

CHAPTER III

PRIMARY PERSPECTIVES: THE ISLAMIZING CONTEXT

THE ISLAMIZING CONTEXT

THE past decade has witnessed the stirrings of the Islamic intellectual revival. A renewed interest in self, other, and history has accompanied the anticipations and aspirations born of the revival. Islamization of knowledge as a concept has become the shorthand for this intellectual orientation, and the Western Thought Project needs to be seen as an integral part of a more comprehensive program to consolidate the revival. This Project signifies an interest by Muslims in the West, and it is in this sense that the term “encounter” has been used in drafting some preliminary working papers on the subject.¹ It also signifies a renewed and intensified interest by Muslims in their own fate as it has been overshadowed by the West in the context of a disadvantaged moment in their historical encounter.

Two years ago efforts were made to follow up on the Project as it was initially conceived in the *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan*.² The following are excerpts – direct and paraphrased – taken from the preface of a report evaluating and describing this project which was submitted by the author to the policy council at the International Institute of Islamic Thought. These excerpts give some insight into the conception of the Project, its nature and its objectives, as well as into the spirit in which it is being pursued. They also place this conception within the framework of a more general understanding of culture and cultural change. Within the immediate context, however,

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the Project is conceived in terms of an Islamizing perspective, and this explains the acronym *RECTOCC*, for Re-Evaluating the Cultural Topography of the Occident. Its general tone and approach is simple but, hopefully, not simplistic. Clearly, the purpose at hand is not to investigate an area, but to delineate it and to point in a direction which could eventually pave the way for evolving a cultural hermeneutic open to more concerted, systematic, and innovative inquiry in the future and involving a widening circle of competences. Ultimately, the Project remains the responsibility and the charge of the entire Ummah.

A Synoptic Overview³

At the threshold of the revival, Muslims are taking a fresh look at their own heritage and at that of the contemporary world in which they live. A new consciousness is taking shape, and part of it is the realization that culture is a deliberate and planned growth that must be nurtured and tended if it is to express the willed identity and the aspirations of a people. In the absence of this realization, there will be fragments and pockets in an amorphous whole constituting inroads into a barren cultural field beyond which hovers the void. By definition, culture must be cultivated, and unlike things, it cannot be imported. In order for Muslims to cultivate an authentic culture, they need to develop a critical awareness of their own heritage as well as that of others, primarily of the dominant heritage which is of the West. Only then can they resume an effective and creative presence on the cultural and epistemic horizons of a global civilization. Only then too can they recover their lode-star role in history as a credible force for justice and right among nations: a witness unto humankind.

It was such ideas that prompted the advocates of the Islamization of knowledge to adopt a systematic and a practically oriented approach to the needs of planning the intellectual essor of the ummah. Opening a new window on the West with a view to critical appreciation and reflection on that heritage as it is developing in our times and as it affects the various disciplines of the human mind and spirit is part and parcel of the Islamization

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workplan. The idea was to prepare the ground for a critical and selective assimilation which could become the catalyst to the process of intellectual renewal. Meanwhile the more basic and crucial interaction which was taking place within the Muslim heritage itself would provide the setting for this fermentation. In this way, the interest in the Western heritage, and in commanding a reflective understanding of how the social and human disciplines were evolving there is not an end in itself.

... attaining a degree of reflective and critical understanding of the West from the distinctive vantage point of an equally whole, viable and self-knowledgeable Muslim standpoint makes for parity in the domain of cultural exchange and interaction. The demystification of the West through a progressive enlightenment of the Muslim mind is a condition for unshackling the Muslim psyche from the burden of a long-standing subservience and domination. It is a condition for assuming a new and worthy burden of responsibility to meet the challenge of thinking for oneself, in terms of one's own identity, and along the lines of a recovered self-confidence. On the other hand, admitting the principle of parity in the forum of cultural exchange is likely to open new horizons for the embattled West as well.

Taking the initiative to reflect systematically ... upon the West within the context of a recovered awareness and resolve on the part of Muslims is an unprecedented development ... it poses the challenge of devising the ways and means of accessing a rich and complex and a virtually unseizable whole ... Regardless of who or which team is in charge of launching such a monumental project, implementation will continue to pose a daunting, but not an insurmountable challenge. As long as the resolve is maintained and the efforts are determined, the pursuit persistent and unflagging, Muslims will steadily find their way through a cumulating reserve of experiences and resources.

The report was entitled "A Policy and Progress Report" in an

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attempt to argue the case of implementation by demonstration and example. It stressed the need for an integrated effort and planning and it put a premium on conceptual consolidation as the condition for effectively implementing a project on this scale. While cooperation would naturally extend beyond the circle of qualified Muslims, yet self-reliance was the cornerstone of this effort. Given the fact that 95 percent of the material needed for this project was already available in the published literature on the West and mostly by Westerners themselves, the issue was to identify that material and to know how to use it. This was one of the lessons gleaned from the preliminary feasibility surveys of the field, and the report outlined some possible criteria for selecting sources, classifying content, and evaluating material. As work on this project necessarily implicates a wide variety of efforts, individual and collective, and as it needs to address various domains and levels of intellect and scholarship, coordination and organization are vital. In this respect, the report pointed out that it was important to structure our efforts in a way that facilitated a systematic and integrated pursuit which ensured that the various inputs would be consistently related and channelled to effect the desired cumulative impact on the overall Islamization program. At the same time, it warned against the limitations of an organization that might stifle initiative and innovation in what was essentially an intellectual and pioneering enterprise. It pointed to ways in which safeguards could be incorporated in the planning stage and initial layout itself, and outlined some of the actual beginnings within the Institute's "Western Project Department" to this end.

