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Methodological Awareness and Methodological Defects

GOALS OF THIS CHAPTER

1. To clarify what is meant by “methodological awareness” and its relationship to other types of awareness.
2. To demonstrate the importance of understanding both method and methodology and the forms of this understanding to be found among contemporary theorists of Islamic thought and action.
3. To identify a number of prevalent methodological defects and the ways in which they manifest themselves in the life of the Muslim community.

INTRODUCTION

When, in our everyday language, we express the need for political awareness, cultural awareness, developmental awareness, awareness of the higher aims and intentions of Islamic law, and so on, we affirm our aspiration for knowledge and understanding of reality in one or more of its various dimensions (its political dimension, its economic dimension, its cultural dimension, etc.), as well as the need to reform this or that aspect of reality. Awareness, then, is a term used to describe human beings’ consciousness of themselves and their surroundings.

The term “awareness” includes the acts of bringing things together, understanding, preservation and memory. The “wide-awake ear” of which the Qur’an speaks is not a physical ear that picks up sound waves in the material world. Rather, it is an ear that understands and makes sense of what it has heard, then puts this understanding to good use.¹

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Similarly, the Messenger of God pronounced blessings on those who hear his words and absorb their meaning, then pass them on to others.² Methodological awareness is a conscious understanding of existing reality and of the way to change it for the better.

The Muslim intelligentsia exhibits a degree of methodological awareness. However, in many cases such awareness is only partial in that it pertains to a single aspect of reality, being based on involvement in a particular academic or practical specialization. Such an awareness is limited to the description of a phenomenon and an appreciation of its various dimensions; it also tends to be spontaneous and instinctive. However, it is hoped that methodological awareness can be developed into an all-encompassing discernment that is based on purposeful contemplation and governed by a comprehensive view of the world. This type of discernment, which applies value-based standards that entail ethical responsibility, expands continuously into new areas and delves more deeply into its subject matter until it becomes “a living methodological culture” capable of contributing to the reform of the Muslim community.

Hence, what we mean by methodological awareness is a realization of the need for a detailed, comprehensive understanding of the nature of reality, its difficulties, and its requirements. It is an awareness of how to deal with reality based on systematic, law-governed, purposeful planning uninfluenced by personal reactions or the pressure that arises from the need to make immediate decisions. Methodological awareness entails the realization that the reality in which we live needs to be reformed by means of a sound methodology and an appeal to an all-inclusive worldview. Such reform requires that we begin at the beginning, then persevere with integrity and determination, making use of the required means and methods and exerting patient effort until the desired reform has been achieved.

Given the fact that we have yet to achieve this level of methodological awareness, there is a need to help people realize the importance of understanding and applying method, that is, of constructing a system of methodological thought, research and conduct. We continue to observe numerous types of methodological inadequacy, that is, the lack of a comprehensive worldview and resulting

defects in our understanding of how to relate to reality, interpret phenomena, and discern the link between causes and effects. Each of these types of methodological inadequacy manifests itself in our lives in a variety of ways. Hence, when we encounter some defect or imbalance in our life and thought, we need to reflect on the methods of relating to objects, ideas and phenomena that have led to this defect or imbalance, for only in this way will we take possession of the “methodological equipment” needed for reform.

First: METHODOLOGICAL AWARENESS

If the Muslim community wants to recover its lost pride and glory, rise to its global responsibilities and serve as a leader of human civilizations, then it will have to cultivate methodological awareness. Given the fact that methodology is the science of reading road signs, as it were, methodological awareness is something we cannot do without. After all, the road ahead may prove to be long and strewn with obstacles, and the journey may involve numerous stages. What with the bends in the road that could cause us to lose our way and the steep grades we will need to ascend in order to broaden our horizons, there will be many a slippery, treacherous slope on which our feet could stumble and slip. In situations such as these, it is methodology that will serve as our source of guidance along the path.³

Methodological awareness calls for clarity in the construction of methodology and in the means by which we make the transition from the Islamization of knowledge to the process of program implementation on the ground. This type of clarity calls in turn for the ability to distinguish between the process of constructing concepts and that of building authoritative frameworks on the basis of which to verify these concepts' effectiveness. Author Mona Abu al-Fadl refers to this type of discernment as “the methodological knot.”⁴ She points out that we cannot untie this methodological knot and make the needed cultural leap without first developing the methodological awareness required to deal with the Islamic sources of theorization.

