

## CHAPTER VI

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# A PROJECT TELESCOPED: RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND STRATEGY

### RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND STRATEGY<sup>1</sup>

#### *Context*

THE encounter between Muslims and the non-Muslim West can no longer be conceived solely in terms of challenge and confrontation. The changed historical context, together with the trends and directions inherent in contemporary civilization, demand and allow for a radical restructuring of the historical encounter away from its conventional rigid polarities to a more accommodating and dynamic complementarity. The inducements which weigh the scales in this direction could be briefly recapitulated here. On the one hand, there are the revolutionary advances which have occurred over the past few decades in the technologies of communication, information, and in the warfare industries. In the aftermath of the massive build-up of capabilities for global annihilation and destruction, the world can ill afford the consequences of a confrontation/conflagration on the scale and intensity which have become possible. Conversely, this very logic provides the opportunity for the necessary restructuring. The politics of technology is steadily engendering a demand for a new ethics of responsibility. On the other hand, admittedly to a lesser degree and conceding the intractability of human nature, the breakthrough in technology has been paralleled by a revolution in human perceptions and expectations. It is no longer possible in the world today to defend the proposition of a naked and unmitigated imposition of wills. There are limits to one

nation abusing another. Nor can nations afford to neglect the presence of one another without imperilling their own fortunes. Isolation and withdrawal are no longer a feasible alternative in a global village where interdependence is the order of the times.

In the meantime, the West has by diverse ways and means effectively managed to impose the globality of its culture on an increasingly diffident world. Yet, clearly, in the face of such diffidence this imposition cannot go unchallenged without exacting further aggravations. This realization has prompted some conscientious response on the part of concerned and responsible elements within the West itself to deplore and renounce an intrinsically unjust and unjustifiable state of affairs.

In this context, Muslim intellectuals and scholars bear a particular responsibility towards the Ummah and towards a stricken humanity at large. By drawing on their rich and immaculate heritage, they can effectively contribute to resolving some of the festering human and social inequities that threaten the globe. At the wellsprings of this heritage is the key to human renewal and social regeneration found in the instruments of the divine *tanzīl* (that which has been sent down through revelation) intactly preserved in the Qur'an and historically corroborated by the Sunnah of the beloved Prophet. These contain a wealth of radical and practical directives relevant to the predicament of modern civilization. They will need, however, to be discovered/rediscovered, articulated, and effectively communicated. In the absence of a responsible and concerned initiative to this end, the potentially vital Muslim contribution to the civilizational debacle will be aborted.

This imposes its own demands in terms of both the objective and the subjective elements of the situation. Only in a forum where a free intellectual and cultural exchange can thrive unimpeded can the necessary communication – and communicability – occur. Such a forum is not given; it is developed. Admittedly, to qualify for such an exchange Muslims must themselves qualify for dialogue. Again this qualification cannot be assumed, but must be achieved. The *hermeneutics of cultural understanding* call for a realistic and thorough understanding of the self, the Other, and the situation in which the dialogue proceeds. To understand ourselves, we need to examine our own heritage critically; to understand the Other, we need to acquire a similar critical insight into

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its heritage and familiarize ourselves with its culture; to understand the situation in which the modern encounter takes place, there is a need to be sufficiently conversant with the dynamics and the historicity of this relationship i.e., to be aware of its various configurations, transfigurations, the stages it has gone through, and the influences it has sustained. Understanding is the prelude to effectively acting to secure the necessary changes. In either case, a strategy is needed, whether for restructuring the terms of global culture exchange or for equipping the participants for the task.

