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Trade Dimension of Technology

Trade is deeply grounded in a proper understanding of our human nature. In the process, all parties hone their unique skills, develop bonds of mutual affection, and prosper together. Trade should not be spoken of using the vocabulary of war, of “win-lose.” Nonetheless, when discussing trade, economists and politicians use the terms of “we” vs. “them” – Americans vs. Chinese, British vs. European, and so on.

This is where the wisdom of Islamic social teaching may strengthen the case for the freedom to trade. Of course, it is not just trade in raw materials that God has enabled for us to engage in. Each human being is unique, with his or her own talents and capacities, so trade allows us to exchange the diverse fruits of our labor. By restricting trade, politicians undermine, not only trade as such, but also the specialization and realization of human talents. Naturally, it is not “America” or “Europe” that trades with “China,” but American and European individuals, families, communities, and companies that trade with their Chinese counterparts. When viewed this way, it becomes apparent just how meaningless the obsession with national balances of trade is, which assume that it is countries that trade, rather than the individuals living there.

When rich economies surround themselves with unscalable trade barriers, it is not only the consumers of the rich countries who suffer, but also the producers of the poor countries. The paramount example of this is agriculture, whereby the leaders of the rich states protect their (already rich) farmers, inhibiting the development of farmers in the poorer parts of the world.

As freedom and opportunity are reaching new corners of the world, technological innovation is allowing us to do more with less. Yet in America, we are no longer living in the safe, secure, insulated, post-war era. It’s the same old story of creative destruction but at a new, break-neck speed: more global, more rapid, more dynamic. Through this lens, many of the primary

drivers of our newfound prosperity – innovation, automation, offshoring, and trade – are also the drivers of our disruption.

So what is the Muslim’s response to such disruption? Is there a way of viewing these constant “threats” to our jobs, comfortability, and convenience as opportunities?

As Muslims, many of us appreciate our “spiritual tools” for such seasons – prayer, fasting, worship, gratitude – and each of these is important. Yet, if we misunderstand God’s design and purpose for business and economics, Muslims are at risk of misapplying these same tools, responding out of a mindset of security and scarcity rather than risk and abundance.

Work is first and foremost, service to others, and thus to God – or service to God, and thus to others. From the garbage man to the school teacher to the doctor to the microchip engineer to the software developer to the father and mother, all of our work is about service to our neighbor.

When we shift our perspective toward God and neighbor, everything flips upside down. Work is no longer about “following your passion” or self-actualization, though that may be a byproduct. It’s about obedience to God. Work and career are no longer about personal provision, though that will likely be a result. They’re about providing for others. Work is no longer about protecting our turf or sitting still in our “niche. It’s about creativity, inclusion, collaboration, and competitive development. From here—and only from here—can we effectively apply the range of spiritual tools God has given us bringing prayer and prophecy, wisdom, and discernment, Islamic transformation to all areas of our work, from the assembly line to the board room to the Silicon Valley garage to the home nursery.

When economic change hits, that fundamental switch makes all the difference, turning signals of disruption into signals for creative service.

The temptation to dwell on the illusion of economic security will remain strong – to cherish and fight for the comfortable control we’ve enjoyed thus far. Yet, to do so requires us not only to succumb to an unworkable fantasy about the global economy, but to distort God’s design for work: to give way to selfish impulses, to suppress our own creative potential, and to exclude the creativity of countless others.

No country insulated from its competitors, whether we pretend to be or not. That is not cause for fear and territorialism and protectionism. Rather, it is a good and beautiful and promising thing, if only we’d respond accordingly – reorienting our hearts and hands from a work that secures, consumes, and collects to one that serves, creates, and sustains.

Certainly, people can work just because they want a paycheck to spend on themselves alone. That might be greedy, but we need to be careful not to confuse profit with greed. People work in order to profit, but profit is not good or evil in itself. That judgment depends on the circumstances in which it was gained and the use to which it is put. Our work itself is service to others. If it wasn't, they wouldn't pay us to do it in the first place, and most people wouldn't want to do it for free. It's an exchange. The division of labor is the phenomenon that the more the manufacturing of individual components of an eventual finished product can be broken down into separate jobs, the more efficiently it can be produced. Adam Smith offered the classic example of the pin-maker in which 10 people working alone might be able to produce 10 pins total in a single day, maybe up to 200 (20 each) if they were really good, but nowhere near 48,000. When people work together, they are able to multiply the fruits of their labors far beyond what they could each do alone.

Another way to think of it is the power of human cooperation. The division of labor implies "teamwork." God made us to flourish in collaboration with each other.

It is worth noting as well that this mass production did not in any way change the quality of the pins produced. Sometimes that is the case with products today, but it is not necessarily true. In this case, it was simply by splitting up the labor required to make a pin into each of its parts and then assigning a single task to each person that made all the difference. Because they could make so many so much faster, they could lower the price to consumers while still making astronomically higher profits. It's a win-win.

Our world provides plenty of examples for this. Consider the production of a book. If you are reading the print version, the paper came from trees that were felled by lumberjacks, made into paper in factories, and then shipped to a printer. Similarly, the ink for the words and the cover had to be manufactured, too. All of the factories involved used tools that had to be made somewhere else, by someone else, at some time before. All of the vehicles used to transport the capital that would become this book had to be made by people all over the world, working to provide for their families and, unknowingly, to provide this book for you. If you're using an e-reader, well, there are far more people and resources involved.

Nearly every product, every fruit of the cultivation of creation, connects us with nearly every other human being on the planet. Their collective contributions make this book more affordable while also benefiting more people in the process. In this way, our work connects us with other people,

serves their needs through products and property, provides for us, and fulfills one of the purposes for which God made us.

On the other hand, can we think that there is a connection between economics and belief?

The overlapping influence and impact of distinct cultural spheres – what anthropologists call the “functional integration of culture” should not be disregarded when talking about faith and economics.

According to anthropologist Darrell Whiteman, every culture can be understood as having the following three interconnecting sectors:

- (1) An economics and technology sector,
- (2) A social relationships sector, and
- (3) An ideology and belief sector.

These sectors are so integrated that if you create a change in one of them, it automatically influences the others, to create a change there.

Nobody knew what the next epidemic or natural disaster may be, yet God has already been working to provide a solution through some non-profits or humanitarian relief efforts or places of worship such as mosques at the mundane levels of economics and technology.

The response would be a revival. While the ball may end rolling up in an ideology and belief shift, it is also related to the economics and technology sector. In the end, individuals will realize how they socially interrelate with these Islamic associations and mosques in different ways, such that their ideology and belief was changed.

For Muslims, our focus has to remain on the bigger picture – economic, social, religious, and otherwise. Whatever victories we achieve are where active and attentive “executive stewardship” actually begins.

Silicon Valley certainly has a reputation for innovation and risk. But Islam? Businesses designed not only to innovate but to pursuing business as an “intimate” adventure with God? That seems unlikely.

Every entrepreneur would acknowledge the high failure rate for startups, yet creativity and boldness are part of the “package” of business. We should all try to figure out ways to harness human creativity in a way that will better lives, and acknowledge that our faith feeds this.

In a free economy, we each serve distinct roles as both producers and consumers. As producers, we create and serve, leveraging the work of our hands to meet the needs of our neighbors. As consumers, however, we look to ourselves and our own needs. Consumption is a good and necessary thing, but it introduces a range of unique pitfalls and temptations. “Consumption

is obviously necessary – there would be no economy without consumers,” explains Raymond J. de Souza. Yet, we distort the very value and purpose of economic freedom. Consumerism distorts our fundamental notions of identity and personhood, yielding to the severe moral confusion we see today. In our digital era, the poisonous effects of consumption extend far beyond the mere exultation of material things. Using various social networks, the individual often becomes – in his own mind or in the view of others – primarily an object of a network who consumes for attention rather than a subject who does goods in order to give himself to others. Whereas in capitalism, we face a constant temptation to reduce ourselves to consumers – mere “objects of material things”; in the digital age, we face a constant temptation to reduce ourselves to consumers of digital media – mere “objects of material things.”

Consumption eventually brings the dismal features of economic pressure and economic warfare to various levels of culture, yielding ripple effects that predictably pollute the waters of an otherwise free society. Alas, what we begin to see in the digital sphere – spreading and manifesting among free, diverse peoples – begins to look ever more similar to government-induced conformity, inspired not by spirit or conscience or creativity, but by force and intimidation.

Freedom is part of human essence. In an age that’s grown servile to the idols of consumption, we have the opportunity to show what true freedom looks like, showing through the work of our minds, the stewardship of our resources, and a tolerance toward freedom of conscience, that all economic activity – even consumption – is destined for the service of the mankind.

Only God is all-knowing. We are finite and limited, so prices help us disperse knowledge efficiently. And, just as there are built-in interdependencies in other parts of creation – and particularly with respect to using the gifts each of us has been given – the knowledge problem also reveals our inherent interdependence. Prices communicate information we need to streamline those interdependencies and serve each other through trade.

Ultimately, overcoming the knowledge problem to make good decisions with what we’ve been given is good stewardship and is part of God’s design and desire for his creation.