The first Islamic component of this methodology has to do with the way in which we relate to the Holy Qur'an. Abu al-Fadl notes that

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there are few models for dealing with the Qur'anic discourse which arise from a comprehensive perspective and which strive to apply this perspective to both social realities and to fields of specialized knowledge. The scattered individual efforts being made in this connection have failed thus far to bring about a qualitative change in the prevailing epistemological climate, which suffers not only from lack of organization, confusion, and superficiality, but, in addition, from an unremitting onslaught of external intellectual influences.⁵

It may be helpful in this connection to note the link between methodological thought and the mechanisms of human thought in their various forms and on their various levels. It has been said that a science is more accurately defined by its method than by its subject matter; it can be granted, at the very least, that a science is defined by its method and its subject matter in tandem. Human beings' acquisition of knowledge and understanding is a process that is at once active and reactive. A given researcher's methodology will be influenced by his or her mentality, state of mind, and all the various factors that go to make up his or her personality. At the same time, methodology contributes to shaping the overall consciousness and cultural patterns of a society or community which serve, in turn, to determine which research topics are given priority and which criteria are employed in evaluating research and its outcomes.

Our way, or methodology, of thinking influences our awareness of reality. When we attempt to convey reality as we perceive it, what we convey is not reality itself. Rather, we approximate reality to a greater or lesser degree depending on the degree to which our way, or methodology, of thinking is, or is not, appropriate.⁶ This attempt is linked to the outcome of an interaction between three elements. The first element is the preconceptions in our minds. These preconceptions generally take the form of a set of principles and values which are either innate, or which originate in social structures and conditions. The second element is the tools employed by the mind, cognitive and emotional processes, and the mind's intuitive, imaginative and volitional capacities. As for the third element, it consists in objective facts, including the quantitative and qualitative features of the reality being experienced and its connection to other realities around it. The human

mind organizes these elements within what is termed human experience, which makes up the content used by human consciousness in its attempt to understand and interpret natural and social phenomena and to put them to use in the quest for greater understanding and sounder behavior.

Human Awareness of Reality Results From the Interaction of Three Elements

1. Preconceptions in the human mind
2. The tools employed by the mind, cognitive and emotional processes, and intuitive capacities
3. Objective facts linked to reality

An individual's awareness of reality may be a bogus one, because social conditions may impose restrictions and conditions that require a person to identify with the prevailing culture and the collective consciousness (or lack thereof). This phenomenon is one of the causes underlying cultural and intellectual stagnation in a society. Nevertheless, in every society there are a few individuals who have the will to excel and be creative. Such people, who exercise their freedom with autonomy and distinction, transcend the prevailing consciousness in their society because they understand reality in a new way and interpret their experiences in a pioneering spirit. As a consequence, they may succeed in spreading a new awareness and way of thinking. If such people gain a major following, their ideas may be put into practice with the result that there is a renaissance, and the hoped-for renewal takes place.

Awareness of the backwardness into which the Muslim community has fallen has manifested itself in the writings of numerous advocates of reform over the past century and a half. However, this awareness has come across as confused and scattered, being based on a number of one-dimensional, deficient methodologies. Some, for example, have advocated a Salafi approach based on reverence for the past, unqualified praise for the early generations of Muslims, a total break with Western approaches, and efforts to undermine Western accomplishments by focusing exclusively on their disadvantages and shortcomings. However, these same individuals, when they think about their worldly

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interests, have no hesitations about sending their children to be educated based on Western methods or enjoying the fruits of these methods! And they fill their homes, their offices and their streets with Western-made – or, at least, Western-invented – appliances, electronics and the like. Others, by contrast, call for a modernist approach that involves all manner of self-flagellation. By virtue of a selective reading of Islamic history, these so-called modernists highlight those events and examples that justify the demolition of history in its entirety and a total break with the past. As for the West, it is portrayed as being so endowed with bounty and genius that it alone deserves to occupy a position of authority and leadership.⁷

The crisis of Islamic awareness illustrated by these approaches may have deepened in the minds of many people. The first reason for this is that the proponents of these approaches from both extremes have, in most cases, been people in positions of authority in the Muslim community, whether in their capacity as government figures, or as intellectual leaders. This crisis of awareness has deepened as a result of the frustration and despair that have weighed so heavily upon many people as a result of the successive military and political defeats the Muslim community has suffered, and the fall of leaders who were once beacons of hope. However, some clouds have a silver lining, and these defeats, however unwelcome, often served to catalyze a rebirth of consciousness even among those who considered themselves to be the Muslim community's leaders in the realm of thought and culture.⁸