The Premises on an Encounter

In exploring the parameters of the encounter with the West and in redefining its terms, a new beginning could be made in the making for both parties involved in the encounter, Muslims and Westerners alike. The present volatile setting may give Muslims the benefit of the initiative in this respect. Aspects of this encounter will be discussed below (chapters 5 and 6). The following remarks may serve to highlight some of the generalities which will be pertinent to that discussion.

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First. The designation of the term Islamization of knowledge to a significant current in the Muslim intellectual revival calls for some passing qualification. What started out as an ambiguous and controversial appellation has come today to be part of a standard currency in circulation. Without going into the peregrinations of the term in Muslim discourse, I shall merely point out some of the lingering doubts associated with it to the extent that these might impinge on the conception and implementation of the Western Thought Project. At first glance, the designation suggests the requisitioning of a body of existing knowledge and its appropriation within an alternative valuational context to signify its legitimation to the appropriating community. In a sense, then, knowledge here implies a thing “out there” that is to be had, or acquired, and then used in terms consistent with the value framework of the Muslim community. This, however, is a denotation that has been open to question on a number of counts, not the least of which is the questionable conception and understanding of knowledge as a reified category and its confounding of the category with its forms. The resolution of this question is by no means a matter of formal definitions, but constitutes a dimension in the process of an evolving cultural movement as much as an issue within it. Suffice it here to point out these implications without passing judgment or indulging in refutations. The term has served its purpose as a focal point for stirring debate – and consciences.

Beyond any dubious connotations however, the term expresses an unequivocal conviction. The debate on the Islamization of knowledge, as Davies rightly reminds her readership,⁴ is ultimately a quest for the contemporary meaning of Islam amidst the complexities of the modern world. This is also the general context for seeking to shape an Islamic epistemology and an Islamic social science. In common with all other initiatives in the contemporary Islamic revival, however diverse, the basis of our search is the consciously acknowledged need and desire to make a return to the values and principles of Islam as the starting point and objective of action and inquiry.⁵

The reflection on the West and its cultural artifacts as constitutive of the dominant global culture of our times is motivated by this concern. As such, this reflection is as much a part and a function of a modern

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Islamic episteme as conceiving of an embryonic social science or as laying the foundations for a modern sociocultural entity in Muslim societies would be. Without its Islamization of knowledge referent, the Western Thought Project would be meaningless. It would be a redundancy in the incessant flow that has gushed through, impeded, expedited or otherwise, over the last century or two between Islam and the West. The point of the Western Thought Project is not to introduce the West as such to Muslims (or, obversely, Muslims to the West), nor is it by any means an endeavor to impute a legitimacy where it is not due. What is at stake in the processes of cultural exposure which permeate the globe today is not the issue of mass acculturation, but it is that of mass deculturation. This affects Muslims and non-Muslims, including those historically or culturally identified with the West. This meaning becomes clear when we consider the general and pervasive disorientation which has set in under the guise of a “postmodernity.” The need is to chart out the course of a new encounter with the West, and within the West, in terms drawn from the *tawhīdī* episteme. It is only then that a dynamic and equitable process of cultural exchange can be set at an even keel. This is what is subsumed when reference is made to the Islamization of knowledge as the premise for this project.

Second. The other general remark pertains to the historical background of the encounter with the West. If the Islamization of knowledge provides the referent and conceptual frame of this encounter, as is postulated and shaped at the level of the Western Thought Project, its context is conditioned by the accidents of a long-drawn history. If we confine ourselves to the modern encounter, we shall find that it goes back approximately two hundred years to the colonial episode, which conditioned its mode and which has structured its course ever since. Within the Muslim Ummah, this course has been characterized by an endemic tension premised on the outgrowth and persistence of two “culture species” in a predominantly deculturated environment: the assimilationists and the rejectionists. Admittedly, there was a shadowy ground between the one and the other which was occupied by the “middlers,” who constituted a significant majority. It was a significance, however, matched only by its ineffectuality. The polarization between

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the first two groups was sufficient to secure a state of endemic cultural immobility in the Muslim world.

Against this topology, there are two ways of looking at the context of the modern encounter with the West. One is to continue to maintain one's stance from the barracks of the colonial episode; the other is to look for new benchmarks. Fortunately we do not have to look far. It is here that the current Islamic revival affords the occasion and the opportunity for new standards in reading our past and envisioning the future. More than a current benchmark, it signifies a recovery of the whole. In this way, it contrasts with the chimeric interlude imposed by the colonial episode, where the Ummah, fractured and fragmented, was cut off from its past and deluded into an illusory progress in a ransomed future. In its then dehistoricized existence, it was extended a lease on a leash. Against that contingency, the revival constitutes more than an antidote in conditioning and restructuring the terms of the modern encounter with the West.

