

CHAPTER ONE



The Crisis of Contemporary Islamic Discourse:

Motive Forces Behind the Crisis and the Crisis Mentality

If the Muslim intelligentsia of our day agree on anything, they agree on the fact that all peoples belonging to the Islamic nation, and first and foremost, the Arab people, are passing through a thought-related crisis. This crisis manifests itself in the form of cultural absence, academic backwardness and civilizational eclipse. They also agree that the crisis is embodied in the inability of contemporary intellectual discourse to communicate the true content of the Islamic message as contained in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, Islamic law and Islamic morals. However, they differ concerning the reasons for this inability and the means by which to redress it.

The sense of crisis has led, quite naturally, to the proposal of a number of projects which aim to revive and reform the Muslim mind. In the course of presenting such proposals, diverse interpretations and points of view have been presented. In addition, the Western project has been proposed anew in various forms and with varied approaches, all of which claim that the sense of crisis is only a result of misapplication and not an error in the method adopted or in the way of thinking on which it is based. There have also been efforts to present concocted projects which take their content from the Western enterprise and certain of their colors and costumes from Islamic enterprises.

Under the weighty influence of the [Western] civilizational enterprise and its discourse with its varied mouthpieces, as well as the preoccupation with problems' effects rather than their intellectual causes, most projects have concerned themselves with repairing the world of things while failing to give the world of ideas the attention it deserves. As a result, such projects have lacked a comprehensive, objective vision, the ability to plan as they need to, as well as the ability to engage in ongoing evaluation and analysis. This has led to decline and frustration while further complicating the problem rather than

offering the appropriate solution.

THE ISLAMIC ENTERPRISE

Given the circumstances of the bitter conflict between the Ummah and its adversaries, the discourse which has emerged from the Islamic enterprise has concerned itself largely with mobilization for struggle. This struggle grew out of the [West's] occupation of the most important Muslim territories during the 19th and early 20th Centuries, the result being that some of them were transformed into regions of protection and influence, while others were turned into markets and vital areas. These developments led to a preoccupation with protecting the Ummah by devoting energy to two main issues, namely: (1) preservation of Islamic doctrine, and (2) mobilization of the Ummah for political, and even military, confrontation at certain times and in certain places. If, after devoting its attention to these areas, there remained any surplus energy, it was devoted to the investigation of juristic questions, the aim being to present them anew, explain them, summarize them, and compare them with legal questions of concern to Western thought.

As for dealing with the crisis of thought by studying it, ascertaining the causes behind it and benefiting from the practical experience of those involved in developing 'field jurisprudence' (made possible by encounters with the non-Muslim world) and then constructing an epistemological and cultural edifice in light of these investigations, such endeavors have not, at least until recently, been given the attention they deserve by the Islamic enterprise.

DIRECTING CONCERN TOWARD PRESERVATION OF DOCTRINE

It bears noting that a major error has been committed in the call simply to preserve Islamic doctrine. This call is based on the belief that the concepts of Islam as understood and embraced by members of the Ummah will not have undergone significant change so long as they have not denied the Truth of the basic testimonies of faith. This is correct to a large extent; however, it cannot be accepted in an unqualified manner. The reason for this is that

despite people's enduring faith in God and His Messenger, Islamic concepts have nevertheless been distorted and altered to a significant degree. If we deal wisely with this fact, it can constitute the epistemological potential which we seek to construct in a methodologically correct fashion, thereby transforming doctrine into an intellectual and epistemological base.

There is a mistaken belief that simply by charging the Ummah with enthusiasm and reminding them through impassioned rhetoric of the glories of Muslim history, the Ummah can be launched anew toward a thriving Islamic life, a new Islamic civilization, and a comprehensive Islamic unity. It is believed, moreover, that this can be accomplished without constructing a sound intellectual, conceptual, epistemological and cultural world capable of giving direction to the Ummah's movement and anchoring the foundations of its path and approach. These beliefs, which are highly risky, signal the loss of correct vision and a willingness to settle for a subjective awareness of the problem without giving serious thought to how to resolve it. One need only look at the deteriorating situation in which the Ummah finds itself at the present time to acknowledge the validity of this claim.

