

TOWARDS THE CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF ISLAMIC CRITICAL THINKING

Mohd Nuri Al-Amin Endut
*Management and Humanities Department,
Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS,*

Assoc. Prof. Dr Wan Suhaimi Wan Abdullah
*Department of Akidah and Islamic Thought
Academy of Islamic Studies
University of Malaya*

Abstract

Critical thinking is a very important intellectual tool which enable us to consciously structure an argument, judge the credibility of a source, analyze assumptions, or make decisions in various contexts. Educators have shown a great interest in teaching critical thinking at all levels in which most of the concept of thinking is referring to the Western perspective. Islam, on the other hand, has established its very own strong foundation and framework of critical thinking from its first revelation. The Qur'ānic emphasis on critical thinking could be firmly observed through its pursuit of contemplation and good reasoning, objection to Taqlid and quest for the certainty and objectivity. As such, there is a significant difference between Islamic and modern critical thinking which is deeply rooted to the conceptual view of each vis-à-vis analytical theories. Both schools of thought are concerned with the same issues of critical thinking although there are some obvious differences, mainly in relation to the epistemological issue of certainty (al-Yaqīn), the revelational issue of absolute truth (al-Haqq) as well as the issues of religious consciousness and values. Thus, it is important for Muslims to reconstruct Islamic framework of critical thinking. This paper is a humble effort to contribute toward this end. It attempts to develop major element of Islamic critical thinking from its primary sources namely the Qur'an and the hadith. It starts with a brief presentation on the available definitions of critical thinking, followed by the critical thinking in the Qur'an and finally presents some elements of Islamic critical thinking.

Introduction

The concerns about the need for well educated citizens who have the ability to think critically and to reason well have always been regarded as an important and necessary outcome of education. This reveals the necessity of critical thinking in educational curriculum. The importance of critical thinking is not only recognized by educators, as the demand for it is widely persisted in the corporate, social as well as political life. Highly competitive employment market in a global economy, the survival of a democratic way of life, and personal decision making in a complex and rapidly changing society require sound reasoning and good judgments. Moreover, to have any flawless and virtuous personal decisions it requires the ability to evaluate and interpret all information accurately especially those filtered by the media that emphasizes promotion and imagery over reason¹.

¹ Jennifer H. Reed (1998), Effect of a Model for Critical Thinking on Student Achievement in Primary Source Document Analysis and Interpretation, Argumentative Reasoning, Critical Thinking Dispositions,

From the Islamic point of view, critical thinking is essential in Muslim intellectual life since it is part and parcel of his/her motivation and reasoning process to accept Islam and reject any element of *jāhiliyyah*. The Qur'ānic emphasis on critical thinking can be observed through its firm objection to *Taqīd* which promotes uncritical adoption and unquestioning acceptance of a doctrine without any valid reasoning. When the Qur'ān infers the sole lordship of Allah Ta'ala over the universe and asks man to serve his Lord, this is definitely derived from an analytical induction method built on a set of factual empirical premises that could be critically observed in verses that signify various evidences of God's creation and lordship over the universe.²

Similarly when arguing those who insisted in worshipping gods other than Allah, the Qur'ān requires them to bring out their convincing proof (*burhān*), derived from reliable and certain (*yaqīn*) premises.³ These are among the evidences that the Qur'ānic guidance and discussion are against any kind of blind imitation and ignorance. Furthermore, it has openly called for a 'critical' contemplation and urged people to willingly accept any of its teaching based on intellectual satisfaction and solid faith. This is the anthropocentric aspect of the Qur'ān where the enlightenment and revealed wisdoms are blended with critical reasons and rationalism to reach the truth.

As such, the difference between modern and Islamic critical thinking is not much at the operational level, but rather deeply involved in its conceptual underpinnings. Both are concerned with the same issues of defining problems, examining evidences, analyzing assumptions and avoiding emotional reasoning and oversimplification. However, with regards to the conceptual context, there are some obvious differences between these two, mainly in relation to the epistemological issue of certainty (*al-Yaqīn*), the revelational issue of absolute truth (*al-Haqq*) in addition to the issues of religious consciousness and values.

Thus, it is important for Muslims to rediscover and promote their own framework of critical thinking as an alternative at least for the Muslim and to encounter the contemporary Western idea of critical thinking which has put aside all spiritual-metaphysical dimensions from its view, methods and theories. This would be an effort to contribute to the process of de-westernization of knowledge as well as to re-introduce critical thinking within the Islamic worldview.

The Definitions of Critical Thinking

The Western understanding of the power and nature of critical thinking has emerged towards an increasingly more explicit formulations starting from as earlier as the 20th Century.⁴ In 1906, William Graham Sumner published a land-breaking study of the foundations of sociology and anthropology, *Folkways*, in which he documented the tendency of the human mind to think socio-centrally and the parallel tendency for schools to serve the uncritical function of social indoctrination. At the same time, he

and History Content in a Community College History Course (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida, University of South Florida), p. 2.

