

# EPILOGUE: RETRIEVE AND RENEW

## RETRIEVE AND RENEW

THE discourse between East and West is a task which cannot be relegated to future generations. It has already begun within our generation. Such projects as the one which has been the subject of the present collection is merely an illustration of the direction in which Muslims today are thinking. Writing from within a *tawhīdī* perspective, carrying the legacy of the Muslim past, and with the burdens of its present in view, it was only natural that the priority and the emphasis have so far been given to rousing Muslim scholars and thinkers to their responsibility towards the Ummah. Their counterparts in the West must evidently also share in a common responsibility of clearing the horizons for a future global moral order which is inclusive and humane. It must embrace everyone and be equally accessible to all peoples and cultures indiscriminately.

Only a century ago, such prominent figures proclaiming their affinities and allegiances to the Enlightenment could equally boast a misconceived arrogance in their claims that the future belonged to Europe alone.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that in the presence of such paradoxes where reason and bigotry coexist the twentieth century would live through the wanton excesses which would leave everyone the poorer in their humanity, not only Europeans. However, man is conceived by his Creator in dignity and a divine spark of hope must forever burn in his soul. The twentieth century has also been something in the way of material achievements and more by way of aspirations to higher elevations of an englobing morality. Dialogues and trialogues have been taken up with varying degrees of commitment and consistency among the different peoples and traditions. They constitute the cultural venue

## *Epilogue*

of a politically self-conscious age. This is one area upon which intellectuals in the East and the West need to reflect in earnest.

A cultural hermeneutic conceived in the spirit of a *tawhīdī* ethos, impartial and at the same time engaged, could provide the corrective and the measure to safeguard against complacency and to spur on a benevolent sense of equity in the regard for others. It would be impartial in terms of its distancing from contending egoisms, its “bracketing” of the self-centered impulse; it would be engaged in its commitment to the pursuit of the truth and its fulfillment in history: in the “worlding of the world.” To take up the lead provided in the prologue, the only test and warranty of integrity in observing this intent lies in the source and premise of its inspiration. The intent begins with the Qur’anic recollection and knowledge that:

Mankind was one single nation, and God sent his messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent a book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; But the People of the Book, after the Clear Signs came to them, did not differ among themselves except through selfish contumacy. (Qur’an 2:213)

Despite their differences, people were meant to strive to “know one another” (Qur’an 49:13) and to use these differences as the gauge of their complementarity and as an access to a purposeful and compassionate mutuality that went beyond the mechanics and the impositions of functional and contingent interdependencies. To do so would require of them, however, a modicum of convictions and a modified self-perception that took its cue from another reinforcing Qur’anic injunction:

Verily, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Sustainer: therefore serve Me (and no other). (Qur’an 21:92)

In world politics, where the price of power without responsibility has soared in modern times, the turn of a new century seems to promise new crossings as the walls which have long divided crumble.

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

Symbolism is rife, and nowhere more so than in the celebrations from the Berliner Schauspiel on Christmas Day playing Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" which was relayed by satellite across the globe. There the ode to brotherhood was transfused into a hymn to human freedom. This optimistic surge might be true for the spectacle on the Western front. There, one version of an East/West divide which has fractured the Northern hemisphere during much of the outgoing century, and which in the process had for long imperilled a shrunken globe, seemed at least for the moment to be giving way. A kind of intoxication seems to be taking over as individuals and peoples emerged to reassert their long denied God-given rights. It is this resurrection of a persistently distorted and a stubbornly dodged source of human morality which seems to be taking the historical West by surprise.

The transformation of totalitarian regimes in the face of popular pressure is more than the ideological triumph it is taken to be by its enthusiastic liberal contenders. Beyond the much vaunted principles of political freedom there are even more elemental values which are at stake in the present global effervescence. The perennial quest for dignity and spirituality peaks at the height of a materialist age. It takes a person of Vaclav Havel's sensitivity and humaneness to remind his baffled and admiring audience in the West of the persistence of an "inner realm of truth" which has sustained his nation through the trials and rigors of an automated and perfected totalitarianism in a Communist regime that to all appearances ruled indomitably for over half a century. Havel is of course that Czech playwright, poet, and politician who rose from dissident to president in one of the more providential turns in this century.<sup>2</sup> It is to be hoped that this aspiration to an innate spirituality which extends to the public realm will not be sacrificed at the altar of another variant of the materialistic vice embodied in the consumerist ethic of the liberal West.