It is this illusion which has led some to view the intellectual crisis as evidence of a defect in doctrine, and to the resultant belief that working to reform and correct people's doctrine will lead inevitably to the resolution of the crisis.

No one can deny that studying Islamic history, reminding the Ummah of its glories, and recovering and developing the various dimensions of its civilizational character over time are necessary if we are to construct the desired epistemological edifice. However, the problem lies in a failure to fulfill the requirements of intellectual and conceptual 'loading' and 'unloading' – that is, the process of comprehending and sifting through the content of the Islamic legacy – and in the inability to analyze, pinpoint conditions for success, and appreciate the circumstances conducive to action. In order to achieve what we hope to, we must understand the laws which govern the demise and revival of nations rather than being content with reminiscing about our past achievements and seeking refuge from our current state of helplessness. For without the ability to transform thought into strength and effectiveness which course through the Ummah's veins, our Islamic history and legacy will become civilizational and cultural hindrances rather than factors encouraging reform and renewal.

It is not our intention here to belittle the importance of sound doctrine, which constitutes the basic foundation for a sound Islamic cultural and epistemological structure. Indeed, we are fully aware that early Muslims' realization and understanding of the various dimensions of doctrine are what led to independent reasoning and thought by means of which they applied doctrine to people's lives and guided their behavior. Hence they produced a sound epistemological and cultural edifice which served as the basis for a civilization the likes of which world history has never known.

However, particularly among the late scholastic theologians, the study of doctrine became ossified within static molds, areas and statements, as a result of which its concepts were confined within the limits of their logical boundaries and polemical styles. Scholars thus lost sight of the type of thought that emerges from transforming doctrine into action and applying it to a reality which, in its turn, reformulates doctrine while preserving its fundamental principles. Such a dialectic breathes the spirit of renewal into doctrine, enabling it to keep pace with the age, and making it into the framework for a universal vision and an all-inclusive epistemological method and model.

Most [previous] attempts to reform doctrine took place within the framework of scholastic debate and abstract, theoretical understanding. In other words, such attempts allowed no appreciable mental space, as it were, for applying doctrine to reality, correcting people's conduct on the basis thereof, or translating it into paths, approaches and systems that go beyond the realm of Islamic rites of worship. Hence, doctrinal studies were transmuted into mental abstractions devoid of practical benefit, like a tree that bears no fruit.

MOBILIZING THE UMMAH FOR POLITICAL CONFRONTATION (SEE FIGURE I. I)

The Ummah's sense of helplessness in the face of the colonial armies and their foreign civilization left its mark on most of its factions, dividing them into two camps:

- 1) Those who, dazzled by the invading culture, called for political, economic, social and educational reforms based on Western patterns and described Islam as unable to keep pace with the modern, contemporary age. This

camp included among its representatives both those who advocated a complete break with Islam and its legacy, and those who advocated peaceful coexistence with the religion accompanied by the formulation of a civil society unaffected by Islamic law.

- 2) Those who held that the cause underlying the Islamic nation's backwardness was its distancing from Islam and its values. This second camp was divided into: (a) those who viewed the Ummah's malady as resulting from distortion of doctrine, weak faith, and preoccupation with worldly luxuries, and (b) those who saw it as resulting from the abandonment of mental struggle and independent reasoning beginning in the 4th Century AH.

In the first camp's view, the place to begin was with educational, social and political reform even if this led to political violence and the destruction of the Ummah's infrastructures. In the second camp's view, the place to begin was resistance against foreign thought, the revival of Islamic culture, purging Islamic doctrine of impurities, and returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah. According to this view, modern civilization can be absorbed once it has been purged of impurities and adapted to Islamic rulings and values. For more than a century, a bitter conflict raged between these two camps: What one considered a source of progress and advancement, the other viewed as the work of foreign agents, subordination and decadence, and what one saw as a solution, the other viewed it as a source of problems and crisis.