### *Rationale*

The Western Thought Project is our response to this challenge.<sup>2</sup> It is essentially conceived to make the West more accessible to the Muslim sensibility: to reduce its opacity, defuse its ambiguity, and resolve its enigmas. In a certain sense, the “disenchantment” of the West and its demystification for Muslims is the condition for a more constructive and mutually beneficent and beneficial interaction. On a more concrete level, the Project aims at a commanding intelligibility of the essence of the Western cultural heritage and it seeks to cultivate meaningful and relevant insights into the dominant themes that constitute it as a distinctive and self-substantiating tradition. The corollary to such insights is to attain a dynamic understanding of the sensibilities and the structuring forces and processes that have contributed to its shaping and reshaping as they continue to exert their influence.<sup>3</sup> In short, the Western Thought Project is conceived in the spirit of a desire to communicate effectively with the West by removing the internal impediments to a mutual encounter and by creating the conditions conducive to its optimal pursuit. Significantly, it signals the passing of the initiative in this regard to the Muslims. Effective communication is the prerequisite for launching a mutual learning process which underlies the dynamic of cultural encounter. In opting for the latter, however, there is a need to secure the attention of the Other: to ensure audibility as well as intelligibility. A minor digression here may serve to make a point.

To command the deference essential for mutuality, Muslims give precedence to “brain power” over “muscle power” as a counsel of

principled prudence and not merely as a concession to necessity. The brain power or the intellect and reason which they invoke is tuned to a higher morality, not to an existential genetics. In so doing, they act out of the conviction that ultimately, in the human condition, there is more that unites than divides, and that underlying a necessary and imminent convergence is a rationale that mutually binds. The cultural encounter here is modeled on the aforementioned divine injunction which could be conveyed in this context as an appeal made to all those of good faith and righteous conduct who are identified as followers of revealed scripture (Qur'an 3:64; 49:13). These constitute the members of a community of conscience. They are urged to come together round an article of faith which renounces all narrow egoisms and vain idolatries and to conduct their affairs, including their public discourse, in the light of a common standard of truth which is defined in the unitarian source prescribing righteousness and to which they all essentially subscribe. This is the essence of the *kalimatīn sawā'* which creates and sustains a universal moral code. This too is the ethos of an active mutuality and consonance which sets the tone for an anthropology developed in an Islamic episteme. A cursory glimpse at what such an anthropology might imply can only serve to reinforce and ground the discourse in view.

The ethos of a mutuality and consonance derives from the nature and the sources of a discipline which makes a distinctive synthesis between rationalism, in the sense of recognizing universal principles applicable to the study of all communities, and relativism, in the sense of maintaining that any community can be understood in terms of only its own identity. The synthesizing concept of both is *dīn* ... which provides the basis for any comparative study, while the concepts of Shari'ah and *minhāj* ... assure the parameters for contextualizing the universals enshrined in *dīn*.<sup>4</sup> In this view, a unitary, nondiscriminatory science for the study of mankind in community becomes possible where:

... all communities as moral domains are equivalent and are subject to the same set of conceptual principles, and are all presently engaged upon the same challenge. Whenever they existed or wherever they exist, they all enable one to reflect upon

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the implications and consequences of values and the same values will be differentially embodied and expressed by them all.<sup>5</sup>

The cultural encounter invoked here is further grounded in a compelling, valid, and realistic logic that premises and structures the dynamics of reciprocity as long as both parties are disposed to concede to a rationale that honors the word more than the sword. In paving the ground for dialogue, Muslims are intent on learning the techniques of the West in order to effectively convey the substance of a message intended to reinforce this rationale.