The most serious form of awareness-related deception or confusion has to do with method or approach. The loss of methodological awareness can cause us to go off track in relation to our methods and their functions. We might even be tempted to apply the term “method” or “approach” to some entity that has nothing to do with either of these. For methodology in the true sense is a source of right guidance, something that helps us to develop a sound awareness. If “method” (*manhaj*) is a road or path that leads to the desired destination, then it will, by definition, clarify the way to get where we hope to go. And to the extent that its premises and orientation are sound, it will serve as a faithful guide that will point out the landmarks we need in order to reach our intended goal.⁹

At any rate, there appears to have emerged a growing awareness of the need for method and methodological thinking since the mid-twentieth century in various parts of the Islamic world, with “method” becoming a major preoccupation among scholars and specialists in the various branches of knowledge, in intellectual circles, and among those concerned with the Islamic call. Some scholars have written methodological studies in the science of the propagation of Islam.¹⁰ Others have advocated the emulation of the Prophet’s approach to spreading the Islamic message.¹¹ Still others have selected methodologically-related texts from the writings of specific Muslim thinkers,¹² or collected newspaper articles with relevance to the methodological enterprise.¹³

Read in entirety the passage in the Holy Qur’an which relates the story of God’s prophet Abraham, upon him be peace: “And thus We gave Abraham [his first] insight into [God’s] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth – and [this] to the end that he might become one of those who are inwardly sure.... Those who have attained to faith, and who have not obscured their faith by wrongdoing – it is they who shall be secure, since it is they who have found the right path” (*sūrah al-An‘ām* 6:75-). Reflect on the methodological implications of this story. Then discuss whether the “methodology” employed by Abraham in his manner of addressing his people about his search for the true God – based on the evidence God had presented to him – might be viewed as expressive of the meaning of scientific methodology or methods of scientific research. Consider what methodological implications would follow if these events had taken place before Abraham’s call to be a prophet, and what methodological implications follow from their having taken place following his call.

In specialized academic circles, the science of origins or principles is discussed as a research method¹⁴ that reveals the need to renew the knowledge we have for the purpose of addressing the contemporary methodological crisis. When Islamic doctrine is discussed, attention turns to relevant research methods as a means of studying contemporary Islamic thought and the methodological elements that make up the study of the principles of the religion. The Islamic religion is a way of life that encompasses the realms of doctrine, worship, ethics, and legislation. Taken together, these elements constitute the approach adopted by the first generation of Muslims. This first generation was

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then succeeded by individuals who turned this approach into a motley mixture of theological and philosophical questions, emotional-mystical experiences, and dry, isolated acts of piety. It was this situation that led to the emergence of reformers who worked to restore cohesion to the structure of Islamic method and lifestyle.¹⁵

How can the science of principles help in the formulation of a precise scientific methodology of thought? Give two examples, and explain.

When the conversation turns to the defining features and foundations of Islam's practical method, we find it to be manifested in the Prophetic Sunnah, which is itself the practical interpretation of the Qur'an. In his book entitled, *Kayfa Nata'āmalu ma'a al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah: Ma'ālim wa Dawābiṭ* (How to Relate to the Prophetic Sunnah: Guideposts and Benchmarks), Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi observes that "the Prophet was himself the Qur'an interpreted, and Islam in bodily form.... It is Muslims' obligation to know this detailed prophetic approach, which is defined by a distinctive comprehensiveness, integration, balance and ease. Muslims thus need to familiarize themselves with ways of improving their understanding and relating to the Prophetic Sunnah." Al-Qaradawi goes on to add that "the Muslims' primary crisis in this age is a crisis of thought." This crisis, he states, manifests itself most clearly in the difficulty people face in understanding and applying the Prophetic Sunnah, particularly in the context of certain Islamic revival currents, "given the fact that adherents of such movements are frequently influenced by their misunderstanding of the sacred Sunnah."¹⁶ Author Abd al-Jabbar Said has also identified a number of faulty approaches to dealing with the Prophetic Sunnah.¹⁷

However, some researchers are of the view that Muslim hadith scholars developed a highly systematic approach to their field early in the history of the study of the Prophetic Sunnah. One modern critique of the Hadith sciences goes so far as to say that early approaches to the study of the Prophetic Sunnah constituted "a complete scientific theory that had reached a high degree of perfection and exactitude."¹⁸ Another scholar has asserted that this science represents "the Islamic miracle in the realm of the Prophetic Sunnah," and that even the various

branches of this science, including, for example, the science of differences among hadiths, have become complete sciences in their own right.¹⁹

