

Traversing Tradition



DIALOGUES

Sociology and Modern Education with Dr. Recep Şentürk of Usul Academy

The following is a transcript of a Traversing Tradition Q&A with Dr. Recep Şentürk about his work and the recent launch of Usul Academy. The transcriber's comments are in brackets, and she has condensed and edited for flow. The Q&A is also available to watch [here \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7svZB-NJnw8\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7svZB-NJnw8).

Dr. Recep Şentürk is the President of Usul Academy and currently serves as a professor of sociology at Ibn Haldun University. He was the founding president of Ibn Haldun University (IHU) in Istanbul (2017-2021). After graduating from The School of Islamic Studies at Marmara University, he did his MA in Sociology at Istanbul University. He pursued his PhD in Sociology at Columbia University, New York. He served as a researcher at The Center for Islamic Studies (İSAM) in Istanbul, and the founding director of the Alliance of Civilizations Institute. He is head of the International Ibn Haldun Society. He has published widely in English, Arabic, and Turkish on a whole range of topics, including social theory and methods, civilization, modernization, sociology of religion, networks of ḥadīth transmission, Malcolm X, Islam and human rights, modern Turkish thought, and the life and ideas of Ibn Khaldūn. Şentürk's works have been translated to Arabic, Japanese and Spanish.

- 1. Ibn Haldun is widely regarded as the grandfather of sociology. Could you give a brief glimpse into the history of that subject in relation to religion? In what ways does the sociology of Ibn Khaldun differ from modern sociology?**

I'm very interested in Ibn Khaldun [d. 1406] for several reasons. The most important one is that today, if you want to gain intellectual and academic independence in the field of social sciences from the dominant hegemonic understandings of social science, which is eurocentric, positivistic, materialistic, modern, or postmodern – if you want to gain independence from this type of social science – we need to rely on our resources.

Ibn Khaldun plays a very important role in that conjecture. He is usually seen as the founder of modern social science – the precursor, forerunner. However, I disagree with this. He is not the precursor: he is the alternative to modern social sciences because when you say precursor or

forerunner that means he played a role in the past but now he's no longer relevant. He's outdated because people after him passed him. They came up with ideas and theories that are more sophisticated and more improved. But I say he's not the precursor, he's the alternative.

We founded the International Ibn Khaldun society with two of my friends, Farid Alatas from Singapore and Bruce Lawrence from Duke University. The purpose of International Ibn Khaldun society has been to show Ibn Khaldun as an alternative to modern eurocentric social sciences. We decided the best way to do this was through applied Khaldunism.

By applied Khaldunism we mean that rather than praising Ibn Khaldun and talking about how great he was, showing why we should care about him by implementing his ideas to current issues. We organized several international Ibn Khaldun symposiums in Istanbul, inviting scholars from around the world, Muslims and non-muslims, who believed that Ibn Khaldun presents an alternative to the present social sciences. They implemented Ibn Khaldun's theories, concepts, and methods to current issues we face, be they economic, political, educational, or religious, and demonstrated comparatively that his theories help us better understand and solve the problems we are facing today. This is what we call applied Khaldunism.

Ibn Khaldun is distinguished from the present day social sciences for not being eurocentric. By eurocentrism, I mean universalizing the European experience, presenting it as if it's natural. As though all societies must have the same experience, as though all societies must go through the same processes that Europe went through, as if it's natural, objective, and universal, not taking into account that [it was] regional. It happened in Europe. Other societies must have different trajectories. Presenting a positivistic, materialistic understanding of social life and reality as if it's natural and everyone must accept it because it's scientific – this is what I mean when I say “eurocentric” social science.

There are efforts to go beyond eurocentrism in the world, even in the West. But it's very difficult for them to go beyond this eurocentric understanding because what do we have beyond eurocentrism? They have nothing. But we have great scholars in our civilization. We can utilize those sources and come up with something that can serve as an alternative so in this conjecture, Ibn Khaldun is really helpful. Today, there is a movement called decolonizing the curriculum. If you decolonize the curriculum, what's your alternative? What kind of alternative curriculum will you put in place of the existing curriculum? Muslims are blessed with a rich intellectual heritage from which we can draw and present new alternatives.