² See for example: *Al-Ghāshiyah* (88): 17-20 and *Āli 'Imrān* (3): 191.

³ Refer *Al-Anbiyā'* (21): 24 and *Al-Naml* (27): 64.

⁴ Richard Paul et al. (1997), *California Teacher Preparation for Instruction in Critical Thinking: Research Findings and Policy Recommendations: State of California, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing*, Foundation for Critical Thinking, <http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/briefHistoryCT.cfm>, Retrieved April 14, 2009.

recognized the essential need for critical thinking in life and education. He described critical thinking as “the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not”.⁵

On the other hand, Alec Fisher claims that the modern critical thinking tradition was first initiated by the famous American philosopher, John Dewey.⁶ His study on the instrumental nature of human thought with regard to its pragmatic basis and its grounding in the actual human purposes, goals, and objectives has contributed a lot in the development of research in critical thinking. He terms human thought as “reflective thinking” and he defines it as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” and this includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality.⁷

These are among the earlier definitions of critical thinking which basically tend to give more emphasis on the logical evaluative measurement in accepting any claims or beliefs. It was since then that research on critical thinking developed and it was in a very broad sense and of various concepts to the extent that researchers found it is hard to reach at a solid consensus on how critical thinking would be best defined. Definitions of critical thinking are usually made in terms of formal or informal logic or, as in recent development, of general problem-solving skill.⁸ The grounding of the various theories and models of critical thinking rests normally in two distinct disciplines, namely philosophy and psychology. The philosophers tend to focus on the nature and quality of critical thinking products, for example in the nature and quality of analysis and of arguments, while psychologists, on the other hand, concentrate on the process of cognition, the components and operations used to address academic and practical problems. It is also evident that both disciplines have different approaches and methodologies; the cognitive and developmental psychology is based on empirical research while philosophy relies more on logical reasoning.⁹

As a result of the broad scope of discussion, the definitions of critical thinking in both disciplines, philosophy and psychology, were also presented in various ways which generally could be categorized into two different approaches. The first approach tends to describe critical thinking in a general and simple way, and sufficient to capture its main concept that emphasizes its practical aspect. A recognized example of the general philosophical definition proposed by Robert Ennis a renowned critical thinking philosopher, who defined critical thinking as “reasonable, reflective thinking that is

⁵ William Graham Sumner (1940), *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, New York: Ginn and Co, pp. 632 - 633.

⁶ Alec Fisher (2001), *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-2.

⁷ John Dewey (1960), *How We Think*, Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, p. 9.

⁸ In Western culture, critical thinking used to be closely identified with the discipline of logic. Logic traditionally formed an essential part of classical models of American education when it often provides the philosophical framework for the entire curriculum of America’s colleges and universities. Today, logic has become merely one of many specialized disciplines which are still considered by many contemporary educators as the primary medium for learning the skills and attitudes of critical thinking. Other educators, however, have sought to de-emphasize formal logic and, instead, develop critical thinking skills through courses in problem solving. See: Chet Meyers (1986), *Teaching Students to Think Critically*, San Francisco and London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 3.

⁹ Jennifer H. Reed (1998), *op.cit.*, p. 15 - 16.

focused on deciding what to believe or do”.¹⁰ By stressing on reasonable thinking, Ennis¹¹ implies that critical thinking must rely upon good and appropriate reasons in reaching the best conclusions. Any belief or actions based not on good and appropriate reason are unreasonable. Furthermore, the element of ‘reflective thinking’ indicates the important of consciousness aspect in good thinking for thinking will never become reasonable by accident. Thus any critical thinkers must consciously seek for good reasons and be reflective in examining the reasonableness of their own and others’ thought. On the other hand, the aim of critical thinking is to reach to a reasonable decision about what to believe or to do. Therefore, it should have been able to evaluate statements (what we believe) and actions (what we do), especially when we learned that to decide ‘what to believe’ has been considered for sometimes as the main concern of critical thinking.

