

CHAPTER V

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS: TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

THIS chapter makes the case for an encounter with the West in terms which evoke echoes of an East/West dialogue. For a moment, the real objective of the Western Thought Project as part of an Islamization program which is primarily targeted at Muslims is deliberately muted without being lost sight of. It is an attempt to persuade the Other to come to the table and engage in a dialogue: to provide the reasons for why this is the reasonable thing to do.

In addressing the West in this way, the Muslim, as scholar and thinker, is reclaiming his individuality and position, his identity and cultural affinity, in order to give the lead and take the initiative. The first lesson in this course is to develop our communication skills. To be effective we need to know how to say what we want to say. We need to have a message to communicate as well as a motive, and we need to be able to relate means to ends in the process to assess our program and keep track of our direction. There are other needs in an effective communication situation: we need to know the important and relevant points about the Other as much as we need to be aware of who we are and what we represent. When the nature of the communication and its context are those of a cultural encounter, communication means more than a savviness in the tricks of the trade and the ways of the world: it is more than an acquisition of the essential know-how and skills. There is an important intellectual dimension to the encounter that calls for articulation and cultivation.

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In approaching the Western Thought Project from the perspective of a cultural encounter in the sense to be expounded below, in the *Working Paper*, we become aware of the challenges relating to how we think and what we think, how we attempt to understand, and how we attempt to explain ourselves and others.

The other perspective on the Western Thought Project, which has already been made explicit on numerous occasions, is that of the Islamic intellectual revival. Muslim intellectuals, scholars, and thinkers are necessarily responding to the revival in terms of their trade. They want to secure a sound footing for the revival. They want to ensure that they can play a role in consolidating the winds of change blowing over the *dār al-Islām* and spurring the Ummah on to resume its place in history.

Now, whether Muslims are taking the lead in renegotiating the terms of the encounter with the West or whether they are concerned with reformulating the epistemic chart of the times along lines more consonant with the essentials of the principles and the teachings of their faith, the intellectual dimension of the challenge is paramount.

What are the elements of this challenge? These may be seen to include the following:

Changed Perceptions. Muslims will have to learn to see the world differently. They can no longer assume an us/them rhetoric and affect a closure among themselves and against the world. In shutting themselves off from the world, they will not shut the world out. Doubtless, they will have to teach the Other the same lessons by their own example. Reading the modern world in terms of its globality and seeing the West in terms of its heterogeneity are aspects of the new perception. Coming to terms with their moral responsibility in a changing context should induce them to take a more serious look at how they themselves relate to their own sources and consider how they can become more genuine representatives of a legacy they pride themselves in but which, in fact, they betray in their reality. These, in short, are among the essential requisites for a changing outlook among Muslims, one which is more compatible with their authentic bearings as heirs to a prophetic legacy and as trustees of a universal message of guidance

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embodying the last divine revelation to humankind. They are also its acid test.

Developing a Hermeneutic of Cultural Understanding constitutes one of the goals of the Western Thought Project, whether such a hermeneutic is conceived in terms of renegotiating the terms of the encounter with the West or in terms of consolidating the intellectual revival. While the venture is directed at understanding the Other, it is also predicated on the need to reinterpret the self. In articulating this hermeneutic, Muslim thinkers and scholars will inevitably be contributing to recharting the contemporary episteme in substantial as well as in formal terms.¹

The essentials of this hermeneutic is that it is inspired by an Islamic ethos and is developed within the parameters of a *tauhīdī* episteme. This can be seen in the example provided in the *Working Paper* where the rationale for the Project is set out in terms of a rational conception of the human condition as it finds its expression in the teachings of the Qur'an. This is a condition of unity in diversity, of a commonality which underlines the variety and characterizes the multiformities of a generic humanity that is conceived by a benevolent and Almighty Creator that it might "know one another" (Qur'an 49:13). The terms for this encounter of mutuality are set in a framework that carries the encounter beyond self and Other in an orientation which transcends and integrates, at the same time as it ennobles and elevates. The cue is given in the divine convocation:

Say: "O people of the Book! Come to common terms (*kalimatīn sawā'*) as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's will). (Qur'an 3:64)

Taken in our context, the lords and patrons interposed between human beings and their Creator include those vanities and idolatries/ideologies which are adopted among groups to divide them from one

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another and to institute the fictitious barriers between self and Other. Meanwhile the *kalimatīn sawā'* literally means the “even word,” i.e., the word that is justly balanced, as well as the word that is commonly agreed to and shared by all. It may be taken here to imply a common code of reason and morality which, among other things, propose the cardinal belief in the common origins and common destiny of a human species: “created from a single living entity” (Qur'an 4:1).

