

# Toward an Islamic Alternative in Thought and Knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

Current developments and the many acute problems facing the Muslim Ummah, especially at the intellectual level, present a serious challenge to Islam. Given this reality, an attempt to outline an intellectual Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge has never been so urgent and imperative. This undertaking will help formulate a clear and coordinated policy with regard to cultural transformation, one based on firm principles and a sound strategy. It is also hoped that this policy will lead to scientific findings.

By way of introduction, I will give a brief description of the state of knowledge and thought, as well as of the educational and cultural systems, in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds.

## THE PRESENT STATE OF THOUGHT

When examining the present state of thought among Muslims, three basic approaches can be identified:

- The “authentic” or “traditionalist” approach, which, by and large, considers the Ummah’s “traditional” thought to be self-sufficient and capable of being presented with very little or no alteration. This approach suggests that the Ummah’s contemporary intellectual life can be formed and organized, and that its civilization’s structure can be built on this basis.
- The “modernistic” approach, which considers contemporary western thought and its worldview (e.g., its concepts of existence, life, and humanity) to be universal and without which a modern culture and civ-

ilization cannot be built. This tendency maintains that western thought must be adopted *in toto*, and that any consequent negative aspects are the price that must be paid for establishing a modern culture and civilization.

- The “eclectic” approach, which contends that one must select from traditional thought that which is most sound and from modern contemporary thought that which one considers and proves to be correct. These two then must be welded together to form an intellectual structure that will provide a guaranteed basis for achieving what is required.

However, the traditional approach, in the manner it was presented and applied, did not prevent the Ummah from falling into a state of decline and failure, from which it is still suffering. Likewise, western thought, as it was presented and applied, cannot protect the Ummah from its inherent adverse, harmful, and even disastrous effects. The advocates of the eclectic (selective) approach have presented no details of this proposed blend; nor have they tried to put it into effect. All of this is conducive to a wide-ranging question: Is the Ummah going through a serious intellectual crisis, and, if so, how can it find its way out?

#### THE PRESENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

To answer the above question, a brief look at the contemporary state of knowledge is necessary. At present, our students are taught two types of knowledge. First, there are the contemporary social, technical, and applied sciences that control the organization and functioning of all aspects of modern life. They comprise – regardless of the Muslim contributions to many of their bases – a body of knowledge whose principles, rules, objectives, and methods were formed by the western mentality through its religious and intellectual framework, philosophy, and background. Every aspect of this knowledge is closely bound to the western form of civilization.

Second, there is the knowledge that Muslims describe as *shar‘ī* (relating to the Sharī‘ah [Islamic Law]) or *aṣlī* (relating to the bases of Islam). This knowledge can be further subdivided into the knowledge of objectives and the knowledge of means. Experts on classification and cataloging include both under the heading of *al-‘ulūm al-naqliyyah* (transmitted knowledge).

Most of this knowledge was produced to deal with the issues that arose during the third Islamic century, a period when the Islamic sciences had been established, and in response to the Ummah’s historical reality at that

time. The books and reference works current among its students were prepared after the door of *ijtihād* had been closed and *taqlīd* (imitation of the works of previous scholars) had become widespread. The authors of these works used to prepare them with the utmost care, paying great attention to linguistic details and artistic style in order to display the depth of their knowledge to their students, colleagues, and rivals. They are more like monologues than teaching books.

The methods and contents of such material supported the concept of *taqlīd* and encouraged people to adhere to it. The intention was to prevent people from exercising any form of *ijtihād* other than that needed to understand the books themselves, and, in the process, to make people despise *ijtihād*. This type of knowledge could not equip anyone to face life's realities. Rather, it strenuously promoted blind following and imitation, and ended intellectual activity and creativity. People seeking knowledge were thus caught between following alien contemporary thought or sticking to old traditional ways of thinking. Neither type of knowledge enabled them to achieve an operative *ijtihād* that help them face current problems in a sound and appropriate way.

#### THE PRESENT STATE OF MUSLIM EDUCATION

Turning to the educational systems throughout the Muslim world, we notice the prevalence of a dual system. The first system, the traditional "Islamic system," offers students a program consisting of the Shari'ah sciences (*viz.*, those sciences pertaining to Islamic law). This system is confined to preparing and enabling graduates to deal with personal affairs, meet some educational needs, and lead the prayers in mosques. For the most part, this system remains a private affair that has limited access to public funds. The necessary funds come from the residue of charitable endowments, not the state's budget. Where public funds are made available, demands of secularization are imposed in the name of modernism.

