

## CHAPTER II

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# CHARTING A COURSE: BEYOND THE FAUSTIAN DELUSION

### BEYOND THE FAUSTIAN DELUSION

THE Western Thought Project is part of an extensive program to Islamize knowledge. This program calls on modern scholars to review the products and processes of modern culture, including their modes of thought and their fields of scholarship, from a perspective which looks at the sources and standards of the Islamic episteme. In view of the secular origins of modernity, the force of this appeal lies in its challenge to the exclusiveness and the validity of the prevailing episteme. In essence, Islamization contests the reductionism of this episteme and questions its validity. In making the case for an alternative model, it is opening new possibilities for a discourse which will admit new participants who may share elements of its particular Islamic perspective on knowledge. This would include the scholarship cultivated in the living traditions of the culture areas of the globe, as well as that coming from the biblical tradition in the West. However the Islamic episteme brings with it, in addition to its transcendental sources, a historical model of learning with a wide-ranging scope of *mundane* interests. In this sense there may be grounds for convergence with certain aspects of modernity, without conceding its foundations and ordering framework.

#### *How the Western Episteme Came to Dominate*

The dominant epistemological mode today crystallized during the epoch of the European Enlightenment which reached its apogee in the

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course of the eighteenth century. Then, in the following century, the latent historical trends bred in the early modern period – circa sixteenth century and after – led to the inflation of the power of Europe and culminated in its domination of the globe by the turn of the twentieth century. Its ideological bias notwithstanding, Immanuel Wallerstein's model of the world economy distinguishing the center from the periphery, with a Western European culture zone occupying the former and a loose amalgam of Afro-Asian and Latin overlapping culture zones constituting the latter, provides a reasonable classification of this development.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the diffusion of the Enlightenment model followed in the tracks of the advancing hegemony of the West to challenge and dominate in its turn. With the balance of power in favor of the rising West, there was little chance for a parity of exchange in this modern encounter of cultures. Where the regional culture survived, despite the onslaught of the intrusive power-backed culture into their field, they would continue to survive in a submerged state.

### *The Globalization of the West*

For all intents and purposes then, the triumphant Western culture would henceforth assume the character of a global culture exerting its influence for good and evil on every other people. In practical terms, this meant that the standards of acculturation to the times were those set by the West, and that the global aspiration for modernity, to which the peoples of the Third World turned in their national development programs, really constituted a more euphemistic expression for a blatant Westernization. From there it was easy to confound the paradigms of modern and Western and to project the universality of the Western heritage.

In the meantime, the twentieth century in the Western world saw significant flux in the cultural climate nearer home. Although the forebodings were there earlier on, by the closing decades the exuberant optimism which had marked the onset of the century had to all intents and purposes become extinguished. There was an impoverishment in philosophy, the cornerstone of the Western intellectual tradition, and theology, periodically resuscitated from recurrent bouts of exhaustion, could hardly shoulder the burdens of a new transitional epoch unfolding

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in the guise of a “postmodernity.” Confusion and skepticism became pervasive. Today, the metatheoretical debates in the social sciences and the humanities reflect and reinforce this general desultory mood.

### *The Opening Out of the West*

If there is one advantage to be sought in this condition, it is perhaps to be found in a new disposition of openness in the Western mind together with, or in spite of, an inclination to a growing measure of introspection. The West is opening up to its past, seeking to “remember” in ways it has not done for nearly two centuries. It is more significantly searching out neglected elements of its past in ways it has not done since its earlier renaissance. Where the Enlightenment had sealed certain gates to the modern mind, the contemporary phase of high modernity seems to be reopening them. An example may be sought in the revival of the debate on the limits of human rationality and a renewed interest in the possible relevance/meaning of revelation.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the West is seeking its past today in a historically transformed context where history is no longer a closed stage, and where it is no longer the only hero in the play. In other words, there is today a noticeable disposition on the part of the modern/postmodern West to turn to other cultures and traditions in an anticipation that they too might have something to offer. This is presumably done in the spirit that there is something there to be learned. There is still, however, a long way to go before this quest is approached in a spirit where curiosity is tempered more by humility than pride. The time has not yet come for the Western scholar to willingly squat at the feet of an Indian guru.