### *Accessibility*

In the light of the foregoing, it is clear that accessibility to the modern culture and to the heritage of the West is far from being an indulgence of a sense of academic or intellectual curiosity. Seen in terms of its diverse and interrelated facets, it is a *civilizational imperative*. On the one hand, it is the condition for inaugurating and sustaining a purposeful and systematic dialogue between two cultural modes: one which is essentially *tawhīdic* and identified with Islam, and the other which is essentially secular and materialistic and which is currently identified with the West. Juxtaposing the modes in terms of Islam and the West in this way needs to be qualified. Its binary matrix is misleading and distorts the intents and purposes of an appeal to a community of conscience which underlies the spirit of our venture. Yet, in the present context of dialoguing in an initiative taken by Muslims and addressed to their counterparts in the West, it becomes a temporary resort of convenience, or expedience, which must be hedged and contained by understanding its very limitations. On the other hand, observing the principle of accessibility has an emancipatory portent for Muslims: it is the prerequisite for breaking out of the confines imposed on the cultural forum by the dominant paradigm through continued Western domination. By addressing the latter in its own terms and on its grounds, which is what accessibility to the Western cultural mode/s secures, the limitations of this paradigm would be demonstrated. Modern Western culture too, like other human cultures, would be confirmed in its historicity and its relativity. Domination occurs when absolutes are misappropriated

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from the transcendental realm, to which they belong, to the mutable human realm where they can only be appropriated in relation to their purpose and their source. Where perceptions are blurred and practice abuses, then domination flourishes in a medium of absolutes, impermeability, and monopoly – an inauspicious medium which constitutes the negation of equity and undermines a forum of cultural parity and free interchange. We might briefly elaborate on this point in view of its significance for dispelling any misunderstanding.

A discourse formulated in the historically biased construct of “Islam and/vs. the West” is likely to fall within the range of a discourse of domination and exclusion. These are inauspicious grounds for any communication. By redefining the West to allow for a range of diversity, mutation, and possibility, and by dissociating Islam from exclusive ethnicities or histories which parochialize and constrain its potential openness and inclusiveness, it is possible to pave the ground for a discourse of principle and convergence instead of one that is primarily evocative of an ethos of ‘discipline and advantage.’ This redefinition and formulation falls within the terms and objectives of the Western Thought Project as a project conceived in the parameters of the *tawhīdī* episteme (*TEPS*) – an epistemic field which restitutes values to their due measure.

It is important to keep that intent in mind in view of the realities which are likely to affect a pursuit, but not deflect it from its intent. The present historical conjunction between a politically powerful and dominant West makes it tempting to confound right with might, while the historical weakness and subordination of Muslims fosters their ambivalence to both power and value. In appealing to a restitution of the balance at the level of reason and intellect, there is a better chance for putting dominance and subordination in their perspective and reducing the distortions attendant on conflating power with purpose. Persuading Muslims (and others) that accessibility is feasible and worthwhile is a step in this direction. It is a step to alleviating the impact of a historical encounter from arrogance/condescension and confrontation to a prospective meeting of mutual expectations and converging reciprocities. These are qualities which would be grounded in what we shall refer to as an ethic of *marḥamah* and *taʿāruf* signifying an

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attitude of coming to know one another in a spirit of compassion and goodwill.

Access to the Western heritage will admit of other readings of the West by others. At the same time, it will also curtail its monopoly on a self-assigned prerogative of mis/representation by reading the Other, for the claimed benefit of the Other, and thereby assuming an unwarranted credit and authority. This is the implication of the emancipatory portent of accessibility. As this access presupposes a command of the dominant idiom, its voice will be made audible and intelligible. It takes recourse in this idiom as a medium of communication and mediation in a first stage. This paves the way for its effective contribution at a later stage. In the interval, it will at least have pushed the dominant idiom in the direction of a real diversification. Participating effectively in a global exchange, however, should ultimately go beyond limiting the dominant discourse and relativizing it, to providing it with a new impetus and new directions. On a more reserved note, one may refer to a dimension posed by the envisaged participation in the dominant idiom. Namely, the challenge to the voice coming from the *tawhīdī* circle will be how to subscribe to the rules of the game without being caught up in them. This is a question which has been raised time and again and which is lucidly argued by others in more specific contexts.<sup>6</sup>

The principle of the accessibility of the Western heritage conceived in an Islamizing purview will lay the foundations for the necessary restructuration of the global cultural conservation. It will open the way to expanding the scope and the horizons of a vital discourse that will admit other parties and set the standards for a critical and constructive dialogue. In this way, the principle of accessibility to the culture and intellectual tradition of the West becomes a condition and a means for effecting the requisite changes in the environment of the East/West encounter, in addition to its evident role in equipping and qualifying Muslims to resume their historical presence and assume their moral/civilizational responsibilities.