There are many Ibn Khalduns in our intellectual history. We chose him as a symbol, but there is Imam Ghazali, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi, Ibn Sina, Farabi, Rumi – hundreds of them. Some people who study Ibn Khaldun say that he was a lonely star in his sky, and he had no predecessor and he had no follower. This is nonsense because if you read the autobiography of Ibn Khaldun, *At-Ta'rīf bi-ibn Khaldūn*, he introduces his teachers. It's clearly evident that he had many teachers. He was also 'ashari in *kalam* [one of the schools of **dialectical theology** (<https://traversingtradition.com/2019/10/28/an-introduction-to-kalam/>)], so that means he was a part of that school of thought so he had predecessors, in particular Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Ibn Khaldun was Maliki, so that means he was part of this chain of jurists. He was also sufi, so that means he was part of the chain because he has a book on *tasawwuf*. That means he was well-embedded and well-networked with the scholars in his time and from the previous ages. He was their inheritor.

In later generations there were many followers of Ibn Khaldun. In the Ottoman milieu he was known and respected, and his work *Muqaddimah* was translated to Turkish. Shaykh al-Islam Pirizade [d. 1749] translated it in the 18th century. How can you say he had no followers? Later, another great scholar, the author of *Macelle* (codified Islamic law [during Ottoman empire]) again complemented

the translation of Pirizade. *Muqaddimah* is one of the first books that was published in the Ottoman print house after it was opened. Ottomans knew him very well, and there is what people call Ottoman Khaldunism.

Ottoman political thinkers and historians followed Ibn Khaldun's ideas and his paradigm is the secret behind the survival of the Ottoman state for seven centuries. They incorporated Ibn Khaldun's vision and wisdom in building their state and making it continue to survive. There's a long story about it and if you have another session I can go into details about Ottoman Khaldunism and how Ottomans used the Ibn Khaldun in their understanding of politics. For instance, the "circle of politics" that Ibn Khaldun drew in *Muqaddimah* was very common among Ottoman intellectuals. They called it *dair-i 'adliye* (circle of justice). There are many drawings of it by the Ottoman artists and scholars.

During the Republican period, Turkish intellectuals and academics were aware of Ibn Khaldun's legacy and one of the leading thinkers Cemil Meriç wrote, "Sociology is the secular theology of the West. We have to return to ourselves and returning to ourselves means returning to Ibn Khaldun."

There is a nonsense claim – some people say that Ibn Khaldun was discovered by the Westerners first then later Muslims show respect to Ibn Khaldun because Westerners respected him. The historical research demonstrates just the opposite: Muslims have always been aware about Ibn Khaldun's work and legacy.

2. Could you expand a little bit more on the statement that "sociology is the secular theology of the West"? Could you provide some tangible examples of how a theological approach to sociology or an Islamic approach in particular might look different to that eurocentric approach?

The founder of sociology, Auguste Comte [d. 1857], wanted to establish sociology as a religion. He called it the religion of humanity and wanted to replace traditional religion with science so science would be the religion of humanity. He said the laboratories will be temples and the scientists will be priests of that new religion. You see this reflected in sociological thinking. Sociologists, especially in the beginning, tried to explain [away] religion to undermine it. One of the first books about religion by [Émile] Durkheim [d. 1917] is titled *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* to try and show religion is a social construct and not from god. That society produced religion to serve some social functions, and these functions are important so even though religion has no truth in it, we should keep it because it's useful for society.

But Comte thought differently: to replace religion with another ideology to serve the same functions to unify society and give meaning to people's lives. These are all theological issues. These are grand questions that academics and researchers are not supposed to deal with. This question should be left to theologians or philosophers. That's why after the 1960s, these imageries produced by the early sociologists from the 19th century were abandoned by sociologists like Peter Berger, Robert Bellah, and many others in the field of social religion. They abandoned this linear evolution which had been dominant in the field of sociology of religion because linear evolution is something that cannot be proven empirically. It's a fiction. Marx has this evolution, people moving in history from one stage to another one, and Durkheim has another fiction and Auguste Comte has another. There are many versions of this social evolution. After World War II sociologists abandoned this linear evolution and undermining of religion, saying they are interested only in the social manifestations of religion but not trying to replace religion with another, alternative religion.

However, the questions social sciences try to answer today are the same questions religions answer: what's a just society, what's a good society, etc. In an Islamic civilization, we have a discipline called *fiqh* [jurisprudence]. The subject matter is *'amal* [action] of that discipline. *'Amal* means human action. So human action is studied by two disciplines: one is western social science, the other is *fiqh*. They

both study human action. You have a choice: either you study human beings, human action, and human society by using *fiqh* or *'ilm al-Umran* [science of society or civilization] of Ibn Khaldun, or Western paradigms and Western social science.

The Islamic paradigm is multiplex. That means it has multiple layers so using it we can incorporate insights from research. If something is proven through research, we have no problem, we can accept it. But when it comes to its interpretation we don't accept materialist interpretations of the data. We have our own interpretation. When we look at human beings, we accept that human beings have a body, mind, and soul and when we look at existence we accept that there is a visible world, the material world and there is an invisible world, and then the divine world. Our understanding of the existence of the universe and the human being is different. Same way for human action.