More particularly, in the case of Islam, the West is afforded a ready cultural arena, which in more ways than one is nearer to the West than any other oriental tradition. F.S.C. Northrop’s genuinely enlightened remark, cited as an epigram to the present volume, comes to mind.<sup>3</sup> It constitutes a perspicuous and honest confession, although admittedly it may not be the most representative of its kind. The opposing reflection by the free-thinking French philosopher, Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who supposedly projected the historical Enlightenment in all his works, including his secular inquiry into the life of Jesus (*La vie de Jésus*), affords a dramatic illustration of the more typical attitude in this regard.<sup>4</sup>

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Fortunately, this brand of vitriol is losing its edge: and so it must, of necessity, if not of prudence. Yet the attitude of the West continues to be hedged in by a persistent ambiguity. The legacy of the historical encounter, compounded by the politics of contemporary times, makes the opening up to the Islamic heritage and to its heirs far more problematic. The initiative here will have to be taken by Muslims, although if the interaction is to gain momentum it will have to be reciprocated by responsiveness from the West. The real question though is this: Are Muslims prepared and qualified for this kind of initiative?

The new *da'wah*, or the summons to “Islamize” knowledge is a move in this direction.<sup>5</sup> It renounces claims to power in favor of a bid for truth and it gives priority to politics of culture and cultural reconstruction rather than to a culture of politics and power-mongering. Knowledge may be a means to power, but it is also an access to virtue and wisdom, and the Islamic perspective on knowledge has much to offer in a direction that reconciles antagonisms and dissolves artificial dualisms. In other words, this Islamization of knowledge brings into circulation a currency that is much needed by the times. In its appeal to knowledge, it appeals to common symbols which, once understood, cannot fail but to command a widening and deepening allegiance of a variety of scholars from all walks and hues. However, the immediate challenges to the Islamization of knowledge may not lie in the West, where it is out to contest the foundations of its still dominant paradigms, but in quarters nearer home.

Thus far, we have made the case for Islamization largely in the context of a Western perspective. We have suggested that the West is currently going through a process of rethinking its own heritage and that it is doing so in a relative openness to its own past as well as to the cultural experience of others. The catalyst to this critical re-examination is the deadlock which has ensued from the West's becoming hostage to a reductionist paradigm of knowledge and being that has found its way to the Western, and now a pseudoglobal, mind in the gospels of the Enlightenment and Modernity. We have also suggested that in the attempt to transcend the present predicament, Islam as culture, episteme, and heritage has much to offer the West and the modern world, to the extent that the latter has become Westernized or

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to the extent that the West has arrogated to itself the category of universality. The anomaly, however, lay in the obstruction caused by an essentially subjective dimension which was likely to impede access to an available Islamic model.

### *Auspicious Anticipations*

The implication so far is that a free and open interchange between the West and Islam could not be left to the West to initiate, and that on the contrary, the Muslims would have to pave the way to this end. Indeed, we might go so far to suggest that once the historical and subjective barriers have been effectively addressed, then the principles animating the plea for the Islamization of knowledge are as likely to find fertile soil in the West as they are within the historical Islamic heartland. Nonetheless, a shift of perspectives is needed to allow us to examine the Islamization of knowledge and the Western Thought Project within the Muslim context.

### *Charting the Muslim Setting: Cultural Cleavages/Blockages*

In the Muslim heartland, the triumph of the Enlightenment model still seems to carry the day and, ironically, it would seem to inspire greater loyalty there among some of its devotees than it would among its own veterans in the West. However, this observation must be qualified by the realization that the cultural milieu here is severely strained, for the Western model, however pervasive, remains subject to all the constrictions which attend an intrusive culture. Meanwhile, the home culture, which continues to be thoroughly Islamic, has shown its resilience in its persistent appeal not only to the masses, but also carries it to a growing proportion of the modern educated sectors of the public. This resilience, however, bespeaks a latent or a potential, rather than an effective vitality. The latter is contingent on the state of its scholarship, and this, for various reasons, has been hamstrung and hemmed in by debilities of its own which antedate the colonial interlude, although the latter no doubt precipitated the corrosion.

### *Cultural Immobility*

The general setting in the Muslim heartland is immobilized by a

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complicity of factors. The discontinuities in the intellectual circles among the pockets of the thoroughly, moderately, and ambiguously Westernized on the one hand, and the uncompromising adherents to the Islamic heritage on the other creates a permanent fissure at a critical node in the prevailing culture. Rarely, however, is the breach complete. Indeed, a truer picture would be of a murky and blurred pool subject to conflicting currents diluting and diffracting the input from the different sources. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the educational establishment, itself so central to the processes of cultural production, transmission, and reproduction.