This quest for an inner realm of truth, one might add, is perhaps just as evident within the bounds of liberal democracies too, where the urge to affirm a moral order is at hand. There the virtues of political freedom fall short of assuring the means for overcoming a host of other problems afflicting modern communities around the globe. The need to look beyond politics, if not to turn politics itself into a paradigm for salvation,

## Epilogue

is very tempting. The historical West, while politically vindicated and technologically unsurpassed, remains a lone and proud victim of its own virtues and accomplishments. Others might be inclined to be less charitable and call a spade a spade. Defiance and rebellion – (or is it arrogance and self-delusion?) – is after all a Promethean patent with which some will gladly identify. Nonetheless, one lives in history and realities that need to be resolved impose themselves.

The need to transcend the claims of a permissive society and to curb the effects of an unbridled individualism seem to be persistently offset by a contentious ethic of cultural relativism. The modern West takes pride in its rational liberalism, yet for all its reverent skepticism it is not at all sure how it can handle its growing human problems. The demand to do something about values that are turning into vices also grows. If this demand is more often articulated in terms that are more social and cultural, yet they frequently boil over into ominous incursions in the political arena. Although they assume decidedly less dramatic form when compared to the events in China's Tiananmen Square or at the Berlin Wall, they are nonetheless historically portent in the Toynbee sense. The spectrum of American anxieties on the eve of a new decade and at the threshold of another century provides eloquent testimony to this effect. A catalogue of nagging issues tests the mettle of its intellectuals as much as the boundaries of its moral and political order. Drugs, sex, abortion, child abuse, pornography, a permanent underclass of homelessness and underprivilege – these are among the social plagues of the day which constitute items of priority in that liberal order. The cultural resources of the Western tradition are strained to the limit, and the public debate which touches on such issues as ethics and public policy, or the relations between church and state, does more to disclose the strains in this tradition than to relieve them.

This again is an area which stands to gain by promoting such initiatives and research as those expressed in the Western Thought Project sponsored by the advocates of Islamizing knowledge. "Islamization" as the preface to the *Roundtable Collection* suggested, is hardly a program for wholesale conversion or for proselytization. Rather, it is a universal summons to learn and to reeducate the self which begins with a rational appeal to Muslims themselves. This appeal

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

stresses the need for reintegrating a core of pristine values that are universally accessible to everyone into the matrix of modernity through its information and education networks. As these values are recovered and reformulated, they are also woven into the basic grounds of knowledge and they can come to inform techniques, technologies, policies, and institutions to the benefit of a wide public.

The human and moral problems in the advanced West constitute an area which suggests to all concerned that it might be salutary to open up to other perspectives on the world and on life. Admittedly, a perspective coming from a *tawhīdī* worldview might have something to contribute to resolving problems which, by virtue of modernity, can rarely be confined to any one part of the globe. With a clearing made in the cultural space of the West, one could hope for a turn towards a *tawhīdī* episteme. To the extent that such an episteme is admitted into the intellectual and cultural horizons of a discourse, which would be carried beyond the current elated idiom of a *glasnost* politics, a welcome access could be assured to the global reserves that would shore up a new moral order. But this could only occur if the obsession with power and power politics which is so rampant in the dominant forums of our day were to be scaled down to its proper proportions. Yet, here we come to the crux of the matter. The very word “proportion” seems to be a term which has lost its meaning in an age which can only see itself in an implosion of refractions as it desperately gropes for both content and direction.

“*Nothing in excess, measure is best, know thyself!*” So the echo sounds of the delphic oracles of a bygone age which seems to have been entirely lost to the consciousness of a present confounded in its self consuming immanence Modernity. This is an epoch which was spawned in the West and now credibly threatens to engulf the globe. Yet it makes sense to recall a timeless exhortation of natural prudence, confirmed in divine revelation, handed down over the generations and understandable to all, in both East and West. It needs to be taken seriously on the agenda of any future encounter between East and West which presumes to address the future ecology of a moral global economy. In its absence there can be no “New World Order” in a shapeless post modern age which is dawning on both East and West, and which is seeking its shape. All the same, the boundaries are more than ever becoming those

## *Epilogue*

between a reason enlightened by faith and prudence and a blind reason intoxicated by its own excesses and want of restraint. This is what an outgoing epoch is teaching posterity, although its own generation is seemingly impervious to the lesson. When the individual has become a measure unto himself, the community dissolves: or at least, its matrix is severely undermined. In the meantime, there is nothing that can secure the individual either against his own excesses. In forgetting their Creator, their origin, and their destiny, God has made them oblivious of themselves (Qur'an 59:19).