The general definition of critical thinking from the psychologist’s perspective is well illustrated by Diane F. Halpern who defined critical thinking as “the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome”.¹² This definition describes critical thinking as purposeful, reasoned and goal directed kind of thinking and it aims in solving problems, formulating inferences and making decisions.¹³

The second approach, on the other hand, is found within a specific framework and narrower subject that largely reflects the philosophical based critical thinking which involves intellectual theories and skills found in informal logic. This specific definition stresses the meta-cognitive (thinking about your own thinking) aspect of critical thinking, the universal intellectual standards (e.g., clarity, precision, accuracy and relevance) regardless of its specific issues and the appropriate dispositions or intellectual virtues (e.g., empathy, humility, integrity, perseverance, fairness) aid in overcoming the biases and unfounded assumptions.¹⁴

Michael Scriven and Richard Paul have provided an example of this specific philosophical definition. They describe critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information generated by observation, experience, reflection,

¹⁰ Stephen P. Norris and Robert H. Ennis (1989), *Evaluating Critical Thinking*, Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Press & Software, p. 3. This approach could be observed in many other informal logical definitions of critical thinking provided by other scholars such as D. Alan Bensley who defined critical thinking as “a reflective thinking involving the evaluation of evidence relevant to a claim so that a sound conclusion can be drawn from the evidence”. Another example is the definition by Royce P Jones who view Critical Thinking as “the activity in which a person attempts to form or evaluate judgments with the aid of relevant and reliable considerations”. See, D. Alan Bensley (1998), *Critical Thinking in Psychology: A Unified Skills Approach*, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, p. 5 and Royce P. Jones (2001), *Foundations of Critical Thinking*, Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, p. 4.

¹¹ Stephen P. Norris and Robert H. Ennis (1989), *op.cit.*, pp. 3 – 4.

¹² Diane F. Halpern (1996), *Thought and Knowledge: An Introduction to Critical Thinking*, 3rd ed., New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 5. This type of definition is more likely to relate critical thinking with problem solving which could similarly be observed in Joanne Kurfiss’s definition of critical thinking; “an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that therefore can be convincingly justified”. See Joanne G. Kurfiss (1988), *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*, Texas: Association for the Study of Higher Education, p. 2.

¹³ Diane F. Halpern (1996), *op.cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Jennifer H. Reed (1998), *op.cit.*, p. 19.

reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”.¹⁵ Despite of its lengthy and wordy statement, this specific definition appears to be more focus and precise compare to the above general approach. Nevertheless, these various approaches in defining critical thinking reflect the vast meaning of thought that could be alternatively perceived from various aspects. At the same time, these definitions also share similar elements of thought which implicitly entail the examination of all reasoning process and lead to its conclusions.

However, a more comprehensive definition of critical thinking was proposed by the American Philosophical Association.¹⁶ It defines critical thinking as “a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based”.¹⁷ This definition covers indeed every aspect of the previous definitions including the cognitive and affective domains the thinking.

In general, based on the above definitions, there are several common characteristics of critical thinking. All of these definitions indicate that critical thinking is not a passive or automatic thinking since thinking were characterized as ‘active’, ‘purposeful’ or ‘focus’. These definitions also point out that critical thinking deals with ideas, including ‘beliefs’, ‘observations’ and ‘statement’ and its focus is primarily on reasoning and arguments.¹⁸ In short, critical thinking is concerned mainly on making sound judgments which generated from a flawless evaluative and analytical thinking process.¹⁹ Thus, the critical thinkers would stand out from the usual kind of thinking by having proper attitude towards reasoning and would equip themselves with an appropriate knowledge of principles of reasoning when engaging themselves with their life. They are supposed to continuously drive themselves to exercise the positive critical thinking and to re-examine their personal, workplace and political lives in order to survive successfully. Thus critical thinking, in this sense, is undoubtedly a valuable skill

¹⁵ Richard Paul & Micheal Scriven, *Definition of Critical Thinking*, Foundation for Critical Thinking, <http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/definingCT.cfm>, Retrieved December 30, 2008. Also see, Alec Fisher (2001), *op.cit.*, p. 10-11.

¹⁶ The definition is part of result proposed from a research project organized by the association in its attempt to achieve a consensus of opinions by a panel of experts in critical thinking for the purposes of educational instruction and assessment. Forty-six experts, drawn from various disciplines, participated in the multiyear qualitative research project. About half (52%) of the participants were philosophers, and the rest were affiliated with education (22%), the social sciences including psychology (20%), and the physical sciences (6%). The report resulting from this investigation is commonly known in the critical thinking literature as the Delphi Report. See: Peter A. Facione (1990), *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction*, Millbrea: California Academic Press, pp. 2 – 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ See, Jay Verlinden (2005), *Critical Thinking and Everyday Argument*, Australia: Thomson Wadsworth, p. 18.

¹⁹ According to Glaser, critical thinking emphasis the process of thinking which mainly involve three principal elements; 1) An attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful, perspective manner the problems and subjects that come within the range of one’s experience, 2) knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning and 3) skill in applying those methods. See: Eugene B. Zechmeister and James E. Johnson (1992), *Critical Thinking: A Functional Approach*, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, p. 5.

that can greatly increase one's understanding of life in various contexts and help him to encounter the world of uncertainty, chaos, change, speed and complexity.