However, the two camps did agree that the means of change were limited to the following three: (1) Reform by means of verbal invitation and political action after building up an educational base, (2) Reform by seeking to attract centers of power in order to take authority [away from them] and bring about change through them and (3) Reform by changing the Ummah's concepts and urging its members to reject the current situation in favor of working to achieve their goal by means of political discourse and the formation of political blocs.

Hence, the concern of the Islamic reform enterprise, in terms of both discourse and programming, was with political entry points. It focused on amassing efforts to mobilize the public to engage in the needed political confrontations, either in order to gain precedence in popular political mobilization, or in response to derision from opponents and their attempts to

defame Islam and Islamic law. As a result of this approach, the crisis was attributed to the presence of uncommitted individuals in authority and influence, or to other phenomena until eventually it was claimed by some that the underlying cause for the malady was external forces. Some identified the fundamental cause of the problem as the presence of the sultan, who did not enforce [Islamic] rulings, while others believed the presence of the United States and other superpowers were at the root of the illness. There were others who resorted to similar facile explanations and improvised analyses which, in effect, treated effects as causes and symptomatic relief as the cure. In doing so, they were forgetting, or pretending to forget, that the root of the malady lay in defects in the thought of the Ummah. In other words, the true affliction lay in the Muslim mind and soul and in a way of thinking which had been remiss in bringing about change in accordance with the unchanging, God-given principle: "Verily, God does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves."¹

HINDRANCES TO REFORM (SEE FIGURE 1.2)

It follows that in order to emerge from its present crisis, contemporary Islamic discourse needs to address a number of matters which constitute obstacles to the reform of Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge. Such hindrances may be summarized as follows:

One: Confusing Doctrine with Thought

The reason for some people's tendency to confuse doctrine with thought is their failure to draw a distinction between their sources. It is a recognized fact, for example, that doctrine emanates from Divine Revelation with well-defined pillars and fixed boundaries and features, whereas thought is a purely human process of independent reasoning which may be correct or incorrect. Human thought, which is characterized by certain premises, tools and methods, is the fruit of the mind's relating to Divine Revelation, its application, evaluation of reality in light of Revelation in the form of suitable formulations and solutions, and sound rational and epistemological structures.

Such confusion often results from the failure of one's method to properly analyze the situation which calls for reform. It is for this reason that we have focused in the foregoing discussion on the fact that one of the priorities of renewing Islamic discourse is the reform of thought, since thought can only accomplish the tasks it is meant to accomplish if it is accompanied by a sound, clear method upon which it operates and whose guidance it follows.

Two: The Belief that 'Knowledge Has No Religion'

Alongside those who confuse doctrine with thought are those who mistakenly imagine that knowledge has no religion, so to speak. Such individuals believe that knowledge professes the religion of whoever possesses it. Hence, even if the religion itself does not produce such knowledge, it nevertheless follows the knower in his religion and school of thought without regard for its philosophy, premises, aims and ends. This belief, however, is based on a failure to perceive the structure and components of knowledge and the conditions for its manufacture and production. Such individuals imagine that if someone adheres to Islamic doctrine and is a person of integrity, then whatever culture or knowledge he acquires will, quite naturally and automatically, become Islamic knowledge and Islamic culture. Thus, when such knowledge enters the mosque with him for prayer, and when it accompanies him on the pilgrimage to Makkah, it will 'become Muslim', and this regardless of whether such knowledge emerged from Darwin, Freud, Marx, Durant, John Dewey, or Durkheim, or from al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldūn, or someone else.