When we look at human action, we see that there is a visible and invisible side. There is *niyyat* which is in the heart and invisible but at the same time observable action, so two levels. The positivists focus only on the observable aspect, and the idealist sociologists focus on the unobservable aspect of human action, but our approach is multi-layered which I call multiplex, something that has multiple levels. We are not reductionists. Our approach to human beings, action, and society is very sophisticated, holistic, comprehensive and our understanding of the universe is reflected in our understanding of society and human action.

3. Usul Academy's website says part of its aim is to "fill the gap that has been left by modern universities." What are the gaps that you feel that have been left and how do you think that Usul Academy will succeed in filling them?

Present day sciences focus only on material existence. They miss other levels of existence, like the metaphysical and divine. Usul Academy will complement by teaching these other levels of existence. Present day paradigms and approaches in modern academia focus only on one source of knowledge: empirical, based on observation and experimentation. But Islamically, we accept that revelation is also a source of knowledge and even dreams may be a source of knowledge. Our approach is much broader than the present day approach which is purely empirical. We accept reason as a source of knowledge, empirical research as a source of knowledge, and *wahy* (divine revelation) and other sources like subjective spiritual sources as sources of knowledge. We have epistemological pluralism.

We allow people to have different ideas about epistemology, different ideas about sources of knowledge so we can accommodate different communities in our perspective. This is what I call open science. Our science is open to different views, *ikhtilaf* [scholarly differences of opinion], different *madhahib* [schools of thought], different schools of thought in *fiqh*, different schools in philosophy, in *tasawwuf*, etc. At the same time, we respect the views of people who are outside of Islam as well. Open science leads to open civilization. The fact that Muslims have this diversity is made possible by this multiplex perspective, multi-layered approach to the world and to knowledge. It has practical consequences. A uniplex single-layered flat view of the world, which is very reductionist, leads to authoritarian political systems in the end because anyone with a different idea is excluded. but this multiplicity can incorporate people with different views because it's comprehensive and sophisticated.

Usul Academy will complement what's missing in academia by introducing this multiplex perspective which is rooted in our intellectual and academic tradition. The motto of Usul Academy is "rooted renewal, rooted revival." Rootless revival is impossible as it's not going to produce anything. The bigger and the longer the branches of a tree, the longer its roots must be. There must be a commensurability between the branches of a tree and the roots of a tree, otherwise the tree cannot stand. If you want to revive Islamic thought and civilization, it must be rooted in our tradition.

The Usul Academy program is designed for students who are already enrolled in a university or graduated from university. This is a part-time and online program that allows students to learn about Islamic intellectual tradition in a sophisticated and serious manner. It's a four years program for those who know Arabic. For those who don't know Arabic, they have to study Arabic for a year – but academic Arabic, not spoken arabic. We don't want to teach them how to shop in the bazaar. We want to teach them how to read classical scholarly academic books.

So there's the one year academic Arabic prep, and then the four-year program. It is nine hours per week. We call it a dual degree program to indicate that you do your academic education or professional education in a university but get an Islamic education from Usul Academy. Usul Academy is the primary education in our view because it grounds you in your own intellectual tradition and helps you shed light on contemporary issues from an Islamic perspective.

The Usul Academy curriculum has several components. Indian Muslims call it Dars-e-Nizami, so Dars-e-Nizami the Ottoman way. It includes classical Arabic grammar, logic, argumentation, and rhetoric. These are called instrumental or auxiliary disciplines. Then there are Islamic sciences/disciplines such as *fiqh*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, etc. Parallel to this we also have contemporary issues in social sciences such as comparative bioethics, comparative psychology, comparative political thoughts, and comparative education.

Students will study these traditional disciplines and then their contemporary applications. We don't want them to just get this old type of knowledge but will teach them how to implement it in present day issues. That's the curriculum of Usul Academy.

We will also have *suhbah* [companionship] to add the spiritual and moral dimension in our curriculum as well. The Arabic and Islamic disciplines will be for grades but contemporary issues in social sciences will be pass/fail, or if you are serious about it you can take it for a grade as well. But the *suhbah* hour will be only for auditing, as we want to make it easy for students who are already in university, or graduated and working now, taking care of the family, etc. It's manageable and flexible. We will also have some retreats in Istanbul as a reward to our students to come meet with their sheikhs, teachers, and great scholars, and enjoy Istanbul.

