of Shariah education (pp. 279–281).

SeCoPP, an acronym for *Separation, Connection, and Pluralistic Praxis*, represents the cornerstone of Hanafi's vision for reforming Shariah education. It offers a systematic framework for methodologically linking the Shariah sciences with the social sciences while preserving the unique ontologies of each discipline. The SeCoPP approach unfolds in three stages. First, it is necessary to define whether the research topic is purely scientific or spans both science and religion. Second, reduction; in the case of combined topics, examine the religious and scientific components separately, using methodologies appropriate to each. Third, integration – reconnect the findings in a coherent analysis that respects objectivity while embracing cultural diversity (pp. 287–289).

In this chapter, Hanafi reiterates the book's core themes—ethics, interdisciplinarity, and pluralism—as key tools for enacting meaningful change. His proposals outline a restructuring of Shariah education into a discipline capable of addressing contemporary global challenges while remaining adaptable. Yet, Hanafi's own reflections raise important questions: To what extent can these reforms be implemented in societies where the civilizing process varies significantly by culture and political regime? Nevertheless, Hanafi

adopts a hopeful stance, emphasizing the possibility of overcoming resistance and bureaucratic hurdles through collective efforts among educators, policymakers, and scholars. He urges a reimagining of Shariah education informed by collaboration and innovation. In this spirit, the *Maqāṣid* paradigm is introduced as a referential framework for addressing ethical, social, and legal dimensions of Shariah education. The book's consistent focus on ethics positions *Maqāṣid* as a practical foundation for reform. What stands out most, however, is Hanafi's commitment to actionable solutions. Rather than merely diagnosing the problems, he highlights existing best practices and presents viable strategies for improvement—underscoring his intention to prescribe rather than simply critique.

However, the book is not without its weaknesses. While Hanafi's analysis is valuable for understanding Arab contexts, it would benefit from proposing models beyond this region. For instance, Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim-majority country and the second most populous nation—offers a compelling and viable context for developing a reformed system of Islamic education. Indonesia has introduced innovative curricula that blend the traditional Shariah framework with other academic subjects and ethical perspectives. The widespread presence of Islamic universities and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) throughout the country demonstrates that Islamic education can be remapped and reoriented to address both regional and global challenges more effectively. Including Indonesia as a case study would have provided a more comprehensive analysis, showing how various sociopolitical and cultural contexts influence the reform of Islamic education. Moreover, Indonesia's successful management of pluralism and development of interdisciplinary approaches positions it as an ideal model for the types of reforms Hanafi proposes, particularly the integration of Shariah sciences with the social sciences.

Nevertheless, Hanafi's work stands as a significant contribution for the present moment and for the key stakeholders it addresses: educators, policymakers, and academics. It challenges entrenched dichotomies and fosters a synergy that integrates the sacred with the secular. In terms of educational policy, this suggests the need for innovative institutions such as Hamad Bin Khalifa University and the International Islamic University Malaysia. The implications for research are equally profound, as Hanafi calls for further inquiry into the theological matrix of ethics, religion, and the social sciences, aiming to construct

a new meta-narrative of knowledge production. Ultimately, *Studying Islam in the Arab World* serves both as a protest against the rigid systematization of Islamic education and as a roadmap for radical reform. It underscores the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, an ethical foundation, and pluralism—values whose relevance extends beyond Islamic education into the broader academic sphere.

## References

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