Consequently, one often hears such people reiterating the incorrect claim that culture and thought have no religion or homeland and that there is no way that geographical boundaries can stand in their way. Such statements are frequently made by groups who wish to persuade others to acquiesce to prevailing Western thought as well as the civilization and culture which have arisen from it by virtue of its political dominance and global influence. Such groups delude their listeners into believing that thought and culture, like the ether, reach people's ears, then enter their minds with or without their consent. At the same time, they wish to persuade people that there is no way to achieve reawakening and progress and to enter the modern age without

adopting Western thought and culture and adhering to the way of life inherent in them. After all, or so they say, this is the world's inescapable destiny.

However, this argument is based on a profound confusion. For knowledge is the fruit of a philosophy, a creed, an overall vision, and a theory, all of which serve to produce it and are ultimately inseparable from it. Indeed, such a philosophy, creed, overall vision and theory are, ultimately, what serve as the Ummah's 'cultural generator', as it were. Every creed has a particular conception of the universe, life and human beings; similarly, every kind of knowledge has its own premises and aims. Hence, borrowing knowledge from another culture is like hanging fruit on a tree other than the one which bore it. The tree on which the fruit has been hung will not be able to supply it with water and nutrients, nor will the fruit be able to breathe and thrive through the tree.

Three: Limiting the Treatment to the Addition of Extra Classes in Islamic Subjects

There are others who hold that a sound Islamic epistemological and cultural edifice can be constructed simply by having more lessons on Qur'anic recitation and Islamic jurisprudence, and by memorizing some Islamic songs in school using old approaches and methods, yet without the ability to translate them into intellectual receptacles, as it were, which have the capacity to hold the entire life of the Ummah and its various activities.

The content and methods of teaching the curricula which relate to Islamic culture or civilization at universities today are simply new titles for old themes and traditional methodologies. Therefore, their objectives and the function they serve in promoting the Ummah's revival are not clearly defined. However, what we have concluded after protracted suffering and research is that the current intellectual and cultural crisis cannot be dealt with simply by teaching additional classes on the Islamic legal sciences, by shouting Islamic slogans in the schools, or by adding Islamic labels to various cultural and civilizational curricula in universities and institutes. Rather, there must be a comprehensive treatment which deals with all elements of the Ummah's educational process in order to rebuild it in a sound Islamic manner which treats the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the life of the Prophet and the universe as a single, unified source of knowledge, culture and civilization.

Restricting ourselves to the memorization of Islamic legal texts, reciting selected passages of the Qur'an, and striving to master the rules of Qur'anic recitation, without being equipped with the ability to contemplate and draw lessons from the Qur'an and extend the Qur'anic vision to the art of living, reflects the mentality of those who immerse themselves in a concern for means alone while forgetting, or pretending to forget, the goal towards which they are meant to be striving. There are, without a doubt, numerous Islamic universities, colleges and institutions which specialize in teaching the Islamic legal sciences and which graduate imams of mosques, preachers of Friday sermons, judges who can deal with peoples' personal issues, and instructors qualified to teach Islamic curricula. And this is a laudable, beneficial pursuit which meets significant needs in the life of the Ummah. However, it cannot take the place of the efforts of specialists qualified to reform Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge, since the Islamization of knowledge is a gruelling process of searching for our missing culture. It entails embarking on an arduous journey full of hardships for the sake of rebuilding this culture, then communicating it to the Ummah and to the rest of the world.

Four: Belief in the Universal Applicability of Contemporary Western Culture

In the present day, Muslims are lapping up culture and knowledge from Western sources - despite their firm roots in Greek and secular thought - in the areas of education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, philosophy, administration, the media, history, law, the arts, literature, and other spheres of the humanities which shape the civilization that produces the Ummah's culture.