The second, and by far the more widespread, is the secular system, which presents all kinds of contemporary knowledge and science during the student's educational career. It advocates un-Islamic orientations and has assumed tremendous proportions, elbowing out the Islamic system. Since the Islamic system's graduates are isolated from the reality of contemporary life and its challenges, they usually present no competition to the secular system's graduates. Consequently, the un-Islamic secular system produces the

Ummah's intellectual, political, and social leaders, as well as the managers of its services and means of production.

This dichotomy in educational systems soon became a means of dividing the Ummah and draining its energy. In reality, education should be a means of bringing Muslims together and providing them with a unified cultural perspective, of directing them toward progress and construction. It should create harmony and provide a common purpose, thus directing all efforts toward developing the righteous Muslim individual, whose mind and soul, culture and behavior, and powers of individual initiative and reasoning are strong and productive.

Much of the division and fragmentation – even the tragic conflict afflicting many parts of the Arab and Muslim worlds – bears traces of this dichotomy's negative aspects. In addition, the negative effects of other branches of education (e.g., military, private, and foreign) are reflected in the graduates' attitudes and cultural visions.

#### THE PRESENT CIVILIZATIONAL STATE OF THE UMMAH

Today, the Ummah's territory is the world's most strategically important and richest area. Its lands contain the most important raw materials for western industry, as well as tremendous human resources. The Muslim world also has a magnificent legacy and possess the best sources of guidance: the Divine Revelation (*wahy*), namely, the inimitable Qur'an (including its interpretation and application), and the Prophet's Sunnah. Despite this, however, the Muslim world is plagued by inner strife and division, turbulence and self-contradiction, war and threats to world peace, extravagant wealth and excessive poverty, and famine and epidemics.

The Ummah is divided against itself, torn up and fragmented into nearly fifty nation-states separated by artificial boundaries designed to create and ensure continued tension and confrontation, especially among neighboring states. None of these states has had the chance to attain the outright freedom and stability, or social integration, that would enable it to concentrate its energies on construction and development. Sectarianism, factionalism, and nationalism, all of which cause disharmony, have dominated affairs to such an extent that they have led to a continual state of instability, which foreign powers can easily manipulate at a time of their choosing. Such a situation only leads to more turmoil and anarchy. The lack of individual freedom prevents the people from pursuing their own intellectual and cultural growth, to

say nothing of their natural psychological development. Muslims continue to live under the shadow of poverty, oppression, and terror, either from those who were specifically prepared to impose western forms of thought and culture on the Ummah, or from military dictators who seize power and impose their own frivolous, arbitrary, and whimsical policies through force, torture, and intimidation. In such dictatorships, the role of political and administrative bodies and institutions is completely eclipsed, a disaster that destroys all of the people's qualities and cultural potential.

The overwhelming majority of the Ummah is illiterate. The people's needs far outweigh the goods, materials, and services that they can provide for themselves. Even in the important and vital necessities of life, almost no Muslim state is self-sufficient. This deficiency is usually made up by imports, which only increases dependency on foreign powers. What makes the situation even more intolerable is that raw materials are bought from Muslim states at the lowest prices, or even taken for nothing, and are returned to them as manufactured goods at the highest prices. Many of these states are living at the level of starvation, while the rest could be reduced almost immediately to such a level if the exporters and foreign powers so wished.

The few Muslim states that have followed the path of industrialization have not attained complete self-sufficiency, because they still depend on foreign sources for most of the equipment needed to develop their industries. As a result, these foreign sources can control the nascent industries and direct them according to their own political and economic interests.

In most cases, "Muslim industry" was not designed to meet the Muslim world's desperate, immediate, and vital needs, but to meet only its inhabitants' tangential and secondary needs and to satisfy and cater to the consumeristic desires and habits planted in the Muslims for the benefit of others.

Unfortunately, the Muslim world has developed the habit of consuming the products of a contemporary non-Islamic civilization and has adopted many of its outer aspects, such as "modern" roads, buildings, and places of entertainment in its capitals. It has also established some political and economic institutions based on the western model. But these measures have failed to bring about the desired transformation and have not even set the Ummah on the road to achieving that transformation. How can this situation be rectified?

