

Note on this Revised Edition

IIIT has great pleasure in presenting this revised edition of Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl's *Where East Meets West: Appropriating the Islamic Encounter for a Spiritual-Cultural Revival*. The book was originally published under the title, *Where East Meets West: The West on the Agenda of the Islamic Revival*. Sadly, Dr. Abul-Fadl passed away in September 2008 before work on a revised edition could begin. Therefore, respecting the quality of her scholarship and in memory of her work no content or structural change has been made to the original edition, other than correction of typographical and other errors which had crept into the typesetting and design of the original.

PREFACE

IN presenting this book to the reading public, the International Institute of Islamic Thought places an important brick in the metatheoretical foundations of its Western Thought Project (WTP), for it was with the intent of encouraging an active and critical presence of the Muslim intellect that the broad outlines of the Western Thought Project were first conceived. Now, with the Publication of Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl's *Where East Meets West: The West on the Agenda of the Islamic Revival*, the Institute is confident that its Western Thought Project will bring about the discourse it envisions. This work represents a call by the Institute and its Western Thought Project to discriminating Muslim scholars the world over – a call to share in the development of an original, constructive, and intellectual Islamic stance as regards modern knowledge at both the conceptual and the methodological levels.

The author of this challenging work is a close and long-standing associate of the Institute. Abul-Fadl's work was first noticed by the former president of the Institute, *al-Shahīd* Dr. Isma'īl Rajī al-Faruqī, and his wife, Dr. Lois Lamyā' al-Faruqī. A meeting was arranged and, a few months before his assassination, al-Faruqī met with Abul-Fadl and came away from that meeting impressed by the scope of Abul-Fadl's reading, her knowledge of Western thought and tradition, and her ability to criticize these both from Western and Islamic perspectives. Although al-Faruqī was anxious for Abul-Fadl to use her skills and knowledge for furthering the cause of the Institute's Western Thought Project, this did not materialize until after his assassination.

When she arrived at the Institute, Abul-Fadl took full responsibility for the Project, started processing materials which had been collected under al-Faruqī's supervision, and then began to cover new ground. After taking another look at the entire project in relation to the Institute's fundamental goal (the Islamization of knowledge), she drew

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up two charts offering two plans of action: one showed intellectual dealings with Western thought from an Islamic point of view, and the others showed academic cooperation and the preparation of synoptic textbooks in major academic disciplines. It soon became obvious, however, that preparing the envisioned systemic text books would require the continuous and combined efforts of a significant number of specialists – something which the Institute with its limited human and financial resources would find difficult to achieve within a reasonable period of time. This realization led the Institute to reconsider its priorities and strategies in addressing Western thought: it would now concentrate on developing a theoretical matrix of inquiry and providing a methodology for dealing with Western thought from an Islamic perspective. Both of these were done with the intent of understanding and evaluating Western thought in order to go beyond it after weighing it against the Islamic theory and sources of knowledge and the distinguishing traits of the Islamic imagination with its values *vis-à-vis* existence, humanity, and life.

Abul-Fadl decided to undertake the exploration of this vast field on her own. She went through hundreds of books and studies in order to immerse herself in the Western intellectual tradition, its roots, history, attitudes, and classifications. Over the next two years, Abul-Fadl recorded her ideas and observations in both English and Arabic. Then, gathering her data together, she submitted the first systematic report on the Western Thought Project, a work which documented her proposals and laid the groundwork in a manner that would be accessible to a cumulative, critical, or creative effort by others.

The report in itself is a serious study in the field, for it contains several constructive suggestions about how to deal with the logistics of undertaking such a monumental project. This report, together with its supplement of nearly six hundred pages, has not been published and at presents constitutes a reference for review and internal circulation. Indeed, Abul-Fadl might have been able to enrich the library of the Institute and of Islamic learning in general with several studies if only she had access to the same facilities as her Western colleagues. Often, the only thing a Western scholar needs to worry about is the idea itself, for the preparation, research, documentation, structured formulation,

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editing, correction, rewriting, and production of the final draft is commonly delegated to qualified research assistants and editors. If Abul-Fadl and many other Muslim thinkers could avail themselves of such facilities, the library of contemporary Islamic thought and culture would be a very rich one indeed.

In this volume, Abul-Fadl defines the Islamization of knowledge and elucidates the present state of thinking on this subject by explaining that one element of the Islamic religious imperative is to activate the Islamic worldview which, in turn, is contingent on the ideal of *tajaddud* (renovation). It is this ideal or commitment that the program of intellectual revival known as the Islamization of knowledge assumes.