### *Requisites*

Handling this Project effectively calls for scholarship of a certain caliber. A premium is laid on an analytical acumen as well as on a synthesizing

perspicacity in dealing with Western sources. The density and, frequently, the sophistication (or simply the underlying ambivalences) of the latter make this necessary to avert the possibility of being either overwhelmed or merely submerging passively into the text. This acumen is enhanced by an ability to balance the requisites for engagement with those for detachment. To the extent that the reader must understand the tradition from within, there is a pressing need for exerting a measure of the *Einfluss* of Weberian hermeneutics, i.e., there is a commonsense need to evoke a certain pathos or an empathy, conducive to meaningfully experiencing the culture of the Other. A communal interchange which reinforces the cognitive dimension in its curiosity to learn about the Other with an outgoing positive affective charge for the Other borders on the compassionate. It may be proximated to the Qur'anic ethic of *tarāḥum/marḥamah* (deriving from *rahmah*, i.e., mercy, benevolence, and compassion – cf. Qur'an 90:17; 30:21; 33:32; 49:13) and which, in the context of the semantic and conceptual field in which it is used in the Qur'an, appeals to a universal God conscious and conscientious bond of a generic kinship and identity within humanity.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, to observe the objective of the whole exercise aimed at intelligibility and communicability, the Muslim scholar must also keep a measured distance – hence the need for a calculated objectivity. This objectivity embraces a critical comprehension which takes into consideration the positive as well as the negative aspects of the subject culture. It calls for a discriminating sensibility in dealing with its values and concepts. It also calls for a breadth in viewing the different dimensions of the culture and a compactness in relating the parts to the whole. The sum of these qualities may be better proximated by another Qur'anic term – *ʿadl* (Qur'an 6:152; 5:8; 4:135). Taken in its literal connotations, in a context in which it is frequently invoked in the divine discourse on human guidance, it carries a double signification. Negatively, it connotes an inclination *away* from bias and away from excesses which implicitly lie at both ends of a spectrum. Positively, it connotes an inclination toward the center which is presumed to be the ground of truth, the “just,” of probity/integrity: the pivot of an intellectual and moral uprightness and rectitude as against one of

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deviousness and deviance. This is identified as *istiqāmah* (Qur'an 11:112; 42:15; 41:30; 9:7; cf. also 25:67), which is the logical sequel and corollary of *ʿadl*. Such is the ethic of justice and integrity. More than the idea of “objectivity,” which presupposes a questionable binary matrix and a reified rationality, this is what is needed to inform and reform the desired scholarship. The originality of a Muslim reading of the West is contingent on this balance between the elements of *tarāḥum/taʿāruf* and *ʿadl/istiqāmah*. In the dominant idiom, it calls for observing the proportions between “empathy” and an “objectivity”.

Beyond temper and modality, this balance between engagement and distance is thus reinforced by and reinforces a kind of scholarship which is substantially grounded in an Islamic epistemology. This is essential if it is to handle the subject culture effectively in a framework reconciling distance to engagement. In the absence of this basic grounding, the critical and discriminating aptitudes associated with the objectivity essential for the task will be impaired. Conversely, keeping a calculated distance does not signify hovering in the void. Perhaps we can further illustrate the importance of “solid grounds” in the process of cultural openness to the Other by reversing gears and reviewing the alternative.

In the event of a random, dispersed, or compulsive encounter with the cultural West, the outcome is more likely to be counterproductive. A confirmed sense of inferiority, no matter under what guise, is bound to negate any opportunity for an equitable meeting of cultures. A one-sided deference to the dominant culture, for instance, carries with it the undercurrents of a persistent mystification of the West and ensures such an inferiority. Nullifying the principle of parity in the relationship between the two cultures, with their respective heritages, erodes the prospects of global restructuring.