Muslims have been deceived, as have others, whether overtly or covertly, by the claim promoted by the West, that Western culture and sciences are universal. This belief is among the most dangerous outcomes of what might be termed 'cultural despoliation'. The West has achieved great success in turning this idea into a firm belief on the part of millions of educated individuals all over the globe, and for a number of reasons. Moreover, this success indicates unequivocally that such cultural despoliation is a fundamental source of the current intellectual crisis. It is indeed a crisis for nations whose

cultures have been marginalized and caused to disappear by every possible means, suffering aggression from their opponents and rejection by their citizens and, thereby, being bypassed and ultimately, abandoned to oblivion.

The difficulty may be that we have limited ourselves to inherited solutions which were produced in a particular era to deal with its problems. In doing so, we have lost the ability to discover the solutions to our own issues and problems through our own efforts and independent thinking. In addition, the contemporary Islamic enterprise has not devoted sufficient resources and energy to the epistemological problem. Instead, it has allowed itself to be distracted from this concern by defensive confrontations and situations which it believed to be more deserving of its efforts and attention.

As for the factors which have led to the spread of the belief in the universal applicability of Western culture and sciences, they may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Victory and defeat, and the effects of the [Western] victory on the mentality of those who have suffered defeat.
- 2) Widespread media promotion of Western culture and values employing a variety of materials and methods.
- 3) Excessive expansion in the numbers of Muslim youths being sent to the West to study the social sciences in schools, institutes and colleges.
- 4) The establishment of Western and theological universities in the capitals of Islamic countries and entrusting them to educate the local population.
- 5) Imitation of the Western educational systems in form and content, importation of the Western social sciences, and conformity to the West in all related areas.
- 6) Abandonment of originality, creativity and independent thinking by the Muslims.

These and other factors have caused many Muslims to rely on acceptance and imitation as their *modus vivendi*. This mentality, moreover, includes both those who have taken refuge in Islamic tradition without being able to read it well or benefit from it, and those who have clung without discussion to the easier alternative represented by faith in the victor's enterprise. Both of these groups have been powerless to comprehend what it is that they are aiming for or to discuss it in a conscious manner, as powerlessness virtually always

leads to the adoption of ready-made solutions.

Representatives of both these approaches – that is, both imitation of Islamic tradition and imitation of the West – are fanatic in their support for such imitation. In defense of proponents of the traditional approach, it may be noted that they are emulating their cultural history; however, they do so by means of blind imitation. Consequently they find themselves incapable of originality or of benefiting from their history for the sake of the present and the future. As for advocates of the Western enterprise, they are even more powerless and prone to imitation than their traditional counterparts. They tend to favor consuming that which is ready-made and imported and which neither they nor their predecessors have had any hand in producing. By following this approach, they perpetuate backwardness and circumvent the angst and concern for their civilization which would goad them to intensify their mental efforts and continue to struggle in the hope of emerging from the current crisis.

THE TYRANNY OF THE WESTERNIZATION ENTERPRISE (SEE FIGURE 1.3)

The discourse of the Westernization enterprise (that is, the secular enterprise) has prevailed in most Muslim countries regardless of which of the varied justifications and slogans have been used to bring it about. There is no need to describe this enterprise's adherents and those who have gone to battle on its behalf. For they are, quite simply, all groups which have not adopted the Islamic enterprise and which believe in the universality of Western thought and culture. The adoption of the Western enterprise as a way of life, a basis for building civilization in Islamic society, and a prevailing discourse in culture and thought has led to the inability by the Muslims to achieve even the most minimal level of the outcomes which the same enterprise has achieved in the West. The reasons for this include the following:

- 1) The fact that the Western enterprise is an outgrowth of cultures which are at variance with the culture of Islamic society. It does not recognize the realm of the unseen, nor does it believe in Divine Revelation as a source of knowledge.

