

# Toward An Islamic Alternative In Thought and Knowledge

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## Introduction

Current developments and the many acute problems facing the Muslim Ummah, especially at the intellectual level, present a serious challenge to Islam. This is why an attempt to outline an intellectual Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge has never been so urgent and imperative. This will, insha'Allah, help in formulating a clear and coordinated policy with regard to cultural transformation based on firm principles and sound strategy. It is also hoped that this policy will lead to scientific findings.

By way of introduction, I will give a brief description of the state of knowledge and thought, and of the educational and cultural systems in the contemporary Arab and Muslim world.

## The Present State of Thought

When examining the present state of thought among the Muslim peoples, three basic approaches can be identified:

- The first can be described as the traditionalist approach which, by and large, considers the "traditional" thought of the Ummah to be self-sufficient and capable of being presented as it is or with very little alteration. This approach suggests that the Ummah's contemporary intellectual life can be formed and organized and that the structure of its civilization can be built on this basis. This approach is often described as the approach of *authenticity*.

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- The second approach considers contemporary Western thought and its world-view—its concepts of existence, of life and of man—to be universal, without it a modern culture and civilization cannot be built. This tendency maintains that Western thought must be adopted *in toto*, and any consequent negative aspects are the price that must be paid if a modern culture and civilization are to be established. This view is often described as *modernistic*.
- The third trend, or the *eclectic* approach, advocates yet another view. It contends that one must select from traditional thought what is most sound, and from “modern” contemporary thought that which one considers and proves to be correct, and weld the two to form an intellectual structure that will provide a guaranteed basis for achieving what is required.

However, the traditional approach, in the manner it has been presented and applied, did not help to prevent the Ummah from falling into the state of decline and failure from which it is still suffering. Likewise, Western thought, as it also is presented and applied, cannot protect the Ummah from its inherent adverse, harmful and even disastrous effects. The advocates of the eclectic selective approach have not yet presented the details of this proposed blend, let alone tried to put it into effect. All this is conducive to the wide-ranging question: Is the Ummah going through a serious intellectual crisis; and, if so, what is the way out of it?

## The Present State of Knowledge

To answer the above question, a brief look at the contemporary state of knowledge is necessary. There are presently two kinds of knowledge taught to our young students. First, there are the contemporary social sciences as well as the technical and applied sciences. These branches of knowledge exercise a dominant control over the organization and functioning of all aspects of life. They comprise—regardless of the Muslim contributions to the bases of many of these branches—a body of knowledge whose principles, rules, objectives, and methods were formed by Western mentality through its religious and intellectual framework, philosophy, and background. Every aspect of this knowledge is closely bound to the Western form of civilization.

Second, there is the knowledge which is described by Muslims variously as *shar'* (relating to the Shari'ah or Islamic Law) or *aşli* (relating to the bases of Islam). This knowledge is itself of two types: the knowledge of ob-

jectives and the knowledge of means. Experts on classification and cataloguing include both under the heading of *al 'ulūm al naqlīyah* ("transmitted knowledge").

Most of this knowledge was produced to deal with the issues of the post third century Hijrah period when the Islamic sciences had been established and in response to the historical reality of the Ummah at that time. The books and reference works current among students with this kind of knowledge were prepared after *ijtihād* had ceased and *taqlīd* ("imitation of the works of previous scholars") had become widespread. The authors of these works used to prepare them with the utmost care, paying great attention to linguistic details and artistic style in order to display the depth of their knowledge to their students, colleagues and rivals. They are more like monologues than teaching books. The methods and contents of such material supported the concept of *taqlīd* and encouraged people to adhere to it. The intention was to prevent people from exercising any form of *ijtihād* other than that needed to understand the books themselves, and, in the process, to make people despise *ijtihād*. This type of knowledge could not equip anyone to face the realities of life. Rather, it strenuously promoted blind following and imitation and brought an end to intellectual activity and creativity. A person seeking knowledge was thus caught between following alien contemporary thought or sticking to old traditional ways of thinking. Neither type of knowledge enabled a person to achieve operative *ijtihād* that could be instrumental in facing current problems in a sound and appropriate way.