The relevance of the Western Thought Project, Abul-Fadl further explains, is in reactivating the Muslim mind so that it can effectively interact within the contemporary epistemic chart, rather than merely introduce Muslims to the West or vice versa. What is at stake is a new type of encounter with the West in terms derived from the *tawhīdī* episteme, so that a dynamic and equitable process of cultural interaction may be set into motion. The contemporary Islamic revival obliges Muslim thinkers to reconsider the world and their place in it, while the Islamization of knowledge (the revival's intellectual response) qualifies the nature of the Muslim's reconsidering the Other, particularly in the case of the West. Ultimately, by drawing on the sources of their rich spiritual heritage, Muslim scholars can effectively contribute to the resolution of many of the more acute social problems that threaten the course of an afflicted humanity.

Surely, too, this is a noble calling and aspiration that must engage the hearts and minds of all those who share a stake in a better, nobler, and more humane world. It is a tribute to the WTP, as it is at present promoted by the Institute (IIIT) and as it is here ably outlined and formulated by the author, that it is all-embracing in its audience and concerns. True to the spirit of the faith and the message that inspired it, it is conceived in the conviction that the renewal of the Muslim intellect and the betterment of the condition of the Muslim Ummah are inseparably intellectual and spiritual enlightenment of all.

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RECENTLY, an avant-garde Muslim critic stated that to have modern consciousness is to live in a world shaped by the Western mind. If in any doubt, one had only to reflect on how the contemporization of the world always entailed the Westernization of its mind.¹ This imposes a challenge to the modern Muslim who is called upon to reconcile his conscience as a Muslim with historical realities.

The strategic goal of Islam's conscience and the grand problem of its thought concerns the realignment of the moral and the natural, including the historical worlds. The ultimate focus of Islamic discourse ... is the problem of world order, in which the West figures as one historical entity ... the Islamic tradition approaches the theme of universal order through a critical reflection on the human situation, both existentially within history and transcendently within the self, from the Quranic thought categories of *zulm* and *zulm al-nafs*. The problem of relating the Islamic self to the world thus presents itself as a problem of world order which in itself forms a part of the more original and comprehensive theme of *zulm* in history and *zulm* in the soul. A critical theory of the self and the world that is derived from these two categories ... would go a long way towards ending the spell of spuriousness which victimizes Muslim thought at present.

At some point in shaping the Muslim discourse on conscience and history it will be necessary to reach out to others, particularly to the West itself, in order to evolve together the terms of a new global consciousness which is inclusive. In so doing the question which will inevitably arise is which West is to be expected to contribute to this encounter? Our critic predicates the answer to this question in the light

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of the commonality of interests which are likely to exist between the participants in the discourse. In this vein he suggests that:

Notwithstanding all the historical rivalry, the two faiths share a religious world view whose incontrovertible givens are God, man, history and revelation. As such there is considerable community of interest between Islam and Christianity which ... (they) both lack vis-à-vis the modern West ... (which embodies the "Faustian heresy") ... Western atheistic humanism challenges the very *raison d'être* of *homo islamicus* (who is the *homo religiosus par excellence*). Why base a religion, culture, civilization and global community on faith in an unseen God, when man on his own can provide all the felicity, prosperity and power that has ever been achieved by any human society?

In this sense, then, reclaiming an Islamic consciousness means more than just repossessing the world as it now exists, as some modern critics might suggest. It entails reshaping the future of the global order along lines which are bound to be endorsed by the generic *mensch*, the *insān al-fitrah*, who also happens to be identical to *homo religiosus*. In this sense too, reclaiming an Islamic consciousness can mean the end of the modern predicament of an all-pervasive alienation – a theme which provides much of the animus for the soul-searching debate in the Western encounter with modernity.

The above glimpses of an intimate "dialogy" seen through the fragments of a discourse selected for a critical appreciation would suggest that, within Muslim intellectual circles, the debate on the West has already begun to take a turn unforeseen a few decades ago. The issue is no longer to defend the Islamic identity and heritage on the assumption that it qualifies Muslims for modernity, or that it is as good for Muslims as the standards set for the world by the West. Rather, the question is whether the standards of a modernity which may be seen to have imposed itself on the globe, West and non-West alike, are those most conducive to promoting the moral well-being, or even the physical survival, of the communities which constitute that world order. It is against this challenge that the Muslims are rediscovering the meaning

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and relevance of their Islamic heritage. At the same time as they recover their own identity and values in the light of that heritage, they strive to share it with others and to relate it to the world order of which all have become irrevocably bound. Yet history is real enough, and the balance and weight of a mixed historical experience between the West and the non-West in general, and that of the West and the Muslim world in particular, will have to be confronted if the future is not to be “ransomed” to the past.