Since the days of Ibn Khaldūn, the issue of methodology in the realm of historical studies has been unclear to many, who have relied on the texts passed down from their forebears as though their contents were unquestionable facts and, as a result, have fallen into methodological errors. The same is true of those who have attempted to adopt the methods of Orientalists who – though they undoubtedly made some valuable contributions – worked in the interests of colonialism. In the thrall of their Western superiority complex, Orientalists began writing history “from behind a glass wall. Consequently, they failed to grasp the threads that were guiding events [in the Near East], and were, in consequence, ignorant of Islam’s defining traits in its own world and time.”²⁰

One of the most important tasks facing Islamic thought today is that of guiding the ongoing dialogue toward the theme of methodology. As one noted Muslim thinker asks rhetorically, “Is the crisis in which Muslims have found themselves for so long anything, in essence, but a crisis of thought and methodology?”²¹ In the area of literature, the search for an Islamic methodology of literary criticism has become a major priority given the incommensurability between Western methods of literary criticism and Muslims’ present-day experiences with literary creativity. There needs to be an alternative Islamic approach to literary criticism which reflects the Muslim character, psyche, and aspirations. Efforts need to be made to define the horizons of this approach, test out its tools, and clarify its components. This need is growing increasingly urgent as foreign approaches attract a larger and larger following. According to one Muslim thinker:

The world around us has progressed in the development of research methods and approaches to thought, action and application. However, many of the practices being pursued by the Muslim community suggest that no real attempts are being made to keep pace [with non-Muslim methodologies] and that, instead, the Muslim community is capitulating to materialist, consumeristic approaches and methods that are at odds with Islamic civilization and values. There is a need to

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study these imported methods and approaches so that we can benefit from whatever aspects thereof are consistent with an Islamic worldview while, at the same time, we strive to establish a distinctive approach of our own that gives and takes within parameters that preserve its own constituent elements and defining features.²²

In the area of literary criticism and terminological studies, al-Bushaykhi explains that “method is our community’s number one problem, and we will never take off either academically or culturally until we have found our way to the most sensible and prudent of methods. We ask God regularly to ‘guide us along the straight path.’ Hence, we must be keen to ensure that our path is straight in all we do, and that the efforts we expend toward straightening our path are commensurate with the path’s own importance. It is knowledge that defines human beings. Similarly, it is knowledge that brings about people’s advance as a result of their having adhered to a particular path or method that enables them to know what they had never known before. And although comprehension is part of the path, its most important part is what comes after this, namely, analysis, explanation and putting the pieces together.”²³

In the realm of thought, Taha Abd al-Rahman stresses the need for a contemporary religious vigilance in the Islamic world in connection with what he terms “intellectual backing.” In other words, there is a need to support the Muslim faith experience by the use of the most modern, persuasive rational approaches, and by showing how faith experience is grounded in these approaches. According to Abd al-Rahman, negligence in this area has led us in directions that have rendered us vulnerable to attacks by our opponents. He states, “If the vigilant acquired methodological skills by going deeper into the experience of faith, they could establish a new form of Islamic thought that would fortify and sustain this vigilance.”²⁴

AbdulHamid AbuSulayman holds that reform of the Muslim community can only take place through family upbringing and educational institutions, and that solving the educational conundrums we face requires the development of “a methodological science...and an organized, ongoing scientific study that goes beyond limited, haphazard

reflections.” Such a study involves an examination of the methodology of reform and change, and of the way to develop the knowledge necessary for reform (which is what education and upbringing are). This process is what he describes as “serious academic study” which he distinguishes from “superficial random observation.”²⁵

According to AbuSulayman, there are three conditions that need to be met in order for renewal and reform to take place. The first of these is psychological strength and courage. The second is a sound, superior way of thinking. The third is a clear worldview whose aim is to bring benefit to all. When discussing the impacts of the failure to meet these conditions, AbuSulayman places highest priority on a systematic way of thinking. He states, “the historical split that came about in the Muslim community between intellectual leadership and political leadership led to ... an unbalanced approach, which led in turn to the demolition of psychological strength and the loss of [the distinctively Islamic] worldview.”²⁶

Conditions for Renewal and Reform in the View of AbdulHamid AbuSulayman

1. Psychological strength and courage
2. A sound, superior way of thinking
3. A clear worldview whose aim is to bring benefit to all