## The Present State of Muslim Education

Turning now to the educational systems throughout the Muslim world, we discover the prevalence of a dual system of education. First, is the traditional "Islamic system," which offers the student a program including the Shar'iah sciences (that is, sciences pertaining to Islamic Law). This system is confined to preparing and enabling graduates to deal with personal affairs, meet some educational needs, and lead *Salah* in mosques. This sector, for the most part, remains a private affair that has limited access to public funds. The money needed for this sector comes from the residue of charitable endowments, not from the state's budget. Where public funds are made available, demands of secularization are imposed in the name of "modernism."

The second, and the most widespread, is the secular, or non-religious system, which presents all kinds of contemporary knowledge and sciences in the various stages of education. It advocates un-Islamic orientations and has assumed tremendous proportions, elbowing out the Islamic system. Because the graduates of the Islamic system are kept out of touch with the reality

of contemporary life and its challenges, they usually present no competition to the trainees of the secular system. Consequently, it is the un-Islamic secular system that produces the Ummah's intellectual, political and social leaders, the managers of its services and means of production.

As a result of this dichotomy, the system of education became a means of dividing the Ummah and draining its energy. In reality, education should be a means of bringing Muslims together and providing them with a unified cultural perspective, directing them towards progress and construction. It should create harmony and provide a common purpose, thus directing all efforts towards developing the righteous Muslim whose mind and soul, culture and behavior, and powers of individual initiative and reasoning are strong and productive.

Many of the manifestations of division and fragmentation—even tragic conflict which afflict many parts of the Arab and Muslim world—bear the traces of the negative aspects of this dichotomy. In addition, there are the negative effects of other “particular” branches of education, such as military, private, and foreign, which are reflected in the attitudes of graduates and their cultural vision.

## The Present Civilizational State of the Ummah

The territories of the Ummah today are the most strategically important and richest areas of the world. They contain the most important raw materials needed by Western industry along with tremendous human resources. They have a magnificent legacy and possess the best sources of guidance, namely the Divine Revelation (Wahy) with its two parts: the inimitable Qur'an, including its interpretation and application, as well as the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAAS). In spite of all this, however, the Muslim world today is plagued by inner strife and divisions, turbulence and self-contradictions, wars and threats to world peace, extravagant wealth and excessive poverty, famine and epidemics.

The Ummah is divided against itself, torn up and fragmented into nearly fifty nation-states, separated by artificial boundaries designed to create and ensure the continuation of tension and confrontation especially between neighboring states. None of these states has had the chance to attain the outright freedom and stability, or the integration of its citizens, which would enable it to concentrate its energies on construction and development. The factors of disharmony, such as sectarianism, factionalism and nationalism, have been so dominant that they have led to a continual state of instability which could easily be manipulated by foreign powers at any time, leading to turmoil and anarchy. The lack of individual freedom does not allow intellectual and cultural

growth and the natural psychological development of the people. Muslims continue to live under the shadow of poverty, oppression, and terror, either from those who were specially prepared to impose Western forms of thought and culture on the Ummah, or from military dictators who seize power, and who impose by force, torture, and intimidation the frivolous, arbitrary, and whimsical policies of one individual. In such dictatorships the role of political and administrative bodies and institutions is completely elipsed which destroys all the qualities and cultural potential of the people.

The overwhelming majority of the Ummah is illiterate. Their needs far outweigh the goods, materials, and services they can provide. Even in the important and vital necessities of life, almost none of these Muslim states is self-sufficient. This deficiency is usually made up by imports which increase dependency on foreign powers. What makes the situation even more intolerable is the fact that raw materials are bought from Muslim states at the lowest price, or even taken for nothing, and are returned to them as manufactured goods at the highest prices. Many of these states are living at the level of starvation, while the rest could be reduced to such a level, almost immediately, if the exporters and alien powers so wished.

The few Muslim states that have followed the path of industrialization have been unable to attain complete self-sufficiency simply because they depend on foreign sources for most of the equipment needed to develop their industry. Such foreign sources are, therefore, able to control the industry and direct it according to their own political and economic interests.

In most cases, "Muslim industry" was not designed to meet the desperate, immediate, and vital needs of the Muslims themselves, but to meet only tangential and secondary needs and to satisfy and cater to consumeristic desires and habits planted in the Muslims for the benefit of others.