Critical Thinking in the Qur'ān

Islam encourages men to engage in critical thinking in order to meet the divine expectation of human creation. While various material and utilitarian benefits can be generated from the process of good thinking, the recognition of Allah as the Sole Creator of the universe and all creatures will always remain the ultimate goal of thinking and contemplation in Islam. The impact of the recognition, however, does not only enhance one's spirituality but also improve his or her social living. This explicitly explain the key function of human mind in making sense the realities of human and social well being based on rationality in the light of revealed guidance. This recognition also reveals sense of direction of thinking process and activities as dictated by the mind Giver in order to make thinking and life more meaningful.²⁰

The Qur'ān, from the anthropocentric part of its nature, emphasizes deeply the intellectual faculty of man. This thinking faculty, apart from being an essential reality of man, is an indispensable feature for man's unique position in accepting the noble mission of Allah's vicegerent in earth. In this sense, the faculty of thinking is the most superior feature that does not only distinguish man from other creatures, but qualifies him to bear Allah's responsibility in sustaining mankind and building civilization²¹.

Notably, the Qur'ān demands the readers to utilize this faculty in many different approaches and styles. The derivative forms of *al-'aql* or "intellect" alone has been repeatedly used forty nine times²² in various chapters of the Qur'ān²³ urging Muslims to exercise their intellect in pursuing good reasoning and drawing conclusions to discover truth guidance. In supporting those different approaches and styles, the Qur'ān also use other terms²⁴ which carry different shades of intellectual emphasis such as *tafakkur*²⁵ (contemplating), *tadhakkur*²⁶ (taking to heart), *tadabbur*²⁷ (pondering), *tafaquh*²⁸ (comprehending), *tabassur*²⁹ (understanding), *tawassum*³⁰ (reflecting), *nazar*³¹ (considering) and *i'tibār*³² (taking a lesson). The fact that al-Razi³³ for instance, while

²⁰ See: Hazizan Md Noon (2005), "Foreword from the dean Kuliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences", *National Conference on Creative/Critical Thinking from Islamic Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, p. iii.

²¹ See: Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (1989), *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam*, London and New York, Mansell, Also look: Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin (2005), *Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective*, International Islamic University Malaysia Press, 2nd ed., p. 1.

²² Mostly mentioned in a active verbal form. See: Fatima Ismail (1993), *Al-Qur'ān wa al-Nazar al-'Aqlī*, Herdinon, IIIT, pp. 63 – 64.

²³ See for example: *al-Baqarah* (2): 44, *al-Hajj* (22): 46 and *al-A'rāf* (7): 179

²⁴ Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin (2005), *op.cit.*, pp. 3 – 7.

²⁵ See for example: *al-Baqarah* (2): 219, *al-An'ām* (6): 50 and *al-Ra'd* (13): 3.

²⁶ *Al-Baqarah* (2): 221 and *al-An'ām* (6): 126.

²⁷ *Al-Nisā'* (4): 82 and *al-Sād* (38): 29.

²⁸ *Al-An'ām* (6): 65 and *al-A'rāf* (7): 179.

²⁹ *Yūsuf* (12): 108.

³⁰ *Al-Hijr* (15): 75

³¹ *Al-A'rāf* (7): 185 and *Yūnus* (10): 101.

³² *Al-Nūr* (24): 44 and *al-Hashr* (59): 2.

³³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (2000), *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 1st ed., Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyyah, vol. 2, pp. 187 – 191.

commentating on the aspect of knowledge in the Qur'ān, has come out with 30 synonyms for the term related to thinking indicates the great emphasis of the Qur'ān on thinking. Although these Qur'ānic terms carry different meanings with various manners, contexts or levels of thinking³⁴ but they generally could be seen, among others, as the direct indication towards an Islamic conception of critical thinking.

In order to elaborate further the concept of critical thinking in the Qur'ān, we will present a discussion on two related topic namely the doctrine of *ayat* and the Qur'ānic tradition of critical thinking.

i. The Doctrine of *Ayat*

The Qur'ānic injunction on critical thinking can be fundamentally traced from its affirmation of the concept of *ayat* (God's signs in the universe). An *ayah*, as explained by al-Raghib al-Isfahani³⁵, basically "means a manifest sign (*al-'alamah al-zahirah*) which serves to indicate what is hidden, or not directly manifest, in such wise that when the sign is perceived, the other, which cannot be perceived and which is of one predicament as the former, comes to be known"³⁶. The concept of *ayat* in the Qur'ān generally implies that the metaphysical truths of the Qur'ān have their physical, sensible, observable counterparts in natural phenomena which manifest and indicate the transcendent truth.³⁷

This concept of *ayat* is presented in different forms; some are explicit and others are implicit in which the higher human intellection is required. The explicit form of *ayat* refers to a group of signs, as in the universe and in our own selves³⁸, that can be perceived merely by sense observation and experimentation. However, this level of perception will still never reach to the ultimate meaning of the sign for, as the Qur'ān clearly stated, this revealed signs could not be grasped by relying solely on sense observation and experimentation due to the limitation of senses in meditating and interpreting the signs of Allah in the universe.