4. You mentioned in particular the Ottoman madrasa system being the foundation. Would that then necessitate that the curriculum will focus on an exclusively *Hanafi Maturidi* paradigm or would there be options available to see the program broadening to encompass other Sunni schools?

The Ottoman curriculum was very comprehensive because Malkis, Hanbalis, Shafi'is, Hanafis, and even Shi'as lived under Ottoman rule. So Ottoman madrasa tradition is very rich. It's not just *hanafi maturidi*, we have the great Ottoman Shafi'i scholars, Maliki scholars, etc. Like Ibn Khaldun, he was Maliki but we followed him.

When I say Ottoman, I don't mean narrowly Ottoman, as I said it's similar to dars-e-nizami like Indian Muslims have, and similar to the Arab madrasa. It is not Turkish. At that time our madrasa curriculum was standardized all over the world so it goes back to Imam Ghazali and madrasa nizamiyya in Baghdad during the Seljuk period. Imam Ghazali fixed that curriculum and it spread everywhere in the muslim world – in Africa, the Middle East, through the Seljuks and then to Asia, Pakistan, Iran, India. The same curriculum which Imam Ghazali formulated, even today this curriculum is maintained.

I believe following this curriculum is very important. Why? Because groundedness in classics empowers students to be able to read other classical works. If you go through this education, then it will be easy for you to read Ibn Khaldun, Imam Ghazali, Fakhr ad-Din al-Razi, Bukhari, Muslim, Imam Shafi'i, Imam Malik, Imam Ahmed ibn Hanbal, etc. with no problem, because you read

classical works under the supervision of a teacher. You are then empowered. You strengthen your intellectual muscles. You could teach the same subjects using modern textbooks but then students would have no access to the classical literature in Arabic. That's why we emphasize those classical textbooks and following the classical Islamic curriculum.

North Africa, India, Pakistan, Turkey, the Balkans – I got really surprised how similar it is. How Muslims reach this standardization and unification of their curriculum and we owe this to Imam Ghazali who for the first time formulated this in Baghdad and established the Madrasa Nizamiyya curriculum at that time. We need the memory to be able to think. If you lose your memory, you cannot think. Usul Academy brings this memory back by offering you this classical Islamic education. Today Muslim intellectuals and Muslim societies suffer from amnesia. They know the Western intellectual heritage more than Islamic intellectual heritage. They know western philosophers, authors, thinkers more than Islamic thinkers. Usul Academy will restore this memory because without it, there's no thinking.

We emphasize this curriculum but at the same time there are two tracks in the curriculum. One track is traditional disciplines the other track is contemporary disciplines but from a comparative and critical perspective. We will offer social sciences like economics, politics, and psychology from a comparative and critical perspective. We're not against the insights proven by modern psychology, sociology, political science etc. but against the way they interpret those findings from their ideological perspective.

5. The movement to decolonize the curriculum that seems to be spreading everywhere. How do you understand it?

We need to decolonize our hearts, decolonize our minds, decolonize our curriculum. Actually, more than colonized, our minds are hacked. We feel the way they want us to think and feel but how can we decolonize our minds, hearts, and curriculum without unearthing, excavating, reviving our intellectual tradition and grounding ourselves on that tradition?

We cannot afford being conservative. We cannot go and live in history. We have to bring that tradition to the present day and make it speak to the present questions. Our curriculum is designed to be able to do this. That's why we have two tracks, the traditional Islamic disciplines and contemporary issues/modern social sciences. If you combine both, you become someone with two wings to fly.

If you are someone who presents himself in traditional education not knowing what's happening in the modern world you're not going to become a good scholar of Islam. Or the other way around, if you study only modern disciplines and have no foundation in Islamic sciences, you're not going to be a Muslim thinker. You have to combine both. I believe Usul academy is a movement of decolonizing the curriculum, decolonizing the hearts, and decolonizing the minds. That's our ultimate purpose.

6. One of the attendees remarked that a lot of what you're describing parallels the discourse of the Islamization of knowledge which Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and the late Ismail al-Faruqi have written about. Would you say that Usul Academy's vision is in line with this Islamization of knowledge?

No, we are different than that because we believe in *tajdid* [revival], not Islamization. *Tajdid* means we grow on our roots rather than borrowing something, painting it in green, and putting *bismillah* somewhere to Islamize it. It's different than borrowing something wrong and trying to Islamize it. We have our own house to repair, we want to restore and renovate it, and are happy living in it – we don't want to move to someone else's house and then try to make it our own. We have our own disciplines, our own thinkers, our own knowledge, and we need to revive it.