- 2) Its conflict with the identity of Islamic society, its character, and the elements which go to make up its mentality.
- 3) Its materialism and antipathy toward the Ummah's spirituality and what it requires for psychological equilibrium.
- 4) Its incompatibility with and disregard for the Ummah's history. Its denigration of Islamic culture and legacy, and its mistaken belief that our culture is nothing but a reproduction of Greek and Roman culture.
- 5) Its reinforcement of the arrogance and egocentrism which have caused the West to deny the intellectual and cultural debt which it owes to Islamic civilization.
- 6) Its sanctioning of Western cultural hegemony by pushing other societies to become subordinate to the West and to acquiesce to the West's central intellectual authority, and its disregard for their particularities.
- 7) Its prevention of any progress on the part of those who defy it, and its confinement of such progress or success to those who meet its specifications.
- 8) Its provincialism, its dependence on the law of struggle and duality, and its sanctioning of the spirit of conflict among nations: from the Cold War, to intellectual invasion, to the clash of civilizations, to the end of history as coterminous with the limit reached by Western civilization itself.

Reality and practical experience bear witness to the failure of the Western cultural structure to offer anything of true value to the nations of the Third World, and particularly to the Islamic world. That is to say, an inductive reading of history and of the currently prevailing reality affirms that any attempt to achieve progress and renewal for the Ummah outside of an Islamic framework is bound to fail. Yet, despite the certainty of failure, advocates of the Western enterprise have yet to declare their defeat or to acknowledge the invalidity of their proposed plan for righting conditions in Islamic society. On the contrary, they claim that this failure cannot be attributed to the plan itself but, rather, must be attributed to Islamic society. The reasons for this claim, which have been mentioned earlier, are: (1) the Muslim mentality, and (2) a lack of concern for the proper use of Islamic terminology.

THE ESSENCE OF THE CRISIS IS INTELLECTUAL (SEE FIGURE 1.4)

By making a careful examination of the weakness that characterizes the Islamic enterprise and, by contrast, the tyranny of the Western enterprise, one may easily perceive the urgent need for attention to the matter of reforming Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge. At the same time, it is easy to appreciate the enormous responsibility involved in implementing programs characterized by a balance between drawing inspiration from authentic Islamic roots and sources on one hand, and on the other, assimilating and benefiting from modernity.

As we have explained elsewhere, the crisis from which we are suffering at present is, first and foremost, a crisis of thought and the intellect² which has led to crises which are political, economic, social and otherwise. At the root of the crisis is a disturbance in our understanding of the sources of thought, a defect in means and methods, and an openness to the teachings of an externally-imposed manner of thinking. We have surrendered to its pressures, and are willing to abdicate the status which befits the Ummah and of which God declares, "You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in God."³

Whoever looks carefully at the various maladies which afflict the Muslim nation, including the absence of a clear vision, cultural authenticity or psychological balance, muddled concepts, a schizophrenic educational system, confusion with respect to aims and goals, and the collapse of systems and institutions, will realize that the causes which underlie these maladies are: a defect in the Ummah's intellectual structure, epistemological inflexibility within this structure, and an inability to achieve revitalization.

It bears noting here that our diagnosis of the crisis being faced by the Ummah as a crisis of thought does not preclude the existence of other crises as well. However, we view all other crises as outgrowths, manifestations or reflections of this one central crisis in one respect or another. The intellectual crisis is thus, as we see it, the 'principle crisis' and the root malady.

It may rightly be claimed that the manner in which we deal with this crisis will determine the fate of our Ummah's ability to achieve rebirth and progress, overcome backwardness, and launch its new civilizational cycle. Once

this cycle commences, however, it will not be limited simply to rescuing and rebuilding the Muslim nation itself and enabling it to resume a genuine Islamic way of life; rather, it will go beyond this role to rescue all of humanity and enable the Islamic nation to recover its role as civilizational witness, which lies at the heart of its mission.

However, it would be inconceivable to think, much less claim, that the current crisis actually began early in the history of the Ummah, toward the end of or immediately following the rightly guided caliphate, after which no one discovered or acted upon it until the present time. Even so, we may affirm that we are a link in a long chain of cultural and intellectual reform movements which have graced the Ummah since the time when the present intellectual and cultural crisis began to surface.