#### TOWARD AN ISLAMIC ALTERNATIVE

In order to present the Islamic alternative to the Ummah, we must reform Muslim thought as a whole and reassess its methodologies. We must under-

stand the position of regional and nationalistic thought, as well as western thought, both Marxist and liberal. Furthermore, we must realize how influential western thought has become in the Muslim world. This will enable us to become aware of the enormous and stupendous challenge we are facing, and the pressure that history and the present are exerting on the Muslim mind.

Several important conditions must exist for such a reformation of thought: It should be comprehensive and free of all psychological pressures, whether historical or contemporary; and, it should be carried out for the purpose of correction and self-criticism, as a serious quest for scientific alternatives governed by theoretical and intellectual principles.

Such a revision should examine the controversial issues that have occupied the Muslim mind and prevented it from being positive, effective and influential: causality, the alleged conflict between revelation and reason, the blind imitation of previous scholars and its crippling effects, the dignity of humanity, and so on. It should reinterpret these issues in a sound and objective fashion, and seek to free the Muslim mind from the negative effects and shackles that these issues have had on its psychology, mentality, education, and way of life.

We must revise and correct the Ummah's inherited historical and cultural structure and rid it of the weakness, dichotomy, and lack of reality that hamper its efficiency and effectiveness. We must reexamine all of the prevalent concepts and work to achieve the correct perspectives on life, the universe, humanity, and all other related issues. In addition, we must agree on these perspectives' sources and design Islamic systems and institutions that can define a role for each of them. In this way, these systems and institutions may achieve Islam's goals, even if they do not exactly match its historical reality in form and structure. This design should lead to an Islamic concept of civilization that will enable Muslims to rebuild the Ummah and achieve its goals and objectives. We should seek to transform all of the above – according to a defined method – into a coordinated cultural system that will acculturate and educate the entire Ummah so that it may become a thriving operational system.

A sound intellectual basis, which is the starting point for building a civilizational system, must have three characteristics: 1) infallible sources that are free of error and destructive deviation, so that thinking will not degenerate into imagination and meandering meditation; 2) that are acceptable in both rational and logical terms, so that ideas presented to the Muslim mind will not be quickly discarded; and 3) that are realistic, so that Muslims will be able to interact with reality in order to change and influence it positively.

TOWARD A STRATEGY  
FOR KNOWLEDGE

Nowadays, scientific knowledge is defined according to the following maxim: "Every piece of knowledge is subject to tangible experiment." This definition, which has been around for centuries and has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is used to decide what type of knowledge is "scientific." Due to the adoption of and the widespread reliance on this concept, revelation was rejected as a source of knowledge, culture, and civilization. In addition, all knowledge based on it was excluded from scientific knowledge, regardless of whether it dealt with the tangible or the intangible world. All such knowledge was considered "fables" or "unscientific," and of no benefit.

As a result, only the empirical method was considered capable of producing scientific knowledge. Humanity was regarded as being no more than a mass of biological substances, and the social sciences and humanities were subjected to the laws of natural science. Experiments were carried out on animals in an attempt to identify those laws that could be applied to humanity and to human behavior, reaction, influence, obedience, refusal, and ways of meeting material and other needs.

Muslims also accepted this approach, with the result that the contemporary western social sciences and humanities, not to mention their underlying philosophy, became the basic sources of their education, mentality, and attitudes toward the values of truth and goodness. Likewise, the arts based on this philosophy formed their psychology and defined their tastes and attitudes toward aesthetic values. The teaching methods and curricula in universities, educational institutes, and schools were subjected to this concept, and thus the students' westernization and alienation from Islam deepened. Consequently, the matters dealt with by revelation were classified as fables. A strong link was established between the West's power, productivity, and ability on the one hand, and western thoughts, beliefs and concepts of God, the universe, humanity, religion, life, nature, time, history, matter, men and women, the soul, science, knowledge, and various other matters on the other.