This is the real implication of the controversies of our times, whether they are of global vintage like the Rushdie scandal, or whether they are more local eruptions like the Cincinnati Museum court case deciding on the fate of the Mapplethorpe collection.<sup>3</sup> The one and the other, each in its own way dramatizes the central issues at stake. In the soul searching they provoke, the thin end of the wedge is broached in an attempt to deliberate on what constitutes "art" and what pornography, and on where the lines, if indeed any, should be drawn between the rights of the individual and those of the community. It was only the politicization of the first of these two issues, the Rushdie affair, and its interpretation within a saturated ideological setting which obscured its real dimensions.<sup>4</sup> These could only be understood in terms of an unbounded and unrestrained effusion/implosion which undergirds the modern secularist culture. In an event which threatened to cloud the historically dense and fragile horizons between the Orient and the Occident, and to stir dormant passions in the saga of "Islam and the West," there were other factors confounding the benighted affair. Foremost was the pervasive impact of a market-oriented media which was typically tempted into publicizing a "death defying novel" to thousands of gullible and well-intentioned buyers. Numbed by the dulling banalities of a boring age, there exists in the West a ready public which is all too eager to join a crusade, even if only for the excitement offered and the opportunity to vent one's pent-up sense of righteousness and frustration. Here again, another valid lesson of our times was lost in the fray. There was no longer an East "out there" to be ravaged, romanticized, taken to pieces, revelled in, phantasized, or exorcised. The East was now within the West and, in a way, it was as much a part of it as the

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

West, in its globalization, had become of the East. That was reason enough for all sensible men and women of goodwill to come together to defuse the spurious and vicarious spark. This thought conduces to another observation which would not have intruded here had it not been for its implications for an East/West encounter.

Indeed, to many thoughtful Muslims who live in the West, as well as to many concerned Christians and other liberal thinkers who are honest with themselves and courageous enough to admit it, there are many perplexities on the horizons that need to be cleared. Many are trivial incidents blown out of all proportion, whether out of malice or more frequently out of ignorance, misunderstandings, misperceptions, misguided analogies or any other contortion. At about the same time, like the Rushdie affair in the Anglo-American world, another minor happening across the English Channel triggered off tensions there. An administrative interdiction by the French authorities banning the veil/headscarf from public schools was proclaimed in the name of safeguarding “secular freedoms.” Such incidents were bound to raise doubts about the genuineness of the liberal credo. That these incidents coincided with the sweeping developments in the Continent and throughout the globe at the close of an eventful decade, these questions were all the more compelling. At the height of their vindication it would seem, when their proud mentors were debating the Hegelian thesis of “the end of history,”<sup>5</sup> the celebrated ideals of the liberal polity seemed also, ironically enough, to be at their most vulnerable. Beneath the surface pomp and luster, frustrations festered and anxieties churned at the fringes. Equivocations in the standards of freedom and of rights threatened the public peace as much as troubling many private consciences. How free was freedom? Freedom for whom and freedom to do what? Whose human rights, and who qualified for the designation “human”? With a steadily growing community of Muslims in the West, both of indigenous stock and of emigrants, these are questions that will have to be addressed to satisfy an innate sense of justice as well as civic entitlement to equity for all.

Whether in their historical *dār al-Islām* homeland in the East or in their new and adopted home in the West, Muslims are essentially struggling with the questions of identity and community in an environment

## Epilogue

that needed to be sensitized to both. For such Muslims, however, there was not a shred of doubt about the immutability and the contemporary vitality of the divinely revealed principles which to them, more than an article of faith, constituted their reason for being. The question was how these principles could be instantiated in a changing time and clime: it was a problem of form and contemporization, not one of content or of direction. The Islam of history that Muslims have lived in the more recent and more distant past, many felt, was not necessarily that of the future; nor, as they well knew, were the boundaries among communities exclusively geographical or ethnic; they were primarily and above all moral. The real task and challenge, as many a self-proclaimed theocentric humanist too would readily concede, was how to evolve a global architectonics of a community that was both free and moral, and how to launch this project from within the West itself, from the lion's den and the eagle's nest. Much would depend on common people's attitudes and on public policies towards the multiplying circles of "pluralisms" there.

The pressing question, however, would remain the same one that has periodically resurfaced in the great conversation in the West: Could a moral order be worked out without degenerating into either tyranny and dogmatism or nihilism and licentiousness? Could the extremes in an inherently oscillating culture be avoided? For Muslims there is no doubt about the possibility for such a golden mean, as such a possibility constitutes their perception of what their test and witness in this world is about. The challenge, however, lies in how to strive towards instantiating an intrinsically realizable ideal. More to the point in the present context, the question was how the encounter with the West and from within the West could be developed within the framework of a *tawhīdī* ethos in a manner that would contribute to resolving some of its perennial self-inflicted dilemmas.