Although the issue of method is, first and foremost, a thought-related matter, the task of engaging with it is not restricted to thinkers and researchers in the realm of theoretical philosophy. Rather, those who posit the theories that make up the foundation of the Islamic movement, be they intellectuals or not, hold that the issue of method “is one of the most important intellectual issues ever to face the contemporary Islamic movement, since there is a natural link between method and movement. Someone who wishes to move in a prudent, well-guided manner needs to specify the goal toward which he or she wishes to move, as well as the path he or she intends to follow in order to reach this goal. It is an issue that calls for urgent attention, because a misunderstanding of it may be costly, delaying the achievement of one’s goal or causing one to lose one’s way altogether. It may also result in

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stagnation, despair, and numerous other outcomes that could be disastrous for the progress of the movement.”²⁷

If we adopt AbdulHamid AbuSulayman’s three conditions for Islamic renewal and reform, how can the family in its capacity as an educational institution fulfill these conditions?

Among the dimensions he views as missing from the thought and practices of contemporary Islamic movements, Alalwani identifies the methodological dimension as the most significant and urgent.²⁸ In Alalwani’s view, this situation calls for the development off a comprehensive methodological understanding which can bring together the dual readings of the Qur’an and the created universe. Through a comprehensive reading of both these realities with an emphasis on becoming, interaction, and the historical logic of change, we can enter the world of the Holy Book with a clear methodology. By means of such a methodology we can overcome the difficulty that prompted the writing of the groundbreaking *Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayna al-Ḥikmah wa al-Sharī‘ah min Ittiṣāl* (The Definitive Word on the Connection Between Wisdom and the Divinely Revealed Law) by Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) by al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd’s response to al-Ghazālī in his book, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence). It was in response to this same difficulty that Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643) declared logic “unlawful,” and Ibn Taymiyyah attempted to do without the minor premise of a syllogism and offer an alternative premise from the Qur’an for the sake of preventing contradiction between revelation and reason.²⁹

These, then, are examples of theorists in the realms of thought, science and political and religious movements with an awareness of method and its importance. However, awareness of the need for a method is one thing, while possession of an actual method is something else. Similarly, awareness among certain select individuals is one thing, while a general awareness on the part of the scholarly community or those who work to propagate Islam, not to mention the society as a whole, is another.

Methodological awareness is not simply a new slogan to be added to the list of things the Muslim community lacks in order to achieve its own distinctive cultural presence. Rather, it is a rational and practical definition of a set of methodological requirements that need to be circulated, researched, studied and critiqued in order to foster an overall mentality in the Muslim community founded on an awareness of method and the best approaches to be followed. Sayf al-Din Abd al-Fattah has listed four elements that are needed in order to construct a sound methodological awareness: (1) awareness of the sources for Islamic methodological theorization, (2) awareness of the available Western methodological potential and the ability to access it, (3) awareness of methodological applications and the ability to interpret the sources of Islamic theorization, and (4) awareness of the difficulties involved in methodological application and ways of overcoming them.³⁰

Once these elements are present, those who do possess methodological awareness will need to translate this awareness into practical action in their respective disciplines and academic specializations.

Second: SIGNS OF METHODOLOGICAL IMBALANCE IN THE LIFE OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

A variety of factors contributed to the Muslim community's descent into the cultural backwaters in which it has found itself for the past several centuries. Still other factors perpetuate this discouraging situation despite reformers' sincere efforts to improve things, while elements that are basic to the desired cultural advances are notably absent.

Contemporary Muslims' psyches, on the individual and collective levels alike, exhibit various types of imbalance or dysfunctionality that have hindered Muslims' ability to engage in effective action. These imbalances are manifested, on one hand, in the mental or ideational dimension of people's psyches, that is, in the worldview that determines Muslims' perceptions of the universe, life, and human beings, and which has become confused and unclear in a variety of ways. Imbalances can also be seen in the psychological, emotional dimension of Muslims' characters in the form of weakness of will, an inability to take initiative, and a lack of boldness and courage.

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The Imbalance in Modern-Day Muslims' Psychological Makeup Manifests Itself in Two Aspects of Their Personalities

1. The intellectual or ideational aspect, where one observes a lack of clarity in their worldview and resultant perceptions.
2. The psychological-emotional aspect, where the imbalance manifests itself in the form of a weak will and lack of initiative.