³⁴ For example most commentators would interpret *tabassur* to be more significant and depth in meaning compared to *nazar*. Golshani on the other hand, stated that the words *tafakkur*, *ta'aqqul* and *tafaquh* in the Qur'ān refer to different degrees of intellectual perception. See: Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin (2005), *op.cit.*, pp. 3 – 4 and Mehdi Golshani (1986), *The Holy Quran and The Sciences of Nature*, Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, p. 133.

³⁵ Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (1972), *Mu'jam Mufradat alfaz al-Qur'an*, Dar al-Katib al Arabi, p. 28.

³⁶ Mohd Zaidi Ismail (2007), *The Cosmos as the Created Book and Its Implications for the Orientation of Science* at

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Cosmos+as+the+created+book+and+its+implications+for+the...-a0182036015>, retrieved October 31, 2009. This paper was originally presented at the International Conference on "The Role of Islamic States in a Globalized World" held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on July 18, 2007, as "The Universe qua the Created Book and its Implications on the Orientation of Science within an Islamic State".

³⁷ On this statement see further: Mehdi Golshani (1986), *op.cit.*, pp. 105 – 109 and Adi Setia Mohammad Dom (2007), *Three Meanings of Islamic Science: toward Operationalizing Islamization of Science* at

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+meanings+of+Islamic+science%3a+toward+operationalizing...-a0164596584> retrieved November 1, 2009.

³⁸ To quote the Qur'ān:

"We will Soon show them Our signs (*ayatina*) in the furthest regions of the earth (*afaq*), and in their own souls (*anfusihi*), until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth." *Al-fussilat* (41): 53

As for the implicit form of *āyat* that reveals the other level of perception, it is recognizable only by those who think and reflect.³⁹ In the verses concerning the miracle of natural phenomena, the Qur'ān has explicitly pointed out that the perception of divine signs and their relation to the Lord belong to the people of intellect and reflection (*qawm yatafakkaru*)⁴⁰. It is obvious from the above presentation that both forms of *āyat* have their own territory, each of which could be perceived in different levels. It also implies that the ultimate meaning of the signs of God cannot be recognized unless through reflection and critical thinking.

In sum, the Qur'ānic assertion of *āyat* necessitates human engagement in critical thinking and the quality of human reception of the *āyat* depends upon the integrity of reason; the higher ability of reason would result the greater achievement in attaining a clearer meaning of the sign⁴¹.

ii. The Qur'ānic Tradition of Critical thinking

Apart from the Qur'ānic emphasis on the specific intellectual terms and concepts in applying critical thinking, there are narrations and stories in the Qur'ān that implicitly promote the tradition of critical thinking. The term *taqlid*⁴² (imitation) as opposed in a way to critical thinking, for example, although it is not mentioned in the Qur'ān but the rejection of the idea and concept are clearly indicated. The Qur'ān has condemned the uncritical tradition of the pre-Islamic society (*jāhiliyyah*) that tends to accept and recognize irrational beliefs inherited from their earlier generations. It also considers this attitude as neglecting the role of mind and being influenced by the evil desires.⁴³ Moreover, this Qur'ānic condemnation of *taqlid* can be seen as a manifestation of its advocacy on the critical thinking tradition particularly in examining the rational and logical aspect of any culture and belief prior to adoption.

In addition to the above implicit narration, there are many other narrations and stories that signify the tradition or spirit of critical thinking in Islam such as follows⁴⁴:

1. The Muslim is urged to ascertain any news brought by a wicked person (*fāsiq*).⁴⁵ They are obliged to examine the sources of information and not merely to accept

³⁹ Refer to: Adi Setia Mohammad Dom (2007), *op.cit.*, and Mehdi Golshani (1986), *op.cit.*, pp. 101.

⁴⁰ In this respect, Allah says in the Qur'ān:

“He it is who sends down water (rain) from the sky; from it You drink and from it (grows) the vegetation on which You send Your cattle to pasture. With it He causes to grow for You the crops, the olives, the date-palms, the grapes, and Every kind of fruit. Verily! In This is indeed an evident proof and a manifest sign for people who give thought”. *Al-Nahl* (16): 10 - 11

Also refer to verses: *Al-An'ām* (6): 97 and 98, *al-Nahl* (16): 12 and *al-Zumar* (39): 21.

⁴¹ See: Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2005), “Reading the Signs: A Qur'ānic Perspective of Thinking”, paper presented at the Seminar on Thinking in Kuala Lumpur organized by International Islamic University Malaysia, p. 1.

