

CHAPTER TWO



The Crisis Mentality and Crisis Proliferation

THE CRISIS MENTALITY

An intellectual crisis is a serious malady, an illness which in some cases grows so severe that it reaches the point where it is no longer treatable. When this happens, the crisis begins to transmute the solutions themselves into new crises which it then adds to its odious litany of symptoms. It is like a virile microbe that interacts with the medicine in such a way that it turns it into nourishment for itself and utilizes it to grow even more potent and deadly.

In earlier periods of history, solutions were put forward to some aspects of the crisis, after which they themselves were transformed into crises. Consequently, there is a need for an in-depth study of these solutions and of the various aspects of the crisis, as well as of the Ummah's social, political, cultural and economic situation.

The Qur'an reproaches those who, after being offered a solution, needlessly complicate it and turn it into a new crisis even more severely than it reproaches those who, after being offered a solution, reject it outright. As an example of the first group, it cites the followers of Moses. God had commanded these people to slaughter a cow to help them resolve a mysterious murder which had been committed and which had nearly led to the outbreak of civil war among them:

And lo! Moses said to his people, "Behold, God bids you to sacrifice a cow."

They said, "Do you mock us?"

He answered, "I seek refuge with God against being so ignorant."

They said, "Pray on our behalf to your Sustainer that He make clear to us what she is to be like."

[Moses] replied, “Behold, He says it is to be a cow neither old nor immature, but of an age in-between. Do, then, what you have been bidden!”

They said, “Pray on our behalf to your Sustainer that He make clear to us what her color should be.”

[Moses] answered, “Behold, He says it is to be a yellow cow, bright of hue, pleasing to the beholder.”

They said, “Pray on our behalf to your Sustainer that He make clear to us what she is to be like, for to us all cows resemble one another; and then, if God so wills, we shall truly be guided aright!”

[Moses] answered, “Behold, He says it is to be a cow not broken-in to plough the earth or to water the crops, free of fault, without markings of any other color.”

They said, “At last you have brought the truth!” – and thereupon they sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.

For, O children of Israel, because you had slain a human being and then cast the blame for this crime on one another – although God will bring to light what you would conceal – We said, “Apply this [principle] to some of those cases of unresolved murder.” In this way God saves lives from death and shows you His will, so that you might learn to use your reason.¹

So simple was the solution which Moses offered his people, they thought that their prophet was mocking them. Hence, their distorted thinking caused them to turn a straightforward solution into a tangled mess. They asked a profusion of questions relating to the cow and had forgotten the crime itself and the unrest it had created. When the price of the cow went up, they nearly kept it instead of slaughtering it out of miserliness. Finally, however, they slaughtered it, but in a spirit of rebellion: “and thereupon they sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.”² This is a perfect example of the way in which a simple solution can be turned into successive crises.

When Muslims closed their minds and rendered them unfit for independent reasoning, relieving themselves of their responsibilities and preferring the path of tradition and imitation, they likewise began to imitate the ways of other nations. They mimicked them in every detail just as the Prophet had predicted that they would.³ Many are the solutions they have rendered needlessly complex, turning them into crises. This is the manner of the children of Israel who raised many questions when commanded by God simply to sacri-

fice a cow. Many cures have been turned into diseases and medicines stripped of their healing powers. In order to clarify the above, we will cite a number of examples which illustrate the ways in which a particular Islamic issue becomes the subject of such excessive concern that it blinds those concerned with applying the legal rulings established for it.

CRISIS BASED ON THE MISTAKEN BELIEF THAT THE SUNNAH IS BEING FOLLOWED

The compilation and recording of the Sunnah and the establishment of the hadith sciences relating to rational interpretation of hadiths and the reliability of narratives is, without doubt, something in which the Ummah can take pride. Tremendous efforts were made by successive groups of early scholars to gather the texts of the Sunnah, to distinguish between authentic and weak narrations, and to lay down standards for classifying the narrators in terms of their reliability or unreliability. In doing so, they caused the Sunnah to become a living, immortal legacy by means of which those who read it or learn from it can live side by side with the Messenger in their hearts, minds and spirits just as the Companions and other contemporaries did. In this manner, the Prophet continues to be an example, model, and ideal for humanity in death just as he was in life. The Sunnah allows humanity to look towards his actions and words for inspiration, find solutions to their problems, discover effective cures for their ills, and acquire the ability to emulate him by connecting the values of the Qur'an with their day-to-day experience in a sound, methodical way. For the Qur'an is a comprehensive, conclusive, creative source for thought, civilization and knowledge, while the Sunnah provides a way to connect the rulings and values found in the Qur'an to a clearly defined reality with features that can be evaluated, and on the basis of which analogies may be drawn.