Revival impels us to take a fresh look at the world and at our place in it. The recovery of the consciousness of the self is attended by its corollary in a reordering of our relation to others. At the same time, the situational constraints compel us to give priority to the West as the ubiquitous other – the other of our present as much as of our past – and to come to grips with the various guides in which this otherness maintains its presence (power, culture, technology; global/universal etc.). The Islamization of knowledge, as the intellectual response of the revival, qualifies the nature and mode of our reawakened responses to the West. It is at this juncture that the historical and the intellectual, or the contextual and the conceptual, converge to affect our conception of the Western Thought Project. The historicity and continuity of the encounter with the West in itself becomes the object of inquiry as well as a context for the inquiry.

Third. The Western Thought Project will need to address two dimensions of a pressing quest. On the one hand, it is a means to render accessible to the Muslim at the threshold of an epochal revival the products of the West: whether as a means of their reappropriation and their eventual transcendence – *Aufhebung* – or otherwise. One can only

reflect on the meaning of the *āyāt* in the Qur'an defining the mission of the final divine revelation to humankind to adduce some affinities. One will realize that this line of reasoning, which presupposes the preservation of the most valuable and valued elements in the human legacy and their reinforcement and supersession by that which is more wholesome and complete, expresses an authentic Muslim aspiration. On the other hand, it is also the premise for assuring and completing the conditions for this revival by interpreting the modern West as the bearer of a humanistic and rationalist culture and as the locus of a contingent historical agency. This interpretation is necessary for Muslims as well as for non-Muslims in a venture which is not without its consequences for everyone in a common global setting. To the extent that there is any simulation of universality to such humanist and rationalist claims, it must be admitted that the responsibility for acting on the behalf of a common good is incumbent on all. Here, too, the inspiration for these sentiments comes from the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him.

In the school of prophethood, Muslims learn that there is no room for indifference. Witness the hadith that teaches: "The example of the one who commits a transgression and the one who is its victim maybe compared to the fate of a group aboard a ship. Some were on the top and others were below, when those who were below – tiring of climbing on deck with their buckets to haul water – got an idea: it was to bore a hole in their cabins below and obtain their water without bothering their deck inmates. In this case, if those above left those below free to pursue their ways, then surely all would perish; whereas if they checked them, then they, along with all the others, would be saved." In this kind of community, such as is envisaged in a *tawhīdī* paradigm of knowledge, there is no escaping one's responsibility for oneself and for the whole to which one belongs. In these terms, an Islamizing perspective on the West would not see in it the other, but it would be a part of the whole to which we all belong. Again, our legacy teaches that: "Every Muslim is outpost on a vigil to preserve and safeguard that whole." There is no reason why the historic encounter with the West at a fateful juncture in the current global transition should not constitute such a vigil.

With these two dimensions of the Western Thought Project in

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view, the terms of the encounter with the West can be addressed to take into account its purpose. At one level, Muslims seek to reformulate the terms of the encounter with the full weight of its historical legacy behind them. Here, the West is conceived in terms of the historically Other, and the Muslims see themselves as the contenders in an unfolding discourse which began with the rise of Islam and the earliest contacts with Byzantium and the Franks and which has continued down its meanderings into the present. This is the conventional “Islam and the West” saga which needs to be overhauled to the benefit of a more constructive historical partnership. Here, the emphasis of the Project is on a selective interpretation that is both therapeutic and propaedeutic. The priority is on restituting the terms of the encounter, as Muslims see themselves facing the West: not necessarily against it, but destined to interact with it. At another level, the Islamizing referent imposes its own dynamic in an all-inclusive discourse which sees the challenges in the temporal issues and calls for concerted and common action. Here the emphasis shifts from the participants to the grounds, and the distinction is made in terms of morality and not of history. The deference to the past in the first instance is transcended by a concern for the future. Here, it is no longer possible to speak in diffuse terms of “the West,” but it is necessary to define which West is at stake in the process of grounding the discourse of the future. If, for example, it is the elements of a pagan West that are in dispute, then these need to be identified and expunged, while the elements of a theocentric humanism in that legacy could be refined and reinforced. In this sense, the encounter with the West becomes an encounter of parties to a common discourse within the West as well.

To sum up. Locating the Western Thought Project in the context of the historical encounter with the West has its imminent implications for the conception and the design of the Western Thought Project. Muslims need to take account of the West and understand its heritage in terms other than those which have hitherto been imposed upon them by the historical dominance of the West. The hope of going beyond historical contingency and overcoming a divisive and a splintering psyche can only be sought in conceptual premises which transcend

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such a contingency. This cannot be sought from within the dominant discourse of the West for obvious reasons. Nor can a historically constricted Muslim make a substantive appeal in the West once it is properly understood there, and such an appeal can be reinforced by a conventional and formal appeal to Muslims too. It is in this sense that the Islamizing referent pointed out at the outset can assure an element of transcendence which can make a distinctive and timely conception of the WTP venture possible.