It would instead confirm the existing hegemony with its inherent antagonistic and antagonizing polarities to the detriment of alternative possibilities. This decentering, fragmenting, and dispersing impulse, or indeed, this diffuse quality of a random contact, has in fact dominated the encounter of an earlier generation that had opted for a window on the West. Yet, they only succeeded in provoking deeper reactions and engendering a greater rigidity in cultural attitudes. The resulting rift

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and cleavage in the ranks of Muslim intellectuals was not alleviated in any measure by the attempt to gainsay and to deny or to minimize the impact of the prevailing rift between the contending cultures either.<sup>8</sup> The rift has to be addressed as much as the cultures in question. It is this situation which has inspired present initiatives in the Islamization program to plan for a Western Thought Project and to take a more serious and open attitude to the West and its legacy.

The scholarship on Western thought ventured into from an Islamizing perspective is inherently engaged in laying the foundations for a more hospitable and tolerant cultural setting that ineluctably admits of other submerged voices. As the potentially enriching contribution of the Islamic heritage reemerges, an effective articulation of the Islamic worldview becomes a distinct possibility. It would also be an important step in redressing the prevailing imbalance in the global medium of interchange and in paving the way for an optimal measure of cultural parity to the benefit of all the parties concerned. In this sense, the conception of the Project could be seen in terms of a bold and innovative blueprint aimed at effecting a cultural breakthrough. Much remains to be done, however, in defining the techniques and arenas of cultural interaction and in refining the scope and perceptions of such a scholarship.

### *Scope*

At a more general level, the needs of such a scholarship could be addressed in terms which further add to the prospect of the success of the project as a cultural enterprise on the scale envisaged. The Western Thought Project calls for a fair grasp of the nature and processes involved in cultural understanding. Of the few works that have directly addressed the issue of cultural exchange in the context of Islam and the West, the work of Norman Daniel comes to mind.<sup>9</sup> This and other similar works could provide a tangible starting point in a wide-ranging but often a highly abstract field. Muslim scholars will need to cultivate a sensitivity to the issue of cultural dynamics and cultural affinities on both sides of the spectrum and they will have to conduct their inquiry fully alive to its more profound implications. On the other hand, a more intimate knowledge of the techniques of intercultural dialogue in

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general would be useful. These could be adopted at certain junctures of the interaction with the Western heritage with a view to locating convergences, or expanding common ground and bridge-building to promote a cause or to bring home a point relevant to the general platform of cultural Islamization. In the one case and the other, a familiarity with the processes of acculturation would be an advantage. In locating the general requisites for the Project in this manner, one is evidently also pointing out some of the thematic sources in the literature which should be relevant to Muslim scholarship in the field.

More specifically, an authoritative familiarity with the Western heritage requires that we define our objectives with an eye on the conditions for their optimum realizability. This calls for expanding our heuristic vistas to a range of literature that might not ordinarily have engaged our priorities. Works on the intellectual heritage or on aspects of culture which are conceived in different contexts and for different purposes may well serve to highlight some of our own objectives and enhance our susceptibility to such conditions as would promote our ends. The way in which we handle such works, our manner of investing the points of contact we recognize, is just as important as diversifying and extending the range of literature. The products of cultured and cultural think-tanks located the length and breadth of the strategic intersections on the Western chart of knowledge and intellectual capital may at times be tangential to our immediate concerns. To the extent that they provide us with a fund of accumulated experience, they will serve to boost our own limited reserves both on the human and the temporal scales. A case in point is the monumental venture into the intellectual legacy of the West which was undertaken by Mortimer J. Adler and others and which resulted in the series of sixty volumes on the Great Books of the Western World introduced by the *Synoptican*.<sup>10</sup>

As the focus on the Western heritage becomes more explicit, the strategies of handling the Project become a matter for urgent consideration. This engages us at a more concrete level with given arenas that will open up our access to the heritage and crystallize the scope of the inquiry. From the outset, we will need to address certain issues and decide on the priorities. The following is a suggestive itinerary that bears further scrutiny. In spelling out the parameters of the ground to be

covered, it can only enhance focus and orientation in planning for the implementation of the Project.