It is with this understanding and vision, and with a sense of urgency drawn from reading the trend of the times, that the bid for renegotiating the terms of the global encounter is made here. It begins with a summons that is addressed to the intellectual community comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims. It urges on all concerned the need of reviewing their own attitudes and intellectual projects in the light of a fresh understanding of the context and needs in a global community/communion. The new understanding it proposes should draw on the principles and precepts enshrined in the authentic and verifiable sources of a divine guidance. The universality and timelessness of this guidance carry it beyond Muslims to non-Muslims and beyond the past into the future. This is an issue which will first have to be debated among Muslims for the sake of clarifying and articulating a coherent stance/stances on the score. The summons accordingly addresses Muslims in the first instance. But even as they debate amongst themselves, Muslims are part of a whole, and it is impossible not to take that whole into consideration even in the earlier phases of shaping the features of a new cultural response to the times. It is here too that renegotiating the terms of the encounter between the East and the West will have to be addressed in any such project of redefining cultural positions in a common world. On this account, the West figures on the agenda of a Muslim revival. On this account too, the repossession of their claims on history by the Muslims must be seen in terms of a new structure of empowerment, not of expropriation; it is a structure grounded in apportioning a share of dues to all who can responsibly stake their claims on a universal and noble trust.

The present volume is not in itself intended as an intellectual debate on the issue of the Muslim encounter with the West. Dimensions of this

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debate have already been taken up elsewhere and will continue to be the subject of future publications. Instead, the work at hand, as it stands, sheds light on a very practical project which has been on the agenda of the Islamic revival for some time and which has been addressed in different ways. Even when it has not been directly and exclusively broached, there is no doubt that the problem of the West figures significantly in any such agenda, as the historical attempts by Muslims to come to terms with the modern world in the past century so eloquently indicate.

One of the more original contemporary responses in this respect has come from the International Institute of Islamic Thought over the past decade. Its originality is due to the attempt to articulate and resolve this problem in a practical and comprehensive manner as part of a more general and fundamental need for restituting and reconstructing the modern Muslim mind. Already this terminology alerts us to the historicity of this process and draws attention to the current critical and reflexive turn among Muslims as they wrestle with the ravages of the postcolonial and, indeed, the precolonial condition. There is no doubt where the Muslim will take recourse in this process as he exercises his faculties of reasoned discrimination and enlightened understanding in locating his pristine sources and models. But this is not the place to expound on this theme, for our intention is merely to highlight the context and the spirit of the more immediate task. The problem of the encounter with the West then is being carried beyond the political and the economic arenas to an intellectual and an essentially cultural realm where it is conceived to properly belong. This is not to deny the importance of the other areas of encounter and exchange, but to give the latter activities and domains the depths which belong to the human civilizational venture.

To this end, the Institute published *The Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* in the early eighties and through it addressed the need for reconstituting the disciplines of modern inquiry in light of the Islamic precepts of knowledge. This was taken up as an element in a radical epistemic breakthrough in tackling the intellectual dimension. As work progressed it was more and more convincingly realized that the disciplines tendered in the modern academy were

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by-products and promulgators of a historical culture with its epistemologies and methodologies which were distinctive to an integral whole: the Western heritage. This could only mean that philosophy, history, and culture had to be tackled at a metadisciplinary level. A strategy was clearly needed for elucidating the nature and thrust of the knowledge chart of our times and for exploring the ways and means for its renegotiation. This is, no doubt, a demanding challenge which calls on the resources, the skills, and the imagination of all the community and which, indeed, invites an openness to others as well. The present slim volume responds to this need and articulates this realization. It is launched with the intention of sharing with all those concerned some of the initial conceptions as they are at present being developed within the Institute. The idea is to strive for their further enrichment and elaboration in the future by other contributions from an ever-expanding circle of interested, capable, and committed elements in the future. Let us briefly in closing touch on its background.

In the course of the spring of 1989, preparations were afoot at the Institute for a restricted round table on the Western Thought Project. *A Convocation* and a *Work Paper* were drafted to this end. When the meeting convened in the early summer, some background was given to participants on the nature of the project, its purpose, and its place in the overall Islamization of knowledge movement. What follows is a collection of these papers and the notes which were prepared for this session. It is hoped that publishing them in their essentially unpolished format might provide some food for thought to those who read them. More than what a “finished” product could achieve, the present material would hopefully prove to be a stimulus for taking up the threads and stringing them together in more original and thought-provoking directions.

MONA ABUL-FADL

Herndon, Virginia, USA, 1411 AH / 1990