### *Afflictions of the Traditionists*

For various reasons, rational and otherwise, Islamist circles are immobilized by their own divisions, reluctances, and rigidities in such a way that any renovationist appeals are likely to be resisted as much out of an instinctive and cautious reserve as out of any genuine religious or academic factor. There may be a vague awareness among Muslims in this group that they do indeed preside over the seeds of a genuine intellectual and cultural renewal, but then they are too submerged in their own inadequacies to be able to articulate this awareness. Those who might be in a position to do so are themselves hopelessly out of touch with their culture, and their plight is doubly compounded by a false sense of confidence deriving from an illusion that they are living their age. In contrast to the traditionists who hark back to a cultural heritage they are unable to animate, there are the modernists who have made some bold leaps across space and time. Their greatest merit, though, lies more in their conspicuity than in their perspicuity.

### *Self-Banished Exiles*

The modernists or the Westernizers in the Muslim cultural spectrum are self-banished exiles to a no-man's zone where they are stranded in the twilight of a cultural "metaxy" – a cultural in-between. Their position is more pathetic than heroic, since they are doomed to fighting a doubly losing battle. They claim to be out to transform a culture and breathe new life into it, when in fact they little realize how presumptuous is their claim. A resilient culture has its own mechanisms and

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dynamics which defy an exogenous approach to tamper with it. In presuming to act on a culture, they lay untenable claims to a capacity to influence and a power to act which they do not in fact sustain. For one thing, in renouncing their historical culture they are seen to have opted for foreign loyalties – and as far as the core of Muslim community goes, no amount of rationalization can conceal the fact that they have abdicated a trust and forfeited their claims to be the representatives of a culture.

The affective element is compounded by a cognitive one, as these modernizing/Westernizing elements have also succeeded in marginalizing themselves from their own culture by depriving themselves of its medium of communication. Lost to their adopted language and its values and symbols, they further fade into an illusory cultural horizon which they seek to perpetually create and recreate by a simulated vitality. Indulging in their brand of sterilities, they remain peripheral to the culture they claim to transcend but which they have in effect betrayed. Wherever their influence surfaces, they proclaim it as testimony to their virtuosity and enlightenment. In fact, this serves as a poignant reminder of the pervasiveness of the cult of power in the contemporary Muslim world, where culture has become an industry contingent on organizational and manipulative skills and carries little affinity for the virtues of knowledge and learning. In making this statement, we have in mind the dominance of Westernized coteries in the ruling elites throughout the Establishment, including the all-important media sector, which is the case in most Muslim countries today.

### *Changing Contexts*

However, by definition the cultural situation is a fluid one, and times are changing. In some circles, Islamic sensibilities are becoming more alive and, in others, a new sensibility has been provoked by the awareness of the pervasiveness of an enduring Islamic reality. Modernists are no longer as prone to dismiss the relevance of the Islamic cultural heritage in their attempt to address their times. Islamists are no longer immune to the disaffections of the age and are increasingly awakening to the futility of their own defensiveness and to the need for overcoming their self-imposed closure in their attitudes to their cherished heritage as well

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as to an alien world. It is these stirrings in the wind that blows over the Muslim landscape that have been invariably expressed in different forms and arenas and which have been dubbed the Islamic revival. They are in reality the signs and symptoms of a recovery of identity and consciousness and the rebirth of a resolve to have a historical presence.

In steadily coming to terms with the self in the Muslim heartland, the modernists may not have changed their goals in opting for modernity, but they have at least evinced a flexibility and a willingness to review their means as well as in formulating their goals. Islamists too are now more disposed than ever to reflect more critically upon their history, since the coming of the era that signalled the rupture of their Islamic history, and they are more inclined to examine the consequences of the great intrusion represented by the colonial interlude. Here and there, there is a dawning awareness that what is amiss in the present must have its roots in the past, and that the will to break into the future is contingent on an honest and critical reexamination of a number of contingencies and categories including the self, the other, and the historical situation that embraces and conditions the cultural leavening.

Without realizing it, the gaps and schisms between the different circles are narrowing, as traditionalists and modernists are coming to stand on converging grounds: simply as Muslims striving to reconcile the self to the age without denying the one or renouncing the other. In seeking to preserve and safeguard the tradition which is the foundation of their identity and the cornerstone of their history in the future, it is increasingly realized that innovation and renovation are the requisites to the goal. This inevitably calls for reviewing the relationship of the traditional, i.e., it calls for a new, vibrant, and relevant reading of the Islamic heritage. Conversely, the unmistakable salience, relevance, and dynamic of the latter has forced itself on the attention of the cultural defectors of a more recent past, and as they too find a place in their agenda to review it in the light of their priorities, they may also come to realize that modernity itself is a negotiable destination. The crux of the matter may indeed lie in a new reading of modernity, and it will perhaps be on this platform that the terms of a new encounter between Muslims and the West will unfold.