However, the ages of decadence were dominated by a debate over formalities and literalisms relating to these efforts. As a consequence, the intents underlying the texts around which the debate raged were lost sight of and there was increasing partiality to this or that school of thought at the expense of concern for the interests of the community. At the same time, tendencies toward imitation were reinforced, while attempts to engage in independent

reasoning which were necessary for ongoing contribution and developing the Ummah met with vehement opposition. Each sect or school of thought clung to parts of the Sunnah based on the fact that they agreed with its teachings, while overlooking other aspects of it. Meanwhile, the Qur'an was neglected almost entirely.

As for understanding the Sunnah as an integral method for producing a model generation of Muslims who emulate the Prophet and ascertain how to erect a sound and prosperous intellectual, cultural and civilizational edifice, such concerns received far less attention. The efforts which were made to understand the life of the Prophet and the Sunnah with its aims and messages in terms of the guidance they have to offer fell short of the efforts exerted to determine, for example, whether a given text passed down as part of the Sunnah was strong or weak with respect to its chain of transmission. Scholars' excessive focus on questions of authoritativeness and the formalities of documentation thus undermined their ability to deal with questions of overall understanding and to perceive the aims and intents of the texts. There were many who mistakenly believed there to be a conflict between the Sunnah and the Qur'an, between different parts of the Sunnah, and between the Sunnah and many human interests. This mistaken belief led back into discussions of authoritativeness on the levels of both generalities and specifics, as well as questions concerning narratives, how to reach a verdict on specific prophetic traditions, and related issues. Yet, in all of this, they were, in essence, in search of a solution which could only be arrived at by means of the epistemological methodology contained in the Qur'an itself.

If those who were focusing on understanding texts and those concerned with arriving at the most reliable and authoritative versions thereof had coordinated their efforts, there would have been no disagreement concerning the Sunnah. In such a situation, a group of thinkers who denied the validity of something that had been added to the Sunnah could have presented, in its place, authentic texts of established reliability to those capable of understanding and analyzing such texts and deriving relevant rulings from them. In other words, they could have dealt with life's questions in light of the Sunnah's guidance, light and methodology. And in this way, it would have been possible to prevent the Sunnah – which, together with the one who brought it, came as a mercy to all of the worlds – from being turned by some into bonds and shackles which people would rebel against and seek to break loose from,

if even by denying its authoritativeness in whole or in part as, for example, in the case of solitary hadiths and the like.⁴

CRISIS BASED ON THE MISTAKEN BELIEF THAT ONE IS DEFENDING ISLAMIC DOCTRINE

The contrary manner in which scholastic theology was dealt with constituted part of the intellectual crisis and serves as another example of the ways in which a solution can be transmuted into a crisis. Scholastic theology as a discipline first came into being in order to serve as a solution, and as part of an intellectual and doctrinal reform process. Specifically, it was developed in order to defend Islamic doctrine and establish its foundations, and to enable discourse to make use of the tools of defense and persuasion in the intellectual and missionary arenas. However, the crisis mentality managed to divert scholastic theology from its original intent and aim, thereby making it into part of the crisis rather than part of the solution.

Scholastic theology was developed by early Muslim scholars as a means of defending and protecting the Ummah's doctrines after they had come under attack by contradictory doctrines. This defense was to take place via the theses and ideas of individuals armed with Greek thought and logic as well as the sciences of early philosophers and thinkers. The translation movement also played a well-known role in this area. It was necessary to be familiar with such thinkers and to master their styles in order to refute opponents' accusations against Islamic doctrines. Some Muslim scholars were dispatched to non-Muslim lands in order to debate with rulers and scholars, as in the case of Abū Bakr al-Baqillānī, who was sent abroad several times on this type of mission.