Islamization implicitly assumes we have nothing and other people have something – but what they have is wrong. We need to take [from what they have] but we cannot take it as it is: we need to make some changes in it. Our methodology is different. We have our own tradition. We should interact with the present knowledge and with the present disciplines, and are open to learning from them, we should be critical, the way our ancestors were.

We learned from the Greeks a lot of things, but we are very critical of Greek philosophy. We didn't say Greek philosophy is trash, throw it away completely. Even Imam Ghazali who criticized the metaphysics of the Greeks said their medicine is okay, their geography is okay but he said they cannot have access to metaphysical knowledge except through divine revelation, that's why what they claimed in that domain is wrong. We translated Greek works except mythology – gods fighting gods, fighting with each other, and cheating each other, this is nonsense – so we did not translate it. Greeks are very famous in sculpture making, but we did not take it because it's wrong from our perspective and it's useless for us. We were open but critical.

Today we will follow the same strategy. We will be open vis-a-vis knowledge of other cultures and civilizations, in particular diversity of knowledge, but will be critical. Fair and critical. If they have something proven empirically or rationally, we'll take it. But when it comes to its interpretation we have our own intuition, because even they disagree when it comes to interpretation of the findings when it comes to interpreting the data. So why should we follow their interpretation? We should have our own intuition from our ontological epistemological and methodological perspective. That's why I call our Islamic tradition, science, civilization, open. We have our house but our door is open.

7. What is the difference between a university in an Islamic country who will offer social sciences etc. and Usul Academy in their approach?

The most important difference is that they are in person and full-time. You have to go there in person to study. Ours is part-time and online, so we target a particular audience. We target students who are registered in a university, they are pursuing their professional, academic degree in a university, but they want to learn Islam as well in a systematic and serious way.

I emphasize systematic and serious. We're not a website where you have many recorded videos you just download or watch those videos by yourself. We are offering a four-year program, building one by one a sequence of disciplines you learn. There's a logic behind this program and this curriculum has been in the making for the last 20 years.

We tested that curriculum in Turkey in several institutions like EDEP, İSAR, ISM, and Ibn Haldun. But these programs are in person. Not everybody is fortunate to go in person to those universities and full time. Those that can go there, they can go there no problem. But there are lots of people who cannot go to those places in person, who cannot commit themselves full-time studying: they want something part-time and online, that they can follow at their own pace in a flexible way.

Our program is intended for people who want to study Islam like a double major. Maybe they are doing an MA, PhD, or working. Anyone can apply. After the application, if we accept the student. We assess his or her Arabic level and if his or her level is not sufficient to continue with the program, then there's a one year Arabic program. It's an excellent and unique program, because it's academic Arabic, not spoken, for *tullab al-ilm* who are seriously interested in studying. that. You can do it while you are studying or working, because this is designed for these kinds of people. That's the major difference between a university and Usul Academy.

Also, our curriculum is unique, you don't find our curriculum in any other university. It's a curriculum that brings together the traditional Islamic madrasa system, the modern social science perspective, and the spiritual dimension together. You rarely find another place with a curriculum

which brings together these three components. There are traditional darul uloom or madrasa and there are universities that offer modern social sciences. like we bring together madrasa university and zawiya, these three three types of education. that's our pedagogy that's our curriculum.

8. Is Usul Academy an accredited institution? What do you envision for the future of the students or graduates of the Academy?

Usul Academy is an American institution, incorporated in Chicago, Illinois. I have to make that clear because I'm Turkish and people assume it's a incorporated or registered in Turkey.

It is not accredited by any external organization. Because our goal ultimately is to grant *ijazah ilmiyyah* to our students and there is no accreditation agency in the world which can accredit it, it's self-accredited. Our purpose is not to offer our students a degree that they can use for their profession. because we want them to study in the university for their professional education and come to us to learn 'ilm to be connected with their own tradition. Our diploma may be accepted in some places that don't care about accreditation, but in some countries they put so much emphasis on accreditation it might not be accepted.

Get your degree from a university and learn the Islamic perspective from us and shed light on your profession from that Islamic perspective. If you are a psychologist, shed light on the profession of psychology from that perspective, if an economist, learn the Islamic approach to economy and shed light on your profession from that perspective. This is our ultimate goal.

The **application (<https://usul.academy/apply/>)** deadline for Usul Academy's Honors Program in Comparative Islamic Studies is October 15th for the 2021-2022 year.

This Q&A was generously transcribed by Heraa Hashmi.

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One thought on “Sociology and Modern Education with Dr. Recep Şentürk of Usul Academy”

1. **Rety Reka Merlins** says:
DECEMBER 21, 2021 AT 4:45 AM
I like this explain about sociology

REPLY