Given the "global village," where a century's technological accomplishments have dissipated the physical distances between communities and cultures, the East/West encounter has become doubly imperative: not just to avoid the consequences of such potentially explosive misunderstandings, but also to deliberate together and to redefine the bounds of rationality and the meaning of community. This is a task

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

which challenges a common endeavor to bring together values and good will as well as the power to give them substance. Such a task cannot be left to the West alone to decide on and bring about, for if the West has no want of power, it is demonstrably powerless to save itself on the scales of morality. While it is evident that no culture can flout morality, yet it is equally true that history is strewn with the records of civilizations that have lost out in the wake of abortive searches in pursuit of their elusive ideals. In the meantime, if it is left unsubdued in its directionless and contentless will-to-power, the West, under the delusion of its monopoly on progress and right, can only destroy itself and others. The idea is that there still remain strong pockets of morality and conscience in the modern West, particularly in the transatlantic New World that is rapidly ageing, and that these need to be reinforced and shored up. At the same time, the Orient, as the historical fount of values and morality, cannot afford to indulge its complacencies and to simulate a disdain for power without marginalizing itself from history. But then, in its own carelessness and misconceptions, it will be guilty of partaking of an end to all history in the very real and tragic sense, its own history and that of others, in a world that can ultimately know of only one history for a common humanity. This is where the prophetic ethos of a joint sense of responsibility for the fate of our global ecology comes alive.

It would not be unseemly at the close of these reflections to paraphrase and briefly dwell on the gist of a parable cited earlier as a reminder of this ethos.<sup>6</sup> The victim of folly and its perpetuator, it is held, are equally responsible for their plight in an affliction that is visited upon all in our planetary ship called Earth. If those who at one end see fit to deplete its resources or abuse them in a manner that suits their own selfish temporal interests, regardless of others who share with them the earth at a given moment or in the future, and if those others are too indifferent or complacent to act in time to check abuse, then all would eventually perish. The limits of moral responsibility for the public good are set.

What we refer to as the prophetic ethos also inspires dialogue and encounter across cultures, and it might be rendered as a code which balances the elements of personal and public responsibility in such a

## Epilogue

way as to assure the dignity and moral well-being of all. As a rejoinder to the theme of joint responsibility, it might be pointed out that each individual and group may ultimately carry the burden of one's own deeds in an ethic where "no soul shall bear the burden of another" and where none shall be taxed beyond their capacity – and where, moreover, each group is judged in terms of its own mandate and not that of another.<sup>7</sup> Carried into the realm of responsibility for the action of others in the task of worlding the world, this might evoke its echoes in a variation on a theme from an analogous tradition. "I am not my brother's keeper" cannot simply be countered by its obverse. Rather, the well-meaning insistence that "I **am** my brother's keeper," which could open the way to abuse and transgression, would need to be qualified with the remembrance that "My brother is also my keeper, as long as neither of us legislates for the other, and as long as we both deliberate together in implementing a code revealed to us by our common Creator and Benefactor."

A *tawhīdī* episteme which embraces that ethos sees the parties to encounter and dialogue in a relationship that transcends their mutual obligations and reciprocities to reach out to their originating, mediating, and arbitrating source. Accordingly, the rationale against a morale of selfishness and indifference here was as simple and practical as it was morally salubrious. At the same time that it inculcated a sense of commitment and purpose to secure a cohesive moral community, it safeguarded it from degeneration into an arena of self-righteous tyranny by maintaining the proportions between the personal and the collective, the internal and the external, the immanent and the transcendent. The essential point to note in such a community is that there is no escaping that sense of moral responsibility for oneself and for the whole to which one belongs. This point is only reinforced by the knowledge that history, i.e., the lapse into temporality and the sheer passage of time is no excuse for forgetfulness.<sup>8</sup>

Muslims can play an axial role in an epoch of transitions as they deliberate on their own destiny. Historically, this role has been conceived in terms of retrieval and renewal. Today, retrieval and renewal are a burden that they must share with the Other in confronting the challenge of the times. To retrieve and renew is this 'double-barrelled'

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

quest which confronts all those who live in the modern world: it means to rediscover, to remember, and to recover their common values and it also means to renew their common life on a shrunken globe as they reverse optics and come to see their planet Earth in the perspective of another epochal moment in cosmic history as it is revealed through the eyes of the Hubble telescope. If anyone is conceivably more qualified than another in taking the lead on this journey to renewal, then it is surely those who are middle-most to the encounter: those who belong to both East and West by virtue of their common allegiance to the Lord of the “two Easts and the two Wests.”