It would be helpful to subject the various types of imbalance in these two dimensions of Muslims' inner lives to a thorough study and analysis. There is, however, still another type of imbalance that afflicts Muslims' efforts on both the individual and collective levels. This imbalance, which affects both of the aforementioned aspects of Muslims' psyches – the ideational and the emotional – manifests itself in Muslims' way of thinking about matters of understanding, feeling, and practice. It is a methodological imbalance that has to do with the manner in which an idea is translated into a concrete reality, or the way in which a mental conviction is turned into an actual life practice. The value of an idea is only realized fully when there is a way for it to be converted into concrete action. The seriousness of this methodological imbalance may be seen in the fact that it prevents individuals with good ideas from presenting these ideas in a sound manner, that is, from bringing them out of the realm of mental abstraction and ideals and into the realm of day-to-day life. People's ideas may be formulated in a distorted manner that prevents others from understanding them and receiving them well. The following are specific expressions of this methodological imbalance:³¹

(1) Imbalance in One's Worldview

A sound approach to dealing with an issue requires that one examine it within the larger sphere to which it belongs, that is, in its capacity as one of a number of elements, some of them similar and some of them disparate, that go to make up a more comprehensive set. This approach enables the researcher to see the various parts against the background of a greater whole, and to reveal the defining characteristics of the issue at hand from a variety of vantage points. By so doing he can relate to

the issue or phenomenon with a proper appreciation of the potential effects of his actions.

The comprehensive approach called for by the Islamic worldview contributes to the possibility of linking the worlds of the seen and the unseen, beneficial and harmful aspects of this or that phenomenon, present and future considerations, the situation in a particular location and the broader environment that surrounds it, as well as immediate and remote effects of actions and events. Methodological imbalance in this context reveals itself in attempts to restrict a given issue or phenomenon to a single dimension to the exclusion of others, the consideration of a limited number of the available facts, and/or what is immediately and directly apparent in the situation at hand. This type of methodological imbalance sometimes takes the form of searching for the truth in a narrow, limited space within the various realms of knowledge by looking, for example, only at what has come down to us historically to the exclusion of more recent developments. This partial or atomistic approach to the study of written history may limit itself to the juristic aspect of things without attempting to grapple with the foundational sources represented by the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. Alternatively, it might focus exclusively on the textual aspect of an issue and its ramifications without giving thought to areas of application in relation to questions about the universe, matter, and human progress and civilization. Similarly, one might restrict himself to a single school of thought or jurisprudence without taking account of other schools whose perspectives might provide him with fuller insight into things, or enrich his mind by giving expression to a broader understanding of the religion and its higher purposes or aims.

This imbalance sometimes becomes visible through an incomplete view of time, which results in the practice of limiting one's assessment of things to a limit period of history. The aims and purposes of the Islamic religion can only be realized through a legal ruling if such a ruling takes into consideration the past (to derive lessons from it), the present (to address its problems and issues), and the future (by anticipating the ruling's potential effects and ramifications). The most notable failing in this connection is the tendency to neglect the future, and the inability to assess future requirements as part of the planning

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process. In reality, *ijtihad*, or reasoned interpretation, is simply the act of joining one period of time with another. The process of *ijtihad* involves seeking guidance from revelation, which stands over and above time, in order to arrive at solutions to the issues that arise in the present. In so doing, the practitioner of *ijtihad* is enlightened by the interpretations of his or her forebears, who were in turn interpreting the religion's foundational texts in light of their own circumstances, while anticipating the effects of today's solutions on the future and its associated developments.

The same type of imbalance results difficulties in assessing the relative importance of issues and what rulings apply to them. Elevating the status of particular ethical principles, actions and rites as though they were the heart of the Islamic message and the ruling criterion of action in isolation from the religion's overarching principles and the requirements of the situation at hand distort these overarching principles and undermine the effectiveness with which the Islamic message can be propagated. When certain individuals or factions cling tenaciously to what they have determined to be of greatest importance, the outcome is disputes and divisions. What they have forgotten is that they are disputing over a simple matter of differing assessments or interpretations of certain peripheral issues. When Muslims allow such differences to divide them, they sacrifice far more vital interests such as their unity and their ability to join their efforts for the sake of promoting their religion and enabling the Muslim community to advance.