⁴² Al-Ghazzali defines *taqlid* as (قبول قول بلا حجة) or to accept assertion without evidence while al-Amidi describes it as to follow other's views without concrete reason. Refer Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1997), *al-Mustasfa min Ilm al-Usul*, Vol. 1, ed. Dr. Muhammad Sulayman al-Asyqar, Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, p.516, and Saif al-Din Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Amidi, *Al-Ihkam Fi Usul al-Ahkam*. juz. 111, Beirut: Dar al- Fikr, p.166.

⁴³ See: *al-Zukhruf* (43): 22-23, *al-Māidah* (5): 104 and *al-A'rāf* (7): 28.

⁴⁴ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1987), *al-Imān wa al-Hayāh*, Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah.

⁴⁵ *Al-Hujurat* (49): 6.

- any information and to make judgment without investigating the credibility of its sources as part of the evaluation process.
2. The event where the Prophet Sulayman had demanded the Hoopoe bird to come with a clear reason for its absence in the birds gathering led by him⁴⁶ illustrates the requisition for man to think and act based on unambiguous statements or evidences instead of emotions and prejudices. Another good example of this requisition is the event where the Great *al-'Azīz* of Egypt refused to accept the claim of his beloved wife, Zulaikha who had accused the Prophet Yusuf without having any concrete evidence.⁴⁷ These prophetic stories provide guidance and inspiration to Muslim to be more critical, analytical and objective in his decision far from any element of biasness and favoritism to whom he loved.
 3. The warning to attach with the idea and tradition of the majority without having any critical and rational consideration.⁴⁸ In most cases, the common and widely practiced traditions were based on assumption and conjecture which need to be re-evaluated according to the teaching of Islam.

Based on these Qur'ānic narrations and stories, it is clear that all fundamental aspects of modern critical thinking concerning issues such as clarity, precision, relevance, sound evidence, depth and fairness have been inclusively if not deeply covered. Moreover, these cognitive and logical issues of critical thinking have been approached within the context of the Islamic spirituality to provide special religious attributes to the discourse.

Fundamental Elements of Islamic Critical Thinking

The culture of thinking of a society has great influences on its intellectual quality and development. In this respect, as for the development of the modern Muslim intellectual, critical thinking is also essential particularly with regards to the intellectual challenges faced by the Muslim. The current development and influences of Western thought, especially in their formulation of critical thinking framework, cannot be neglected. The Muslim must therefore participate in this situation and try to develop their own framework in order to assure that their thinking culture will grow hand in hand with the current achievement, but within the framework of Islamic teaching and foundation.

Islam has established a very strong foundation and framework of critical thinking from its first revelation. The teaching of Islam has tremendously succeeded in transforming the mindset of the pagan Arabs to be more reflective, critical and civilized. It has also illustrated a general Islamic framework and worldview for the Muslim life which include necessarily critical thinking. This general framework reveals several elements of thinking which could be considered as the Islamic foundation of critical thinking. These foundational elements could be categorized as follow:

1. *Al-Tafakkur*

The term *tafakkur* has been interpreted by a majority of the *mufassirin* as reflection and contemplation. Literally it means a deliberate, systematic process of reflective

⁴⁶ See: *Al-Naml* (27): 20-22.

⁴⁷ See: *Yusuf* (12): 25-29.

⁴⁸ See: *Al-An'am* (6): 116

discourse.⁴⁹ It has been used 18 times in the Qur'ān as a 'verb', instead of a 'noun', to stress on its application rather than merely an abstract conception⁵⁰. The Qur'ān repeatedly provokes and challenges the reader to think and contemplate the signs of Allah so that she or he can understand better. This implies that we have to reflect and examine the message of the Qur'ān, as demonstrated in its *āyat*, to grasp the very 'reality' of its messages and to present its relevant and realistic meanings and understanding in accordance with the needs of all times. This would require a spiritual consciousness and a proper 'critical' framework while reading the Qur'ān⁵¹. Has not the Qur'ān said, "(Here is), a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition." (*Al-Sad* (38): 29). In fact the verse: "verily in that are Signs for those who reflect" (*Al-Rum* (30): 21) is a constant theme throughout the Qur'ān which, among others, underscores the point that the meanings of the signs of Allah cannot be read merely at face-value but it requires thinking and reflection. This is what we understood by *tafakkur*.

The process of *tafakkur*, according to Malik Badri⁵², develops through three interrelated stages; a) information that comes through perception via the senses, imagination or abstract intellectual information, b) paying closer look and inspecting the aesthetic aspect of that information while acknowledging its beauty and perfect creation which will lead to astonishment and appreciation, c) Shifting from contemplating the created object to the thought about its Creator that will lead to the sense of submission to and appreciation of the God. This systematic process of thinking is an essential portion of the Muslim consciousness of *tawhid* which has been the source of the scientific spirit in Islamic tradition as frequently explained by Osman Bakar⁵³. He stated that the spirit of Muslim observation/experimentation is shaped by this religious consciousness, and not due to religious doubt and skepticism. The spirit of Muslim experimentation was inspired rather by the certainty of God as the Absolute and as the source of all great truths.

