

The Crisis of Thought and Ijtihad

INTRODUCTION

The Muslim mind experienced a crisis of thought when, during the early centuries of the Islamic era, *ijtihād* (independent judgment in juridical matters) began to be viewed as limited to legal matters, rather than as a methodology for dealing with all aspects of life. This limited understanding engendered a malaise that allowed *taqlīd* (imitation) to attain such prominence and respectability that its cancerous, constricting, and irrelevant *fiqh* (jurisprudence) spread throughout Muslim life. Had *ijtihād* retained more of its lexical meaning and creativity, and had *fiqh* been considered only one of its uses, perhaps Muslims would have overcome many of the problems that confronted them. However, this particularization of *ijtihād* confined the Muslim mind, and *taqlīd* eventually paralyzed its creative abilities.

Had *ijtihād* remained a way of life for Muslims, as Allah commanded, they would not have fallen behind in establishing the Islamic sciences necessary for their society and civilization. They also would not have had to watch the reins of leadership pass to the West, whose most important qualification was its ability to engage in creative and scientific reasoning. Although its intellectual tradition was tainted with pagan Greek influences, the West achieved world leadership. Had Muslims taken up those sciences and laid the foundations of their society on the basis of *tawhīd* (unity), Earth would be different today and the state of civilization itself would be far more felicitous than it is at present.

Before *ijtihād* was confined to the purely legalistic framework of *fiqh*, the Muslim mind was enlightened, eager to deal with all manner of thought, able to meet challenges, generate solutions, and achieve its goals. Had it not been for *taqlīd* and its subduing of the Muslim mind, that mind would have

This "reflections" article first appeared in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 234-37, and was translated by Yusuf DeLorenzo. It has been slightly edited.

achieved great things. Certainly, a mind with its beginnings in the verse “Read! in the name of your Lord Who created ...” (96:1) should be more than able to renew the Ummah’s mentality, continually adjust to changing circumstances, and initiate the sciences of civilization at a time when the West was still overrun by wild forest tribes.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY IJTIHAD?

For the reasons indicated above, we are calling for a new type of *ijtihad*. Rather than the *ijtihad* specified by the scholars of *uṣūl*, we speak of an *ijtihad* that is more of a methodology for thought. Such an understanding would allow the Muslim mind to participate in an intellectual *jihad*, a *jihad* launched to generate ideas and build a new Muslim identity, mentality, and personality. This *jihad* would apply to all fields of knowledge, seek to make the Ummah qualified to shoulder its responsibilities as regards vicegerency (*khilāfah*), and enable it to serve as a median nation (*wasatīyyah*). While such an *ijtihad* would apply to legalistic, juridical, and jurisprudential *fiqh*, it would also apply to such new forms of *fiqh* as the *fiqh* of religiosity (*fiqh al-tadayyun*) and dialogue (*da‘wah*), as well as to all fields requiring the Ummah’s attention and creative thinking.

IJTIHAD: THE ALLY OF JIHAD

Both *ijtihad* and *jihad* are derived from the lexical root, *j-h-d*, and both seek the same goal: to release all beings from devotion to the created so that they may be free to practice devotion to the Creator, to take them from the injustice of religious deviation and superstition to the justice of Islam, and to take them from the restrictions of the physical world and limited thinking to the wide horizons of Islam and the Qur’an. For this reason, *ijtihad* is counted among the pillars of Islam in the same way that *jihad* is. Without *jihad* there would be no Ummah, and without *ijtihad* the Ummah would have no vitality. Thus, both may be considered as essential and continual responsibilities.

Once *taqlid* in matters of *fiqh* established itself as a pervasive intellectual attitude, all that remained of *ijtihad* was its extremely rare use – maybe once in a century – by individual Muslim thinkers and scholars. Their role was of inestimable importance and was, in some ways, just as important as that of modern parliamentary and democratic institutions.

Ijtihad was the methodological means that allowed Muslims to confront ignorance, oppression, and deviation. But when the Muslims themselves abandoned it, all manner of trouble beset them. By closing the door of *ijti-*

had, Muslims believed that they were solving their legislative problems. In reality, however, they only succeeded in crippling their own intellectual powers. Although the call to revive *ijtihad* was never entirely silenced, such calls were never enough to extract the Ummah from the intellectual crisis in which it had become mired. As a result, *ijtihad* was left mainly to heretics and deceivers, and, finally, to Orientalists. If a true Muslim were to articulate ideas to which people were unaccustomed or to announce his/her readiness to practice *ijtihad*, he/she would become an immediate target of ridicule and abuse by the supporters of *taqlid*.