In light of the above, the first step toward formulating an Islamic cultural strategy is to redefine knowledge in terms of an Islamic epistemology and in a way that will be acceptable to Muslims everywhere. In this context, we need to emphasize that all knowledge is derived from revelation, reason, perception, or experiment. The contemporary theory of knowledge affirms that

the sole source of scientific knowledge is the tangible universe. The Islamic theory of scientific knowledge, on the other hand, stresses that knowledge has two sources: revelation and the tangible universe. Revelation is the source of absolute facts and truth about which there is no doubt and no concept of relativity. Revelation is contained in the Qur'an, which Allah revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Allah has challenged humanity to produce a surah (chapter) that can match even the shortest one of the Qur'an: "And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our Servant, then produce a surah like thereunto" (2:23).

Reciting the Qur'an is, in itself, a form of worship. The Qur'an opens with *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* and closes with *Sūrat al-Nās*. The second source of revelation is the legally binding elaborations upon the Qur'an that are contained in the Prophet's Sunnah. This consists of his reported actions and decisions (i.e., all that he said, did, approved of, or condemned, provided that the particular narration has been proven to be authentic).

The Islamic theory of knowledge considers the means of gaining knowledge to be reason, perception, and experiment. The Qur'an says: "And Allah has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing – but He has endowed you with hearing, sight, and minds so that you might have cause to be grateful [to Him]" (16:78).

According to Islam, no piece of knowledge can be considered as true or worthy of acceptance without corroborating evidence from revelation or the tangible universe. Knowledge of the tangible universe has to be derived by one of the three means mentioned above: reason, perception, or experiment. The Qur'an challenges people to "produce evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true" (2:111). As for those who affirm unsubstantiated beliefs, it asks: "Have you any [certain] knowledge that you could offer to us? You follow only conjectures and do nothing but guess" (6:148). And it categorically affirms: "Never can surmise take the place of truth" (53:28).

Humanity should have some knowledge and understanding of two fields: the "unseen world" (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception, and the "seen world" (*‘ālam al-shahādah*) that can be witnessed by a created being's senses or mind. The primary source of knowledge about the unseen world is revelation, from which humanity derives evidence about it. The basic source of knowledge about the seen world is the tangible universe. Experiments and perception provide evidence about the seen world through a variety of means that may support one another. If we lay a firm foundation for the theory of Islamic knowl-

edge and present it as an alternative to the contemporary western theory of knowledge, we will have established the second basis of the proposed cultural strategy.

This strategy must be based on the realization that every nation has a main issue of concern, a belief, or a basic goal that provides it with a motivation, inspiration, and impetus in all of its activities related to knowledge and labor. Usually, each nation seeks to plant this belief or goal in the consciousness of its youths through all possible means, especially during childhood. The nation then continues to nurture and strengthen this belief throughout the individual's development.

The Muslim world's current system of education has failed to instill any such belief, sound vision, standards, or motives. As a result, the goal of education for Muslims is to obtain decent employment with a decent income. Materialism has become widespread among the educated classes, which have lost any sense of a clear purpose in life. Academic syllabi have failed to establish a sound purpose in the Muslim conscience. The only way to achieve this goal is to establish a strong Islamic belief (*‘aqīdah*) and instill an Islamic vision in the hearts and minds of Muslim youths. We must use all available means and resources to nurture and develop this belief and vision in order to achieve a sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah. We must make this belief the motivation and the inspiration for our thoughts and feelings.

Secondary schools in the West, despite its secularism, teach students about western heritage, cultural history, and traditions in an integrated and comprehensive manner. This gives the students a sense of belonging and instills in them their nation's basic goals and strategy. They grow up with this feeling and carry their nation's vision and concepts of life, the universe, humanity, other cultures, as well as other aspects of its worldview.

Our proposed cultural strategy must firmly establish Islam and its vision not through limited classes on "religion," but throughout the entire education system. Every syllabus and program must seek to form and establish this belief. We must rid every syllabus of anything that contradicts or opposes belief by reorganizing the education system in all Muslim countries and by discarding the negative influences of the division between religious, secular, civil, and military education. This division has created, and continues to perpetuate, divisions among our people, with the result that graduates of religious schools and universities have ideas, opinions, and concepts that differ sharply from those who graduate from secular or military schools and universities. We do not want to abolish variety and specialization; what we want to end division.