It might be recalled in this context that the West has frequently seen Muslims in ambivalent terms: at one moment Muslims are seen as apart of that exotic Orient – out there, on the other side, the fabled and foibled other. But, more frequently they are seen as an extension, a projection, or a perversion of the West itself – another instance of a Christian heresy that has to be brought back into the fold – or exterminated. Only rarely is that flicker of an intuitive sensibility stirred to suggest to the few that experience it that somewhere in that extension of self, in that “continental shelf,” lies the key to a magnanimous reconciliation that lies at the heart of the Western odyssey from classical antiquity through modernity. This reconciliation will have to be one that starts from the self and stretches out to embrace the Other. Those who can conceive of such a vision and its realizability are, indeed, the few whom the inspired Muslim theologian and philosopher of the sixth century *hijrī*, al-Ghazālī, referred to as “those from whom God does not denude the world” and who are, as he explained, to be found in every culture and throughout time.

Little is it realized, however, how the “middle-most community” which constitutes the Muslim norm is defined by a vertical and transcendent compass that assigns the unitary orientation to all of mankind in terms of its single origins and its ultimate destination. This is the perspective which inspired the triologue of the Abrahamic faiths advocated by al-Faruqi as chairman of the Islamic Studies Group at the American Academy of Religion. With this, we might end on a very pragmatic and down-to-earth proposition on a somewhat more mystical and sublime note.

## Epilogue

The middlemost community is a global ecumenical community, a universal brotherhood in the full sense of the word; it owes its character and designation to the direction in which it sets its face: its *qiblah*. Every Muslim knows what the *qiblah* is. In his prayers five times a day he sets his face to countenance a source and direction round which the hearts of millions of his brethren converge in humble devotion. But in the encounter with the Other, the significance of the Abrahamic sanctuary, that time-honoured House of God which beacons to all His thirsting bondsmen, will need to be communicated on the plane of a paradigm. In this context, the *qiblah* could be transfused symbolically in terms of an interiority that stretches outward to the infinite. Or, obversely, it could be perceived in the heart of the devotees of a world of truth and light, in terms of a transcendence that is projected in a visible center of finitude where it is instantiated and to which all who care to turn can palpably relate. Whichever way it is defined and communicated, the *qiblah* ultimately signifies that nodal point which reaches to the invisible depths of the core of our humanity as we seek to internalize within our consciousness and our consciences the values that can save our common history. The direction of the shaping/reconstructed middling global moral community as it comes to prevail over the derelict dichotomies that artificially divide, stretches beyond itself to the Creator and Sustainer of both East and West. With such an orientation, the community is confirmed in its bearings and it becomes finally possible to discern what constitutes measure and what proportion. In this, it can distinguish means and ends and relate the one to the other; it can balance freedom with morality as it seeks to retrieve and to relearn the essential wisdom that can preserve and ennoble the human species. In this way too it can 're-member' by putting its world back together and piecing the fragments into a whole.

Thus defined, the middle-most community is a community that is potentially inclusive of a humanity advancing at its own varying pace and temper to the center of an attracting magnetic field. It is a community that is selectively open to all who would freely elect to subscribe to its manifest and universally accessible principles, regardless of biological genes or of historical geographies and genealogies. In this sense, it is horizontally an expansive community by virtue of its membership and,

## WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

vertically, an integrating of a radiating community by virtue of its principles. By definition, such a community would operate at a level which transcended the factitious East/West divide. The norms for a free and open encounter would be confirmed in the sense enjoined in the exhortation to consciously heed the meaning and consequences of our unitary origins.

O mankind! We have created you out of a single pair of male and female, and We have made you into multiple nations and tribes, in order that ye may get to know one another. Truly, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the one who heeds God the most, who is most God-Conscious. (Qur'an 49:13)

And,

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread forth a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily God is ever watchful over you. (Qur'an 4:1)

With the reconstituted perceptions of self and Other, and with a realistic attunement to the needs of an accelerating future, the agenda of the encounter could be set upon for action predicated on understanding. Having opted for retrieval and renewal, the retrieval of a common heritage and the renewal of an ailing humanity, the parties would then be expected to deliberate together on how a life-binding commitment could be optimally achieved – in time and with due measure.