- What are the sources of the Western heritage? What are the specific traits and contributions of each?
- What course did the evolution of this heritage take? Can we locate the nodes of this evolution in formative periods and critical junctures? What were the factors which influenced this course and ... in what direction were these influences exerted?
- From another perspective, can we identify the landmarks in Western thought and patterns of evolution in terms of epochs and issues – and “epochal thresholds?”<sup>11</sup>
- With slight variations on the above themes, can we ascertain the dynamics of Western culture in a pattern of continuity and discontinuities ... the patterns of preservation and transmission, or the cycles of production and reproduction, generation and diffusion?
- What are the different configurations of the Western legacy? Conversely, how does the latter percolate through the different layers of the culture and how is it projected in the disciplines of knowledge?
- On the intercultural level, diverse questions could be raised. In the dynamics of cultural exchange, the emphasis can be laid on the encounter with Islam. What were the stages, levels, and modalities of this encounter?
- How did the Muslims react, respond, or interact with the ideas and the heritage of the West? More to the point, perhaps, how did the West present itself to Muslims and to others? Can we devise categories for this encounter: i.e., projection and self-image vs. reflection and response?
- With a slight shift of emphasis to the context of the encounter, it is evident that the Western cultural ethos and the heritage percolates unevenly into the Muslim eco/psychosphere. What are the arenas of cultural encounter to be examined?

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- In examining cultural influences, we could provisionally distinguish among three different levels or arenas in the cultural encounter: a civilizational (institutions); a cultural/intellectual; and an educational (specifically curricular content and discipline – classification).

The above enumeration by no means exhausts the possibilities for exploring strategies and means for designing the project. It is suggestive, however, of the many questions which could be raised and which could provide useful frames of reference for researching specific topics. The range of the latter is as vast and varied as its subject matter. Researching the Western tradition with an emphasis on the nature, course, and forms of its encounter with our own heritage and history as Muslims can initially be organized around historically structured nodes or thresholds such as the following themes would suggest:

- The Graeco-Roman and biblical roots and sources of the Western tradition and how these have been repeatedly projected and processed in the different strands of the Western tradition – (Anglo-Saxon and Continental, or German, French, English, and American); how they have impacted on the modern West and its culture; and conversely, how Muslims are inclined to view and distinguish these sources to the extent that they do or may have done in the past.
- The Andalusian heritage: its significance and its potential implications for a Muslim reading of the encounter. Bringing it into focus can enhance an understanding of the patterns and consequences of the transcultural interaction between Europeans and Muslims both in the past and in the future.
- Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Revolution, or the epochal moments in modern European history: a reassessment of their meaning and implications from a Muslim perspective – whether in terms of experiences specific to the European setting or in terms of their actual consequences and implications for Muslim history and society.

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The scholarship of the Western Thought Project would be expected to dwell on the above themes directly and to develop original interpretations. But it would also be a reflexive scholarship and it could go beyond the historical to the substantive approach to the issues. In this case, the focus could shift along the following lines:

- Surveying and assessing the current scholarship on the above themes, both Muslim and occidental. Identifying trends and characteristic patterns and tracing influences and genealogies in the field. This would include an inquiry into the field of orientalist scholarship and its critics.
- Contrasting and comparing respective perspectives in the two traditions, the Islamic and the Western, on knowledge, ethics, culture, philosophy, religion, history, and civilization. Their implications should be sought with reference to the modern context.
- Identifying the challenges and problems in the contemporary episteme both in the Muslim Ummah and in the West. Central issues could be located and addressed, i.e., the relationship between reason and revelation, reason and ethics, values and sciences, or power and responsibility, etc.