This could be achieved by integrating existing systems and creating a single system based on Islam's teachings, spirit, and vision. The new education system, its syllabi and methods, and those responsible for it, should all be infused with Islam's principles and goals. It should abandon the tradition and the educational programs, content, and methods of other nations that were adopted without considering our Ummah's particular needs and aspirations. It should generate a sense of mission, whereby professional achievement and material success may be regarded as bonuses, not as the purpose and objective of education. The proposed education system must unify ideas, concepts, and feelings on all major issues. If, at this stage, there is some diversification into various specializations, students and scholars would feel no sense of isolation or alienation.

If this unification is carried out properly, it will help to provide all educated members of the Ummah with a good share of Islamic knowledge that deals with Islamic beliefs, values and goals, and morals and behavior. In addition, this unification will help familiarize the Muslims with Islamic legislation, history, and civilization, as well as with what is necessary and essential to contemporary modern knowledge.

While developing an Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge, special attention must be paid to the study of Islamic civilization. Such a study, when undertaken according to a proper methodological syllabus (to which a number of selected Islamic thinkers, educationists, and psychologists have contributed), is considered one of the most important means of creating and crystallizing the individual's feeling of belonging to the Ummah, and enabling him or her to understand the spirit that motivated our ancestors to make their great achievements to art and science, as well as political, social, and economic thought. At the same time, individual Muslims will become aware of the pain and suffering of earlier generations, what they failed to achieve, and how and why they failed. Such insight will help them develop self-awareness and the ability to compare themselves with other peoples and civilizations. In addition, studying Islamic civilization will help create and develop an awareness of its legacy, the spirit that produced and animated it, and what distinguishes it from other civilizations; develop the ability to plan for and look forward to the future; and help protect Muslims from being swept away by the conflicting currents of civilization that are seeking to dominate them. Certainly, no one can escape unscathed from this conflict unless he or she belongs to one of the contending civilizations that can be a real alternative when the other civilizations decline and fail.

Our new educational strategy must include a course of study that explains the bases, values, sources, and goals of Islam as a source of thought, culture, and civilization. This four-year course should be studied in the first stages of university education by all students, regardless of their specialization. It would deal with Islam's history, the historical achievements of Islamic civilization, and the basic features of Islamic culture.

Following on from the above, we need to present the humanities, social sciences, and arts from an Islamic perspective. We must appreciate that the methods and theories of the modern humanities, social sciences, and arts were formed in a way that reflects western thought, as well as its beliefs, strategies, and goals in life. The issues they deal with stem from western theories of knowledge. But with regard to all of these sciences, people in the West have begun to sense their shortcomings and inability to meet even their own needs. These sciences are now encountering many serious problems in their methods, theories, and application, and their adherents in the West are trying to correct them.

The Muslims desperately need to have their own humanities, social sciences, and arts, ones based on their beliefs and the theory of knowledge derived from the sources of those beliefs. If this is achieved, it will not be only the Muslims who attain their goal by gaining knowledge of the Islamic humanities and social sciences that are connected to moral values. Such values will, indeed, contribute to humanity's general welfare.

This objective could be achieved through studying the directives of the Qur'an and the Sunnah on all social and human matters, and then classifying them according to the issues of these sciences so that they could provide guidelines and principles for our societies. This work should be carried out by groups of researchers composed of specialists in the humanities, social sciences, the Arabic language, and the sciences of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In addition, the Islamic legacy must be studied and all available material must be classified according to the issues of these sciences. This classification should be precise, so that the knowledge contained in the Islamic legacy is readily available to researchers and specialists in a convenient and authentic form. Computers and information technology are invaluable tools for any such project. A critical study of contemporary thought must be undertaken in order to select its best elements according to strictly defined standards.

Finally, plans need to be drawn up to use and benefit from all of this material. Colleges, institute, and school textbooks need to be rewritten so that they will reflect the Islamic vision of contemporary reality and needs.

Moreover, they need to be written and designed in a way that makes them attractive and convenient to use.

All Arab and Islamic universities must cooperate to realize these goals. The International Institute of Islamic Thought has detailed plans for all of these matters, and is willing and eager to share its expertise with the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), as well as with anyone who seriously wishes to cooperate in these matters.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to ISESCO for bringing together Muslim scholars from all over the world to discuss and propose a concept for a cultural and civilizational Islamic system. Such a system is long overdue and is urgently needed. May Allah (SWT) grant us success and help us achieve that which will please Him.