It also subsumes the conviction that the ultimate source for all genuine claims of mutuality among men and women in their respective communities as to their rights, obligations, and responsibilities, lies in the infinite and absolute bounty of their Creator and Sustainer. They are assumed/and urged to be mindful of God, in whose name they demand their mutual rights of one another, and to realize that He will also be their Judge on the Day of their Return.

In an age where the dominant paradigm is blatantly materialist and exclusively temporal/secular, it is all too easy to be dismissive of this language. But a hermeneutics of cultural exchange cannot afford to do so, given the fact that such language constitutes the backbone of a living culture. Indeed, the articulation and reformulation of an episteme is contingent on recovering the currency or idiom of that living culture. So we might briefly pause to expound on the meaning and implications at hand in referring to an Appointed Day (*al-mā'ād*): “On that day shall ye be brought to judgment and not an act of yours that ye try to hide shall be concealed” (69:18). There, “every soul shall be held in pledge for its deeds” (74:38) in the certainty that “To Us will be their return: then it will be for Us to call them to account” (88:25–26). In a *tawhīdī* episteme which inspires that cultural hermeneutic, the eschatological dimension has its implications for worldly conduct. In the final analysis, in a given historical context such claims become determinate and determining, as they shape expectations and assume form and content relative to that context. Their justification, however, and their ultimate power to bind cannot be arrogated by any one group of humanity, although they should inform the consciousness of all its members. In its moral compulsion, this knowledge can only derive from the infinity and absoluteness of its source, not its mutable channels of propagation.

The encounter with the West advocated in the present context

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presumes these elements and parameters of an underlying ethical and rational code of mutuality and reciprocity. It is only such a code that is believed to pave the way for dissolving the lines which divide self and Other into senseless confrontational entities and restore humanity to its essential basic oneness. The point of departure should be kept in mind through the remembrance that:

Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed. (Qur'an 2:213)

Any disputation in this regard was more likely to be provoked through selfish contumacy and needed to be exposed as such and overcome through enlightened reason. In the meantime, any residual differences which remained had to be also accepted again in the knowledge that

Had it not been for a word that went forth before from thy Lord, their differences would have been settled between them. (Qur'an 10:19)

Such differences justified the plurality and diversity of institutions and media to represent, to express, and to contain them. Essentially, however, the underlying ethos defining interhuman and group relations should remain subject to the principle of unity and affinity among all. That realization is beautifully expressed in an assurance that carries with it a unitary reorientation that if heeded is sufficient to ensure an overriding goodwill to the benefit of all:

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)

It is this code which sets the tone for the auspicious title of this collection: *Where East Meets West*. Elaborating the conceptual matrix of our Project along such lines is important for consistency as well as for expediency. In this light, we are called upon as Muslims to demonstrate the merits of the *tawhīdī* episteme as we engage in a historical process of cultural exchange in the civilizational encounter with others. The need

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is eventually to break the historical binary barriers and to learn to see self and Other as participants in an inclusive process which affects us all as moral beings and as members of equally purposeful and moral groups. This is necessary if we are to be effective in carrying our message through. For the moment, however, we work under existing constraints which might occasionally seem to impose their trenchant categories, along with an implicit exclusionary rhetoric, upon us. While working through them, it is important to keep our aims and alternative understanding and vision in mind, that such a constraining framework might be transformed and superseded in the process of a dialectics of convergence attending a hermeneutics of cultural understanding.

With this qualification in mind, the closing passage of an earlier chapter in this volume might be suggestive in this regard. It explores the logic and the benefits of a profitable exchange attendant on the present phase of the great transmutation, as the terms of the encounter between the East and West are being reviewed in the scales of a changing balance of power and culture.

....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 the West maintains its capacity to learn from its own insights as well as the insight of others, it can only reap the benefits of the breakdown of its erstwhile monopoly. To the extent that Muslims are willing and able to produce their version of the Western text, they will be contributing to transforming a monolithic, one track model into a diffusion model where ideas, unlike commodities and power-interests, would be enabled to create their own impact and trajectories. It is in this sense too that the assumption that the balance of modern civilization rests on culture rather than power should be understood. Ultimately, the readings of the one and the other are not exclusive, and once a perspective coming from the Islamic episteme is admitted into the global cultural horizon, it will be possible to conceive of an alternative mode of thinking which will go beyond the either/or structure to the "both and more" variant.

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If the *Working Paper* which follows provides a rationale for evolving a cultural hermeneutic and outlines an agenda for this purpose, another condensed presentation which constitutes part of the occasional supplementary papers on the Project, provides a practical example and application² of what this pursuit entails. Obviously, this can be no more than a background and a beginning for a more general and thorough stock-taking of a situation that we see as a challenge and an opportunity. It is merely a preliminary step in setting the stage for a task which, as conscientious Muslim thinkers and scholars, we are called upon to perform.