These imbalances result from the loss of a comprehensive, overarching vision which enables us to assess things in accordance with their true significance and order them based on their relative degrees of importance. Those who have lost sight of this overarching vision treat what is minor and particular as though it were major and universal. One of the distinguishing features of a comprehensive perspective is the ability to make assessments on the basis of sound comparisons between things and situations: to discern the difference between what is important and what is more important, what is harmful and what is more harmful, what is beneficial and what is more beneficial. Without this ability, we lose our capacity to set sound priorities, and thereby to serve the Muslim community's best interests. This type of method-

ological defect also impairs our ability to understand the principles of realism, causality, and comprehensiveness as they affect Muslims' thoughts and actions. As a result, it constitutes a major hindrance to progress toward the desired Islamic cultural advances.

(2) *Impaired Ability to Understand and Deal With Reality*

The impairment or defect being spoken of here has to do with the way in which we look at the natural world and the world of human beings. This defect may manifest itself in a failure to give proper consideration to reality, relying instead abstract conceptualizations, be they mental abstractions on the order of Greek philosophy and its derivatives, or spiritual abstractions on the order of Gnosticism and its outcomes. The Holy Qur'an has brought human reason out of such abstraction and into a realistic understanding of the universe and the human beings who inhabit it. The signs we observe on the horizons (that is, in the natural world) and in our own souls are a source of knowledge, understanding, and guidance. However, this methodological defect may take the form of a pious otherworldliness that overlooks the realities of life and the requirements of human society. There is also a type of social otherworldliness which neglects broad sectors of society due to the isolation of the educated elite and their unwillingness to involve themselves in the concerns of the masses, or an indifference to reality that grows out of despair of changing the way things are. Such despair may lead individuals to avoid dealing with the issues of the day, accuse others of unbelief, or even engage in violence. And to make matters worse, Muslims sometimes give up trying to understand not only their own situation, but, in addition, the situations of peoples and nations around them.

The eventual outcome of this disregard for facts is an ignorance that robs people of the ability to cope with reality. It will be noted in this connection that Western societies have been able to build advanced civilizations as a result of a thorough study and understanding of reality in its various dimensions and details. Given this tendency to think and act unrealistically in relation to the facts of human life in general and Islamic life in particular, there have even been attempts to abolish realism entirely in the realms of both thought and practice.

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Disregard for reality has manifested itself on the part of certain groups of Muslims in a tendency to cling to an abstract, idealized image of Islamic history to which they flee for refuge from their own situations. Their understanding of the methodology of reform is limited to attempts to reproduce partial images of the ideal and impose them on present-day reality, or automatic appeals to the Salafi ideal whenever and wherever they are called upon to do cope with the new and unfamiliar.

Many Muslims are ignorant of the impact of global developments on their understanding or discovery of certain principles of religion and the ways in which these principles are applied to contemporary situations. Many aspects of Muslims' understanding of principles are reflections of what they observe among non-Muslims rather than being grounded in their own texts and traditions. We find, for example, that freedom, equality, justice and consultation have come to be associated in modern times with institutions and laws that many Muslims would like to see established in their own countries. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to deny the impact made by the application of these principles in the non-Muslim world on Muslims' understanding of them.³² This tendency is indicative of a methodological defect in Muslims' thinking which can be observed even among some well-respected contemporary Muslim scholars.³³

Disregard for Muslims' real-life circumstances may have been reinforced in some Muslim sectors by still another methodological defect, namely, adoption of the situation in the West as the ideal example of advancement and progress. This defect can be seen on the practical level in the practice of devising reform programs derived from a Western idealism that is not well suited to Muslims' situations, since they fail to reflect the cultural, social and religious particularities of Muslims' lives and circumstances. The danger represented by this view of reform lies in the fact that those who adhere to it are highly placed, influential decision makers even though they enjoy a very limited popular base and are quite isolated from the common people.

Give three other examples of a methodologically-based failure to understand and deal with reality.

(3) *Failure to Link Causes to Effects*

Failure to acknowledge causality and, as a consequence, to fall back on superstitious explanations for phenomena, is a serious methodological defect. Causality is viewed in Islam as a law that governs nature, society, and the human psyche within the framework of the divine governance of the universe. Human beings' relationship to the natural world is governed by causes which may or may not be within human control. Such causes and natural laws are operative at all times unless God wills to overrule them in specific cases and for particular ends which human beings have no way of predicting ahead of time, and for which they bear no responsibility.

This methodological defect may reveal itself in a failure to take account of natural causes on the pretext of relying entirely on God, or the belief that acknowledging natural causation is inconsistent with Islamic doctrine according to which God Almighty is the Sole Actor in the universe. Those who think and behave in this manner see earthly phenomena, including human beings, as bearing little or no responsibility for outcomes because, in their belief, outcomes are the province of God alone rather than being the results of previous causes in time. At the other extreme, there are individuals who rule out the supernatural element altogether in the realm of causation. Such individuals are of the belief that outcomes are brought about by natural causes alone without any divine interference or intervention.

