

## CHAPTER I

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# A CONVOCATION: THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

### THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

THE fate of our civilization lies in the balance of culture, not power. Indeed, the terms of the culture of our times will determine the future of our politics and societies. Moreover, this simple truth applies equally to each constituent part of the global world, including the Muslim world.

Islam today continues to be, as much as it was in the past, at the hub and crossroads of contemporary civilization. The difference, from a historical perspective, lies in the West's control of the political setting, the primary factor in qualifying the terms of today's civilization, and in setting its pace and direction accordingly. These terms however are unsatisfactory, not simply on account of the inequities underlying Western power structures, but in view of the inadequacy of the cultural underpinnings which lend it its qualitative dimension. Any attempt therefore to influence the course of civilization must rely on the modes of interaction that occur between a dominant West and the emerging power centers all over the globe. In essence, these modes need to be seen as a function of culture and not merely as politics.

A digression here may place this relationship in due context. It goes without saying, or so it would appear, that the prospect of rival power centers conjures the image of a scramble for substituting one hegemony for another. But this should remain at the level of an assumption open to historical refutability. Admittedly too, the emergent power centers are

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bound to constitute a threat to the current dominance of the West through their challenging its supremacy. The implications of this challenge, however paradoxical it may appear, need not necessarily imply a loss for the West; it can indeed mean, through its consequences for the global system, a net gain for all the parties concerned. Obviously, however, this is not a foregone conclusion.

To the extent that the emergent power centers develop in the context of the prevailing power economy, rooted as it is in the domination/subjugation model, the outcome can only be conceived in terms of a zero-sum game. To the extent, however, that the emergence of these power centers brings with it the possibility of an alternative to the conflict model, the challenge must be conceived in terms of its implications for a new paradigm of world order that transcends the constituent identities of those who are the parties to this order.

The possibility of this alternative is contingent on the cultural factor, not the political. The significance of the Muslim world as an emergent power center lies in its claim to a cultural identity and heritage that qualify it for a paradigmatic contribution of this nature. In order for it to assume its role, however, it is essential that it revive its culture, recover its *tawhīdī* ontology, and rediscover and activate its episteme, all of which call for a measure of cultural autonomy. Given the nature of the world system and the historical realities of the Muslim Ummah, the extent to which this may take place is severely restricted. In considering the need for such autonomy, the limitations imposed by pervasive cultural penetration and hegemony will have to be addressed. This may be an onerous task, but it invokes its own ardour; one that is only augmented by necessity.

To assure the premises for a cultural revival, it will be necessary to give priority to consolidating a measure of cultural autonomy. This calls for redressing the anomalies of the prevailing cultural imbalance between the Muslim world and the West. The difficulty lies in defining boundaries in a context where the very rationale of autonomy becomes problematic. Reviewing the West becomes in part a process of reviewing the self in its contemporaneity. Having become an endemic feature of the cultural setting in the Muslim world itself, the culture of the West can neither be neglected nor ignored. However, it is the way in which

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this pervasive intrusion is approached which constitutes the difference and the challenge. Hitherto Muslims have been at the receiving end, and the prevailing logic of encounter has oscillated between a dialectics of imposition and a dialectics of seduction. In the tidal revival in the Muslim soul, the recovery of the consciousness of self and identity is currently accompanied by an appreciation in self-confidence and a revalorization of the Muslim identity. This has reflected positively on various attitudes, include those relating to the enduring encounter with the West.

The novelty here lies in the initiative taken by Muslims to evolve a serious and credible reading of the West. They realize that they will first need to understand the West in its own terms before they can evolve an objective and critical reading of their own. On the other hand, they equally realize that unless they can develop a viable and credible Islamic platform for their intellectual venture, their critical and discriminating aptitudes will be severely impaired and their version of the account of the West will be of dubious value. Furthermore, it may be pointed out that, for Muslims, such a reading of the West cannot be an end in itself; it is valued more for its potential contribution to redressing the intellectual equilibrium of an entire culture that finds itself threatened. The core of that threatened culture lies in the Muslim hemisphere, but its range and reverberations embrace the globe.