The Muslim world has, unfortunately, developed the habit of consuming the products of a contemporary alien civilization, and has adopted many of its outwards aspects. It has built "modern" roads, buildings, and places of entertainment in its capitals patterned after Western styles. It has also established some political and economic institutions based on the Western model. But all this has failed to bring about the desired transformation, and has not even set the Ummah on the road that would lead it toward that transformation. How can this situation be rectified?

## Toward An Islamic Alternative Thought

In order to present the Islamic alternative thought to the Ummah today, we must revise Muslim thought as a whole and re-assess its methods. We must also understand the position of "regional" and "nationalistic" thought

as well as Western thought, both Marxist and liberal. Furthermore, we must realize the extent of the influence of Western thought in the Muslim world in order to become aware of the enormous and stupendous challenge we are facing and the pressure that history and the present are exerting on the Muslim mind.

There are several important conditions for such a reformation of thought: It should be comprehensive and free from all psychological pressures, whether historical or contemporary; it should be carried out with the purpose of correction, self-criticism, and serious quest for scientific alternatives, which are governed by theoretical and intellectual principles.

Such a revision should examine the controversial issues which have occupied the Muslim mind and prevented it from being positive, effective and influential, such as the issues of causality, the alleged conflict between revelation and reason, the blind imitation of previous scholars and its crippling effects, the dignity of man, etc. It should reinterpret these issues in a sound and objective fashion, and seek to free the Muslim mind from the negative effects and shackles which these issues have had on its psychology, mentality, education, and way of life.

We must revise and correct the inherited historical and cultural structure of the Ummah and rid it of the weakness, dichotomy, and lack of reality which hamper its efficiency and effectiveness. We must re-examine all the prevalent concepts, and work to achieve the correct perspectives on life, the universe, and man, as well as all other related issues. In addition, we must agree on the sources for these perspectives and work to design Islamic systems and institutions to define a role for each one of them. In this way, these systems and institutions may be able to achieve the aims of Islam, even if they do not exactly match its historical reality in form and structure. This design should lead towards an Islamic concept of civilization which will enable the Muslim to work seriously toward building the Ummah and achieving its goals and objectives. We should work toward transforming all the above— according to a defined method—into a coordinated cultural system that will acculturate and educate the entire Ummah and change it into a thriving, operational system.

In our opinion, a sound intellectual basis, which is the starting point for building a civilizational system, must have three characteristics: It must have infallible sources, free from error and destructive deviation, so that thinking will not degenerate into imagination and meandering meditation; it should be rationally and logically acceptable, so that if ideas are presented to the Muslim mind, they will not be readily discarded; it should also be realistic, so that it will be able to interact with reality to change and influence it positively.

## Toward A Strategy For Knowledge

Nowadays, scientific knowledge is defined according to the following maxim: "Every piece of knowledge is subject to tangible experiment." This definition of scientific knowledge has been prevalent for centuries and has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It has been used as a means of deciding what knowledge is scientific and what is not. Through the adoption of this concept and widespread reliance on it, Revelation was rejected as a source of knowledge, culture, and civilization, and all the branches of knowledge which are based on Revelation were excluded from the field of scientific knowledge, regardless of whether they dealt with the tangible world or that which is beyond perception. All these fields were considered to be "fables" or "unscientific" knowledge which was of no benefit whatsoever.

As a result, the empirical method was considered to be the only means of gaining scientific knowledge. Man was regarded only as a mass of biological substances. The social sciences and humanities were subjected to the laws of natural science. Experiments were carried out on animals in an attempt to define laws that could be applied to man as well in the areas of behavior, response, reaction, influence, obedience, refusal, and ways of meeting material and other needs.

The Muslims also accepted this approach; and the contemporary social sciences and humanities, with these methods and such a philosophy, became the basic sources for the Muslim's education, the formation of his mentality, and the definition of his attitudes toward the values of truth and goodness. Likewise, the arts based on this philosophy became the source forming Muslims' psychology and defining their tastes and attitude towards aesthetic values. The teaching methods and curricula in universities, institutes, and schools were subjected to this concept, and Westernization and alienation from Islam deepened. Consequently, the matters dealt with by Revelation were classified as "fables." A strong link was established between the power, productivity, and ability of the West on the one hand, and Western thought, beliefs and concepts of God, the universe, man, religion, life, nature, time, history, matter, woman, the soul, science, knowledge, and various other matters on the other.