Methodological errors such as these undermine the kind of scientific mentality that prompts a researcher to engage in the logical steps of analyzing, arranging and classifying the elements of a given problem or phenomenon in order to identify the true causal relationships that exist among these elements, which in turn makes it possible to discover solutions, cures, and the like.

Give three other examples of a failure to link causes with effects.

Methodological Awareness and Methodological Defects

(4) Failure to Discern Truth, and Working at Cross-Purposes With Reality

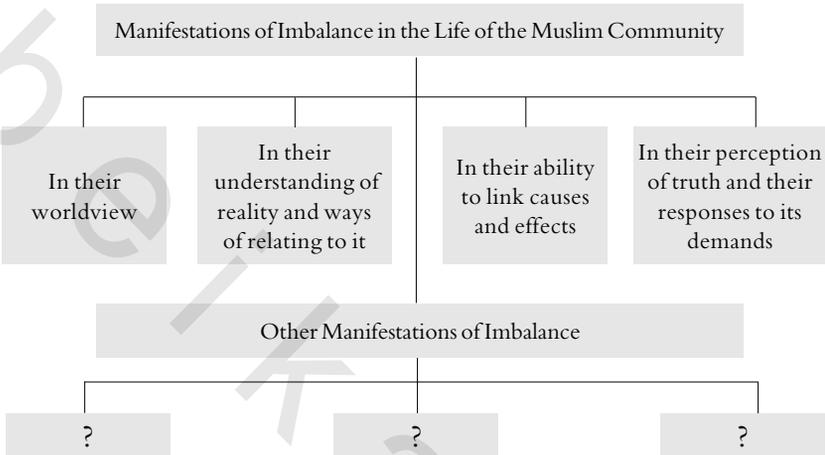
Consider the following example of a failure to heed truth, and even to work at cross-purposes with it: Smoking has become an epidemic of worldwide proportions, albeit in varying degrees. There is not a state on the face of the earth today whose officials are unaware of the harmful effects of smoking. Nevertheless, states themselves invest in the tobacco industry, or allow the construction of cigarette factories by local or international investors on the pretext of promoting a free market when, in reality, what they want is the taxes that will be levied on the industry,³⁴ or increased job opportunities. Decision makers in these various states know full well that the sums spent on treatment for smoking-related illnesses are far greater than the income that accrues from tobacco plants and cigarette factories.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2008) report on the global tobacco epidemic, the number of smokers worldwide in the year 2008 came to more than one billion, or around one-third of the entire population worldwide. The blight of smoking brings a greater death toll than all the wars being waged around the globe. According to the same report, scientific studies have demonstrated decisively that both smoking and second-hand smoke cause death, illness and disability, while “tobacco use causes 1 in 10 deaths worldwide – more than 5 million people a year. By 2030, unless urgent action is taken, tobacco’s annual death toll will rise to more than eight million.”³⁵

The report indicates that 80 percent of the world’s smokers are in low- to medium-income developing countries. Most of the states in the world have responded to calls by the WHO to increase awareness of the harmful effects of smoking, while the number of smokers in high-income countries is declining. However, the percentage of those who smoke in developing countries, particularly in Arab-Islamic countries, is on the rise.³⁶

The dangers of smoking are not limited to the health risks that threaten smokers and those around them. They also include the financial burdens caused by the purchase of tobacco, the cost of which sometimes consumes up to one-quarter of a family’s entire income.

This type of economic waste is clearly beyond reason. So, given the known facts about smoking, why is no Islamic legal ruling forthcoming on its dangers? And what is to prevent the governments of Arab and Islamic countries from making decisive political and economic decisions to curb or prevent the production, import and use of tobacco?



Training Session: Trainees are Divided Into Five Groups

- After discussing the manifestations of methodological imbalance in the understanding of reality and ways of relating to it, the first group gives six examples of these manifestations.
- The second group comes up with six examples of methodological imbalance in relation to the ability to link causes and effects.
- The third group comes up with six examples of methodological imbalance in relation to the Muslim community's worldview.
- The fourth group comes up with six examples of methodological imbalance in relation to perceptions of truth and ways of responding to its demands.
- The fifth group proposes three additional types of methodological imbalance in the life of the Muslim community and gives two examples of each.