2. *Al-Yaqin*

The element of *al-yaqin* in the context of Islamic critical thinking could be explained from two different angles. The first is focusing on the conceptual meaning of the term which deals with the theoretical and epistemological discourse from the nature of knowledge. The second emphasizes on the quest for *al-yaqin*, which addresses the systematic processes of verification of knowledge to reach to certainty.

As for the conceptual meaning of *al-yaqin*, it is considered the ultimate aim of Islamic critical thinking in which it leads to an intellectual and spiritual satisfaction (*al-`ilm al-yaqin*) far from all kind of doubt (*shakk*). Al-Ghazzali⁵⁴, in his *Ihya' `ulum al-din*, explains that a learned man "should be greatly concerned with the strengthening of his faith (*yaqin*), which is the mainspring of religion. He further defines *al-`ilm al-yaqin* as

⁴⁹ Ibn ManZur (1990), *Lisān al-Arab*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr (the root "fakkara").

⁵⁰ Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin (2005), *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Yedullah Kazmi (2000), "The Role of Critical Thinking in Islam", in *Hamdard Islamicus*, Madinat al-Hikmah: Bait al-Hikmah, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 32.

⁵² Malik Badri (2000), *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*, Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, p. 30.

⁵³ Osman Bakar (1999), *the History Philosophy of Islamic Science*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, pp. 2 and 7.

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1992), *Ihya' `Ulum al-Din*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiah, pp. 87 – 88.

being such that “the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility”.⁵⁵

The quest for the certainty, on the other hand, refers to the process of requiring sound proofs and evidences. Al-Ghazzali, in his intellectual and spiritual quest for certainty, has provided a clear guideline on the way of thinking with regard to the sources of knowledge. In the introduction of his work *al-Mustasfa min ‘Ilm al-USul*, he stressed the importance of identifying the status of a premise in order to justify its function as the foundation of *al-burhān*⁵⁶. The premises, according to him, must derive from the reliable sources and reach the level of certainty before it can generate *‘ilm al-yaqīn*. In other words, a certain conclusion must derive from a certain premises. The importance of having authentic sources has been clearly stated by the Qur’ān (*al-Hujurat* (49): 6). In another verse, the Qur’ān (*Yunus* (10): 36) also warns from relying on fancies and conjectures which can never substitute for truth.

3. Al-‘Adl

The concept of *al-‘adl* in the context of Islamic critical thinking can be derived from many verses and Prophetic narrations especially with regard to the quest for objectivity. This is clear, for instance, when the Qur’ān states “*not to let the hatred of others toward you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice; be just, that is next to piety; and fear Allah*” (*al-Māidah* (5): 8). It stresses the importance of objectivity in the process of decision making free from any emotional and personal interference. Similarly, critical thinking in Islam denounces any type of dependence on desires, personal interests, prejudices and other forms of bias⁵⁷. This is because such elements would negatively influence and become obstacles to the objective thinking and fair judgments.

Basically these three foundational elements prescribe the nature of Islamic critical thinking that mostly concern about the spiritual, epistemological and ethical aspect of thought. The concept of *tafakkur*, *al-yaqīn* and *al-‘adl* provide an Islamic insight and consciousness to critical thinking that distinguishes it from the Western perspective. Moreover these unique elements present groundwork for a comprehensive framework of Islamic critical thinking which would need to be elaborated further compatibly to the relevant discussion of modern critical thinking in order to reach to the utmost aim of thinking in Islam.

Conclusion

This paper examines the subject of critical thinking from the Islamic perspective and explores its nature and framework by suggesting the distinguished elements of Islamic critical thinking. Critical thinking is certainly not strange from the Islamic teaching. The Qur’ān has presented the thinking culture in various ways and aspect in which they could

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1964), *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, ed. Abd al-Halim Mahmud, Cairo: Maktabah al-Anglo al-Masriyyah, pp. 13 – 14.

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1997), *al-Mustasfa min Ilm al-USul*, Vol. 1, ed. Dr. Muhammad Sulayman al-Asyqar, Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Risalah, pp. 36 – 38.

⁵⁷ Ismail Abdullah (2005), “The Application of Critical Thinking in the Process of *Jarh wa Ta’dīl* (Impugnment and Validation) of the Prophetic Hadith”, *National Conference on Creative/Critical Thinking from Islamic Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, p. 116.

be systematically structured to form a clear conceptual definition of Islamic critical thinking. Even though the Islamic and Western definition of critical thinking would be technically similar, but the differences lay on the conceptual comprehension of those technical terms used in the definitions and on the worldview of both traditions. As such the conceptual definition of Islamic critical thinking would function to describe the thinking from the Islamic worldview as a replacement to the Western secular conception. It is essential for the Muslim educators to explore and introduce the concept of Islamic critical thinking, particularly in the Muslim educational system, to instill the next Muslim generation with proper skills of thinking, far from any secular element.