The value of a revival which takes its measure from an Islamic core lies in an implicit model of world order more congenial to the times and more compatible with the needs of the future. It is a model that bears the imprints of a global universality that stops short of abrogating the centers of autonomy. The proverbial capacity for accommodating diversity within the parameters of unity has, in the past, constituted the hallmark of the historical civilization of Islam. There is no reason why this should not be so in the future. In this sense, an Islamic reading of the West can contribute to the sanctification of the culture of the West, not to its subversion. Meanwhile, it will contribute to redressing the global balance of culture to the advantage of other less advantaged centers as well. In this way, it would also be contributing to the safeguarding of all parties from their own excesses. At the bottom line, an Islamic reading of the West will signify the rebirth of an authentic tradition of learning

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and knowledge that has for long been unjustifiably submerged. Through redressing the anomalies of a civilizational perversity, the excesses of the prevailing paradigm may be alleviated.

The International Institute of Islamic Thought, as one of the many robust young institutions which the first decade of the fifteenth century *hijrī* has spawned, has consecrated itself to the cultural imperative. Lying within the range of the Institute's priorities, the Western Thought Project is significantly conceived as part of a comprehensive and systematic workplan which is essentially flexible. It is open to periodic revision and "upgrading" in the light of a growing experience in the field and its anticipated contribution to a concomitant conceptual sophistication. The essentials of the plan, however, remain. These are predicated on a close-knit set of principles that are logically integrated and bound up together through an underlying revivalist rationale. The following is a recapitulation of these principles as they are briefly expounded against this rationale:

- (1) The *Workplan* begins with a fresh reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah on the understanding that they continue to constitute now, as much as in the past, the enduring foundations for any viable Islamic civilization. These are the wellsprings and immutable sources of an Islamic culture and knowledge, and any genuine intellectual error in the Ummah is contingent on the efficacy of this fresh reading in the modern context.
- (2) This is corroborated by a critical and objective reassessment of the Muslim cultural and intellectual heritage of the past to sift out the wheat from the chaff. The nature of the modern intellectual error calls for a reflexive and reflective interaction with the thought processes and products of past generations as they responded to the challenges of their times in the context of the Islamic moorings of their civilization. The counterpart to this reflexive and reflective interaction may be found in the Muslim assessment of the modern heritage projected by the West.

- (3) It acknowledges the necessity of a similar critical and objective reassessment of the Western mind, its processes, and its cultural and intellectual artifacts. The objective is to develop the insight necessary for discerning its strengths and weaknesses, the negative and the positive aspects that are to be found in another distinct legacy, and to identify its sustaining dynamic and mechanisms of production, transmission, and reproduction, or perpetuation.
  
- (4) The objective is to develop a valid methodology that will enable the reconstruction of the modern Muslim mind along lines that will ensure the recovery of its originality and creative potential. Given the premises of the venture, the lessons learnt in the course of critical cultural exposure and in the reflexive dynamic of intra- and cross-cultural interaction, a distinct Islamic vision will crystallize and this, in turn, will generate a fresh civilizational impulse in our own time.

In assuming a responsibility on this scale, the Institute is under no illusion as to the enormity of the task and the limitations of the available resources. It is, nevertheless, intent on contributing, to the best of its ability, its share to the realization of an impending historical ideal – if only to constitute itself as a model to the Ummah and to provide the stimulus that others might follow. To this end, it has taken it upon itself not only to articulate the ideal and thus to actively promote it Ummah-wide, but, furthermore, to spare no effort in mobilizing the talents and the competences needed to ensure the most effective mode of implementation. Each phase of the *Workplan*, each facet, and each level of its implementation calls for a variety of such competences. In the final analysis, the substantiality of the achievement is contingent on the complementariness of these efforts. The Institute has been established in order to tap new potential, to encourage and preside over an expanding pool of resources, and to see that an effective coordination is sustained without losing sight of the purposeful orientation of the whole enterprise. This too is the operational context in which the conception and the implementation of the Western Thought Project takes place.<sup>1</sup>

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Beyond any immediate plans, there is a need to bring the Western Thought Project into clear focus and to overcome any inertia on this front of the workplan. The idea of interlocking round tables to debate on the Western Thought Project, or aspects of it, is expected to mark an important landmark in promoting a greater consensus of opinion among Muslim scholars and intellectuals on an issue that is critical to the long-term prospects of an Islamic cultural revival. In the final analysis, success will be contingent on the ability to systematically set out the terms of the modern encounter with the West along lines more conducive to a genuine parity of cultures.