In the light of the above, the first step toward formulating an Islamic cultural strategy is to redefine knowledge in terms of an Islamic epistemology and in a way that will be acceptable to Muslims everywhere. In this context, we need to emphasize that all knowledge is derived either from Revelation, reason, perception, or experiment.

The contemporary theory of knowledge affirms that the sole source of scientific knowledge is the tangible universe, and that there is no other source.

The Islamic theory of scientific knowledge, on the other hand, stresses that knowledge has two sources: Revelation and the tangible universe. Revelation is the source of absolute facts and truth about which there is no doubt whatsoever and is not subjected to relativity. Revelation is contained in the Qur'an which is the word of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS). Allah (SWT) has challenged mankind to produce a Surah to match even the shortest one of the Qur'an:

And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our Servant, then produce a surah like thereunto (2:23).

The recitation of the Qur'an is, in itself, a form of worship. The Qur'an opens with Sūrah al Fātiḥah and closes with Sūrah al Nās. The second source of Revelation are the legally binding elaborations of the Qur'an contained in the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAAS), which consists of his reported ḥadīth and decisions, i.e., all that he said, did, approved of, or condemned which have been proven to be authentic.

Furthermore, the Islamic theory of knowledge considers the means of gaining knowledge to be reason, perception and experiment. The Qur'an said:

And Allah has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing – but He has endowed you with hearing and sight and minds, so that you might have cause to be grateful [to Him] (16 : 78).

According to Islam, no information can be considered true knowledge or worthy of acceptance without evidence from Revelation or from the tangible universe. Knowledge from the tangible universe would have to be derived via one of the three means mentioned above: reason, perception, or experiment. The Qur'an challenges people to

produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true (2 : 111).

About people affirming unsubstantiated beliefs, it asks:

Have you any [certain] knowledge which you could proffer to us? You follow only conjectures and you yourselves do nothing but guess (6 : 148).

And it categorically affirms:

Never can surmise take the place of truth (53 : 28).

The two fields of which man should have some knowledge and understanding, are: the "unseen" world (*ʿālam al ghayb*), i.e., all that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception; and the "seen" world (*ʿālam al shahādah*), which is all that can be witnessed by a creature's senses or mind. The primary source about the unseen world is Revelation from which man derives evidence about it. The basic source about the seen world is the tangible universe. Experiments and perception derive evidence about the seen world through a variety of means, which may support one another. If we lay a firm foundation for the theory of Islamic knowledge, and present it as an alternative to the contemporary Western theory of knowledge, we will have established the second basis of the proposed cultural strategy.

This strategy must stem from the realization that every nation has a main issue of concern, a belief or basic aim, which provides it with motivation, inspiration, and impetus in all its activities in the fields of knowledge and labor. Usually, each nation is seeking to plant this belief or aim in the consciousness of its youth, using all methods available, especially in the stages of childhood. The nation continues to nurture and strengthen this belief in all other stages of the individual's development.

The current system of education in the Muslim world has failed to instill any such belief, sound vision, standards or motives in Muslims. As a result of this failure, the aim of education for the Muslim, at various levels, is to obtain decent employment with a decent income. Materialism has become widespread among the educated classes, and they have lost any sense of clear purpose in life. Academic syllabi has failed to establish a sound purpose in the Muslim conscience. The only way to achieve this is to establish a strong Islamic belief (*ʾaḳīdah*) and to instill Islamic vision in the hearts and minds of Muslim youth. We must use all available means and resources to nurture and develop this belief and vision in order to achieve a sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah. We must make this belief the motivation and the inspiration for our thoughts and feelings.

Secondary schools in the West, despite the West's secularism, teach students about Western heritage, cultural history, and traditions in an integrated and comprehensive manner. This gives the students a sense of belonging and instills in them the basic aims and strategy of their nation. They grow up with this feeling and carry with them the vision of their nation and its concepts of life, the universe, man, other cultures, as well as other aspects of its world-view.