References

- Adi Setia Mohammad Dom (2007), *Three Meanings of Islamic Science: toward Operationalizing Islamization of Science* at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+meanings+of+Islamic+science%3a+toward+operationalizing...-a0164596584> retrieved November 1, 2009.
- Alec Fisher (2001), *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1964), *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, ed. Abd al-Halim Mahmud, Cairo: maktabah al-Anglo al-Masriyyah.
- Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1992), *Ihya' `Ulum al-Din*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiah.
- Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid (1997), *al-Mustasfa min Ilm al-Usul*, Vol. 1, ed. Dr. Muhammad Sulayman al-Asyqar, Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah.
- Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (1972), *Mu'jam Mufradat al-faz al-Qur'ān*, Dar al-Katib al Arabi.
- Chet Meyers (1986), *Teaching Students to Think Critically*, San Francisco and London: Jossey-Bass Publishers
- D. Alan Bensley (1998), *Critical Thinking in Psychology: A Unified Skills Approach*, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company
- Diane F. Halpern (1996), *Thought and Knowledge: An Introduction to Critical Thinking*, 3rd ed., New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Eugene B. Zechmeister and James E. Johnson (1992), *Critical Thinking: A Functional Approach*, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company
- Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (2000), *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, 1st ed., Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-`ilmiyyah
- Fatima Ismail (1993), *Al-Qur'ān wa al-Nazar al-'Aqlī*, Herdionon, IIIT
- Hazizan Md Noon (2005), "Foreword from the dean Kuliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences", *National Conference on Creative/Critical Thinking from Islamic Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Ibn Manzur (1990), *Lisān al-Arab*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr.
- Ismail Abdullah (2005), "The Application of Critical Thinking in the Process of *Jarh wa Ta'dil* (Impugnment and Validation) of the Prophetic Hadith", *National Conference on Creative/Critical Thinking from Islamic Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin (2005), *Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective*, International Islamic University Malaysia Press, 2nd ed
- Jay Verlinden (2005), *Critical Thinking and Everyday Argument*, Australia: Thomson Wadsworth
- Jennifer H. Reed (1998), Effect of a Model for Critical Thinking on Student Achievement in Primary Source Document Analysis and Interpretation, Argumentative Reasoning, Critical Thinking Dispositions, and History Content in a Community College History Course (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida, University of South Florida)
- Joanne G. Kurfiss (1988), *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*, Texas: Association for the Study of Higher Education

- John Dewey (1960), *How We Think*, Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Malik Badri (2000), *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*, Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought
- Mehdi Golshani (1986), *The Holy Quran and The Sciences of Nature*, Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization.
- Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2005), "Reading the Signs: A Qur'ānic Perspective of Thinking", paper presented at the Seminar on Thinking in Kuala Lumpur organized by International Islamic University Malaysia
- Mohd Zaidi Ismail (2007), *The Cosmos as the Created Book and Its Implications for the Orientation of Science* at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Cosmos+as+the+created+book+and+its+implications+for+the...-a0182036015>, retrieved October 31, 2009.
- Osman Bakar (1999), *the History Philosophy of Islamic Science*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Peter A. Facione (1990), *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction*, Millbrae: California Academic Press
- Richard Paul et al. (1997), *California Teacher Preparation for Instruction in Critical Thinking: Research Findings and Policy Recommendations: State of California, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing*, Foundation for Critical Thinking, <http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/briefHistoryCT.cfm>, Retrieved April 14, 2009.
- Richard Paul & Micheal Scriven, *Definition of Critical Thinking*, Foundation for Critical Thinking, <http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/definingCT.cfm>, Retrieved December 30, 2008.
- Royce P. Jones (2001), *Foundations of Critical Thinking*, Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, p. 1.
- Saif al-Din Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Amidi, *Al-Ihkam Fi Usul al-Ahkām*. juz. 111, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Stephen P. Norris and Robert H. Ennis (1989), *Evaluating Critical Thinking*, Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Press & Software.
- Sayed Sikandar Shah (2005), "Critical Thinking: A Critical Tool for Constructing a Dynamic Fiqh for Modern Time", *National Conference on Creative/Critical Thinking from Islamic Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (1989), *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam*, London and New York, Mansell
- William Graham Sumner (1940), *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, New York: Ginn and Co.
- Yedullah Kazmi (2000), "The Role of Critical Thinking in Islam", in *Hamdard Islamicus*, Madinat al-Hikmah: Bait al-Hikmah, Vol. 23, No. 1.
- Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1987), *al-Imān wa al-Hayah*, Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah.