

***M.A. Mannan***

Islamic Economics as a Social Science: Some Methodological Issues,  
*JRIE Vol.1. No.1, Summer 1403/1983*

***Comments: Erfan Shafey***

*First Under Secretary of State  
Ministry of Investment Affairs and International Cooperation  
Cairo - Egypt*

The essence of Dr. Mannan's paper is really simple and consists of two straight forward points.

First, that some economic principles of *Shar'iah* need to be amplified, these amplifications should be used as guidelines for economic policy. Then these amplifications may be retained or altered in the light of experience gained in their application.

Second, that in this process of amplification and application, especially in the realm of application, we need an inter-blending of Islamic value judgments and such economic knowledge of cause-effect relationships which do not violate the *Shari'ah*.

No one would squabble with the author had he presented his argument in those simple terms. But the author presents a sophisticated discussion in which he raises some interesting points on methodology and occasionally over-states his case and over-draws his conclusions. A few comments are therefore in order.

Dr. Mannan entitles his paper "Islamic Economics as a Social Science", and states that one of his objectives is to indicate "the steps needed for the development of Islamic Economic science." The touchstone of science, we all know, is its methodology not its conclusions. The scientific method is what makes science respectable. But the scientific method has also a serious draw back in that it is not capable of studying everything.

Now to aim at making Islamic Economics a Social Science, in the strict sense of the word, entails adherence to the scientific method as the sole standard; i.e. accepting what it endorses and rejecting what it rejects. But as we know revealed knowledge is a major and important component of Islamic Economics which has to be accepted by the believer as such; i.e. as God-ordained and extra-scientific. There are strict limits therefore as to how far Islamic Economics can evolve into a science even though it may grow and flourish as a branch of knowledge in a way similar to several other branches of knowledge.

In any case, as it turns out, Dr. Mannan spends too little time in demonstrating how the *Shari'ah* principles would be amplified into scientific theory *per se*. This is what one is led to expect in his paper. His concern, however, is with a much broader topic in that he provides a summary overview of the steps needed to move from the timeless and abstract *Shari'ah* principles towards the time-and-place bound guidelines of policy which are modifiable in the light of feedbacks. The exposition of that part of the paper is cast in very broad terms, interesting as far as it goes, but in the final analysis it does not deliver what it promised on the relatively narrower topic as "the steps needed for the development of Islamic economic science."

With regard to the sub-topic of implementation of *Shari'ah*-derived economic policy, Dr. Mannan refers exclusively to the use of the price mechanism and transfer payments. Certainly the policy instruments in an Islamic society could be much more numerous and diversified than these two which have been singled out.

A point which I felt Dr. Mannan blew a little out of proportion is the role of values in the formulation of theory and design of policy. There can be no denial that some values are implicit and unavoidable in the formulation of positive theories (e.g. in the choice of problems and variables). This point is well-taken and has been noted in the economics literature for decades. But it does not follow that the analytical distinction between positive and normative economics is dead and useless. There is often a big and clear difference between "what is" and "what ought to be". Dr. Mannan expressed his fear however that the distinction between positive and normative economics "may eventually give rise to birth and growth of 'secularism' in Islamic economics.... and may destroy the basic foundation of Islamic economics". He does not stop to explain why a science should be afraid of the scientific method. What he does is to suggest that we aim for an "integrated" Islamic economics, i.e. as neither a positive nor a normative science. But playing with words here will not do. Islamic economics, in its primary concern with "what ought to be" cannot ignore "what is" the actual reality in a given time and place. In other words, Islamic economics needs theories or positive models by which actual reality can be comprehended, evaluated, and/or steered to bring it closer to the normative Islamic model.