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### *The Nature of a Summons*

It was in this general setting that the Islamization of knowledge was launched as a catalyst to a more critical and reflective mood, invigorating the process of self-examination and giving it direction. The Islamization of knowledge is explicitly targeted at examining, exposing, and transposing the characteristic modes of thought and learning current among Muslims. Moreover, it seeks to raise an awareness of the nature and the process of cultural formation, reformation, deformation, and mutation in the Ummah with a view to generating a genuine renovationist momentum in its ranks. The idea is to articulate and develop an Islamic episteme that will inspire the standards and criteria which may be used to institute and rationalize alternative thought modes and cultural output.

### *Scope of Address*

While the Islamization of knowledge is primarily addressed to Muslims as a way out of their cultural and civilizational malaise, its message is by no means exclusive. Two factors preempt any such exclusiveness. The one inheres in the intrinsic universalistic calling of the Islamic standards which are being invoked as the measure for cultural sanification. The other evokes the inherent characteristics of the situational contingency, as was shown above, a matter which equally obviates any notion of complete cultural autonomy in a system of global hegemony. In this context, rethinking the dominant culture calls for a fresh reading of the West and its legacy. Given its premises and its objectives, this reading stresses objectivity and originality as much as relevance and utility. In this way, an Islamic reading of the modern West becomes an integral part of any program aimed at rectifying the cultural scales in the Muslim world. By the same token, this reading is likely to be as relevant to the West itself in its own soul-searching. These are the yields of mutuality in an age of global interdependence.

### *Appropriating Global Interdependence to Promoting Islamic Goals*

By absorbing the Muslim ecosphere within the sphere of its own hegemony, the West has made it impossible for Muslims in the modern world to contemplate their cultural survival as a distinct civilizational

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entity, or their renewal as such, without also addressing their predicament from within the global framework. The great transmutation referred to by Marshall G. S. Hodgson has indeed made some version of Western culture endemic to the local setting of practically every urban center in the world today, including the Muslim centers.<sup>6</sup> This has its positive implications to the extent that the Muslim reading of their particular text must produce a corresponding reading of the global text as well. Just as addressing the Western heritage becomes an imperative in restituting the cultural chart in the Muslim world, it might also be conceded that the efforts produced in the venture are likely to affect a restitution at the global level as well.

### *The Idea of a Profitable Exchange: A Tijāratan Rābiḥah*<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, this transmutation has come, in turn, to exact its retribution in kind as the circulation of influence can no longer be confined to its original concerted and authoritarian version. The West can no longer monopolize the reading of its own culture any more than it can claim such prerogatives for the culture of the other. As long as it maintains its capacity to learn from its own insights as well as those of others, it can only reap the benefits of the breakdown of an erstwhile monopoly. The rules apply to all the players. To the extent that Muslims are willing and able to produce their version of the global text, they will be contributing to transforming a dominant, one-track model into a diffusion model where ideas, unlike commodities and power-interests, will create their own trajectories. It is in this sense that the above assumption about the balance of modern civilization resting on culture rather than power should be understood. Ultimately, the reading of the one and the other are not exclusive. Once a perspective coming from the Islamic episteme finds its way into the global cultural horizon, it will then be possible to conceive of an alternative mode of thinking which goes beyond the either/or matrix to one where the options included the “both and more” variant. But this can only crystallize as the Western Thought Project advances and as the Islamization of knowledge platform is consolidated.

We may sum up the point of what we dubbed at the outset as the passing of the Faustian delusion in a key statement. Coming as it does at

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this juncture in time, and conceived in the cultural context of Islamization, the Western Thought Project acquires a particular significance. The end of modernity in the West, and the dawning self-consciousness beyond, beckons the emergence of a new discourse which can overcome the prevailing sense of moral depravity and intellectual aridity which threatens to engulf all in an age where boundaries fuse. In order that it might persuade and pervade, this discourse will also have to infuse the kind of vitality and direction which are currently lacking. For various reasons which have been mentioned elsewhere, the Western Thought Project in its Islamizing habitat is assumed to meet with the measure of this discourse. Whether it is seen from a strictly Muslim perspective or from a more general one, the relevance of this project can hardly be overemphasized. Nor can its urgency be overlooked.