However, the same crisis mentality intervened to divert this academic discipline from its primary function – namely, to be part of the Ummah's civilizational mission and a tool of Islam's liberating developmental and civilizational call. Instead it became a cause of infighting among Muslims and fuel for a counter-discourse which stood opposed to the aims and intents of the Islamic message. As such, scholastic theology became a source of strife within Islamic ranks leading to intellectual disunity and narrow-minded attachment to a particular school of thought. Thus the tools which had been created for the purpose of defending Islamic doctrine and thought were used to bring

divisions among Muslims, distracting them from their intended role and rendering Islamic doctrine incapable of fulfilling its proper function in their lives.

With encouragement from the political authorities, debates would be held among scholars representing various schools of thought, in the context of which they would be incited to enmity against each other. Juristic debates would be held for the same purposes. In the context of such debates, both scholastic theologians and jurists would touch upon subjects which, according to the principles of authentic Islamic methodology and Islam's clear intents and goals, they had no place debating. As a consequence, people engaged in discussions whose sole purpose was debate, argumentation and empty contests. This generated a spirit of contentiousness, strife, fanaticism and profound divisions.

One of the outcomes of this loss of direction in the realm of scholastic theology and its method was that the attention of society's most influential members was diverted to issues which themselves served to perpetuate the Ummah's intellectual crisis and disunity, dissipate its energy, and neutralize the effectiveness of its discourse. Such issues included, for example, the question of whether the Qur'an was created or eternally pre-existent, which produced a significant amount of fallout on the intellectual, cultural and political levels, the question concerning the sources on the basis of which human action can be evaluated and corrected, Revelation vs. reason, and others.

CRISIS BASED ON THE ILLUSION OF NURTURING ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE

It was in the mid-2nd Century AH that the juristic sciences came into being and efforts began to compile and record their works. These works were not intended to form an additional law alongside the law of God but, rather, to be a means of dealing with the problems and questions of that era based on the understandings, opinions and rulings of the imams of that day. The idea that those who succeeded them would leave the law of God aside in order to imitate them in what they had said or the conclusions they had reached would not have occurred to them. Their primary goal in compiling and recording their opinions was to prepare the way for their followers and those who suc-

ceeded them to walk the same paths they had by clinging to the Book of God and the Sunnah, applying the Qur'anic rulings to all of life's issues, and dealing with life's evolving events and newly arising cases and questions in accordance with the intents, purposes, and universal principles of Islamic law. Only in this way would it be possible to preserve the connection between reality as experienced on a day-to-day level in all times and places, and the genuine principles and intents of Islamic law.

However, once again, the crisis mentality turned the statements of jurists into a law beside the law of God, and human jurisprudence became, in effect, the Shari'ah. The law of God was thus equated with this huge store of statements, legal decisions, explanations, commentaries, marginal notes [*hawāshī*], footnotes, personal opinions, and matters both hypothetical and concrete. This was the case whether they dealt with public or private affairs, property and capital assets or personal statutes. In this way, this huge store of human production was turned into a law which was viewed as binding in all times and places, and whose formulators must be emulated despite the varied, ever-changing nature of events.

The mindset of crisis production and imitation – whose causes and manifestations have accumulated and made their way deeper and deeper into the Ummah's mentality – has turned Islamic jurisprudence and its evolving dynamic from a movement based on the understanding and analysis of reality as manifested in newly arising events and cases for the purpose of offering solutions to life's problems, into a shackle which hinders the Muslim mind, limits its movement, and causes it to remain firmly fixed within set frameworks. As a result the Ummah has forgotten the intents and aims of Islam, the universal principles and wise purposes of Islamic law and the bases for its rulings, all of which could serve to build up the Muslim community in the face of the spirit of individualism and self-centeredness generated by partial solutions, legal subterfuges and escape hatches. As a consequence, the Islamic answers to life's questions have become little more than formalities in which it is sufficient to have the proper outward appearance in juristic, legal terms even if they have lost their essence, their truth and their spirit, and even if they achieve none of their original intents or purposes.