The Ummah must understand that *ijtihad* provides it with the fundamental means to recover its identity and reestablish its place in world civilization. Without *ijtihad* the Muslim mind will never rise to the levels envisioned for it by Islam, and the Ummah will not take its rightful place in the world. Unless the call to *ijtihad* becomes a widespread intellectual trend, there is little hope that the Ummah will make any useful contribution to world civilization or correct its direction, build its own culture or reform its society. To liberate the Muslim mind, the Ummah needs *ijtihad* in every aspect of its life. If it is to play its preordained role, it must undertake a new reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, study its past, analyze its present and, by means of these, ensure its future.

RIGHT OR WRONG, THE *MUJTAHID* IS REWARDED

No mere call, announcement, or advertisement will result in *ijtihad* or produce a *mujtahid*. Such developments depend upon the preparation of needed intellectual and cultural atmospheres, for a *mujtahid* is one of the Ummah's most gifted and accomplished scholars. When the Prophet spoke of *ijtihad* and how one who performed it correctly received a double reward, and how one who made a mistake received one reward, he was addressing an Ummah that understood that only a few people could undertake it. The resulting responsibility was so great that even those few individuals who dared to undertake it did not always announce their opinions if they seemed contrary to those of majority or the rulers.

Clearly, any mention of *ijtihad* and its importance should be accompanied by serious efforts to bring about the right sort of intellectual and cultural atmosphere. The first step toward this goal is to create an environment of complete freedom of thought and expression. If people lack the courage to perform *jihad*, they find it even harder to perform *ijtihad* and accept the

consequent responsibilities. How many intellectual positions are harder to defend than military positions?

In the present straightened circumstances, no one who can generate sound ideas or perform even partial *ijtihād* should hesitate to announce the results of his/her *ijtihād*. No one who is aware that there is a reward even for those whose *ijtihād* is incorrect has an excuse to refrain from playing a role or from giving the Ummah the benefit of his/her ideas and creativity. After all, those ideas might become the foundations of a new cultural and intellectual order within the Ummah. Nor should anyone continue to listen to those who warn of the dangers inherent in allowing *ijtihād*. The Ummah has heard all of their arguments, and nothing they say has been of any help.

THE LEXICAL AND TECHNICAL MEANINGS OF IJTIHAD

In the Arabic dictionary, the root *j-h-d* is defined as “the exertion of effort on a matter that requires it.” In all of its different applications, the term denotes the expenditure of mental and intellectual effort. A *mujtahid*, therefore, is a scholar who researches and studies all of the sources, information, statistics, and available material about a subject until he/she is satisfied that he/she has done everything to learn about the subject in question. After expending all of that effort, it may reasonably be assumed that his/her opinion is reliable. This is why al-Ghazālī defined *ijtihād* as “the expending, on the part of a *mujtahid*, of all what he/she is capable of in order to seek knowledge of the Shari‘ah’s injunctions.” In a further clarification of this definition, he then wrote: “Complete *ijtihād* happens when the *mujtahid* expends all of his/her energies in seeking, to a point where he/she is satisfied that no more can be done.” This definition refers to *ijtihād* in the field of law and indicates that the effort expended must be exhaustive and emanate from those who are qualified. If an unqualified person undertakes these same efforts, one cannot say that *ijtihād* has been performed.

HOW CAN THE PROBLEMS OF TAQLĪD AND DEPENDENCY BE OVERCOME?

In order to extract ourselves from the clutches of *taqlīd* so that we can create the circumstances under which *ijtihād* can flourish, we must define our intellectual premises carefully. In doing so, however, we must avoid the modern western paradigm that, for too many reasons to list, has become the center of every academic circle and the starting place for the majority of

modern thinkers. One major reason for doing so is that the western paradigm is based on secular materialism, an outlook that rejects revelation outright. It views only that which can be measured or quantified as a suitable subject for serious study. Those who have come under the West's influence define knowledge as information acquired either through the senses or experimentation. All of the contemporary social sciences and humanities, as well as the natural sciences, are founded on this premise. This is why modern theories of politics, society, economics, and ethics have their roots in the same definition. Secularism, therefore, has become the basis for all intellectual and academic research, analysis, and synthesis. Thinkers and scholars the world over have now accepted the secular paradigm of knowledge.

The acceptance of this western model has only served to increase the Ummah's intellectual dependency. At the same time, it has helped to eradicate whatever traits distinguished non-western cultures and civilizations from their western counterparts, and perhaps has had a role in the latter's outright plundering of the former. Unless the mentality of dependency is overcome, there can be no *ijtihad* or intellectual ingenuity.