These cumulative dimensions have undoubtedly contributed to the weakness of Islamic discourse and its relative ineffectiveness in society. As such, they have reinforced the Ummah's intellectual crisis, including both

those aspects of the crisis which result from errors in perspective, and those that arise because the method of thought has deviated from its intended path and disregarded Islamic law's intents and purposes in favor of formalities and outward appearances. Hence the process of turning various types of knowledge which had originally been solutions into crises, has itself led to a new crisis, namely, the crisis of 'the split between theory and application.' This in turn has become a hallmark of the Ummah's current state now that it has become unmoored from its intellectual and doctrinal foundations and lost its vitality and unity of direction and movement.

CRISIS PRODUCTION THROUGH AN IMAGINED RECONNECTION BETWEEN THEORY AND APPLICATION

The crisis in Islamic thought and discourse was a cause of concern to a number of great scholars who had an accurate understanding of the true nature of this split and who perceived the harm it was capable of doing. These scholars realized that if the crisis continued, it would empty Islam of its content. Hence, they saw the need to engage in ongoing efforts to reestablish the connection between theory and application, to offer the practical guidance found in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and to remind Muslims of the ways in which the Companions and their followers conducted themselves. The purpose for such efforts, as they saw it, would be to produce a clear understanding of issues relating to spiritual education and writing on this theme, and to urge Muslims to investigate the effects and intents of actions and statements rather than being content with mere forms and appearances.

At that time, such efforts yielded academic material belonging to the realm of ethics. In addition, they raised a behavior-related issue which was referred to by some as 'the science of reality' (*'ilm al-ḥaqīqah*) and by others as Sufism (*al-taṣawwuf*), and which would be another aspect of 'the science of Islamic law' (*'ilm al-sharī'ah*). This was a sincere attempt on the part of these scholars to reconnect reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) with Islamic law (*al-sharī'ah*), that is, to do away with the theory-application split referred to above. In doing so, they hoped to revive the intimate link between these two aspects of existence and to transcend the formalistic legal and juristic framework by looking into the behavioral effects associated with these rulings and linking everything

with its intent. For indeed, “matters can only be understood in light of their intents,” just as means can only be understood in light of the ends to which they lead. For, “means are subject to the same rulings which apply to their intents.” Hence, whatever fails to achieve what it was intended to is of no value even if it happens to remain correct in its juristic appearance, thereby fulfilling a legal obligation or duty.

However, as in the case of the aforementioned sciences, which had emerged initially as a treatment for an existing crisis and in order to protect the Ummah from potential future crises looming on the horizon, this science was likewise subjected to the influences of the intellectual crisis. This again served to turn it from part of the solution into part of the crisis itself. Consequently, Sufism became a door through which numerous deviant practices and beliefs were allowed to infiltrate the Ummah, while many aspects of it became a call for isolation and a shift of attention to individual issues at the expense of collective issues of concern to the Ummah as a whole. Hence, Sufism served to foster immersion in a new type of formality and passivity, thereby adding new dimensions to the Ummah’s already existing crisis. Specifically, it introduced a new type of preoccupation into the Muslim psyche and added untold problems to Islamic life, the least serious of which was a distraction from the concerns of this life and a preference for a state of isolation from society, its problems and its issues on the pretext that it is undesirable to immerse oneself in the world of people and their ignoble demands.

Thus it was that the energies of a large sector of the Ummah were consumed and their effectiveness limited. In addition, once this trend had grown stagnant due to its transformation from a part of the solution to a part of the problem, its adherents were prone to accuse those engaged in any activity or action of immersing themselves in the affairs of this world and abandoning the concerns of the life to come. Many later Sufi leaders closed their eyes to the fundamental principles which had been stressed by Sufism’s earliest proponents, including the principle that this earthly life is the realm in which one sows the seeds of the life to come, that is the place in which one seeks to do good in preparation for the next life where one will be called to account for one’s actions and be rewarded or chastised accordingly, and the domain in which human beings use their reason and action, bear the divine trust, deliver the Message, and be God’s vicegerents on earth.