Our proposed cultural strategy must firmly establish Islam and its vision, not through limited classes on "religion," but throughout the entire education system. Every syllabus and program must aim at forming and establishing this belief; we must rid every syllabus of anything that contradicts or opposes this belief. This should be done by reorganizing the education system

in all Muslim countries and by getting rid of the negative influences of the division between religious, secular, civil, and military education. Such division has created, and continues to perpetuate, divisions among our people, so that graduates of "religious" schools and universities have ideas, opinions, and concepts differing sharply from those of the graduates of secular or military schools and universities. We do not want to abolish variety and specialization; what we want is to end divisions.

This could be achieved by integrating all existing systems and creating one single system based on the teachings, spirit and vision of Islam. The new education system, its syllabi and methods, and those responsible for it, should all be infused with the principles and aims of Islam. It should abandon the tradition and the educational programs, content, and methods of other nations which were adopted without taking into consideration the particular needs and aspirations of our Ummah. It should generate a sense of mission, whereby professional achievements and material success may be regarded as bonuses, not the purpose and objective of education. The proposed education system must unify ideas, concepts, and feelings regarding all major issues. If there is, then, a diversification into various specializations, the students and scholars would still feel no sense of isolation or alienation.

If this unification of the education system is carried out properly, it will help to provide all the educated members of the Ummah with a good share of Islamic knowledge dealing with Islamic beliefs, the values and aims of Islam, and the morals and behavior of the Muslim. In addition, this unification will help to provide familiarity with Islamic legislation, history, and civilization, as well as what is necessary and essential in contemporary modern knowledge.

In developing an Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge, special attention must be paid to the study of Islamic civilization. The study of Islamic civilization according to a proper methodological syllabus (to which a number of selected Islamic thinkers, educationists, and psychologists have contributed), is considered to be one of the most important means of creating and crystallizing the individual's feeling of belonging to the Ummah, and enabling him or her to understand the spirit that motivated our ancestors to make their great achievements in the fields of art and science, as well as political, social, and economic thought. At the same time, the individual Muslim will also be aware of the pain and suffering of earlier generations, what they failed to achieve, and how and why they failed, so as to develop self-awareness and be able to compare himself with other peoples and civilizations. The study of Islamic civilization will help to create and develop an awareness of its legacy, the spirit that produced and animated it, and what distinguishes it from other civilizations. It will also help to develop the ability to plan

for the future and look forward to it. The study of Islamic civilization will help to protect the Muslim from being swept away by the conflicting currents of civilization that are seeking to dominate him. It is certain that no one can escape unscathed from this conflict unless he or she belongs to one of the contending civilizations, which is qualified to eventually be an alternative when the other civilizations have declined and failed.

Our new educational strategy must include the planning of a course of study explaining the bases, values, sources, and aims of Islam as a source of thought, culture, and civilization. This course should be studied for four years in the first stages of university education by all students, regardless of their specialization. It would deal with the history of Islam, the historical achievements of Islamic civilization, and the basic features of Islamic culture.

Following on from the above, we need to present the humanities, social sciences, and arts from an Islamic perspective. We must appreciate that the methods and theories of the modern humanities, social sciences, and arts were formed in a way that reflects Western thought and Western beliefs and strategies, in accordance with Western aims and goals of life. The issues they deal with stem from Western theories of knowledge. But with regard to all these sciences, Western man himself has begun to sense their shortcomings and inability to meet even his own needs. These sciences are now encountering many serious problems in their methods, theories, and application, and Western man is trying to find ways to correct them.

The Muslims desperately need to have their own humanities, social sciences, and arts, based on their beliefs and the theory of knowledge derived from the sources of those beliefs. If this is achieved, it will not be the Muslim alone who attains his goal by gaining knowledge of the Islamic humanities and social sciences that are connected to moral values. Such values will, indeed, contribute to the general welfare of the human race.

This objective could be achieved through studying the directives of the Qur'an and the Sunnah concerning all social and human matters, and classifying them according to the issues of these sciences, so that they provide guidelines and principles for our societies. This work should be carried out by groups of researchers, composed of specialists in the humanities, social sciences, Arabic language and the sciences of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In addition, the Islamic legacy must be studied and the material available in print or in manuscript form must be classified according to the issues of these sciences. This classification should be carried out precisely, so that the knowledge contained in the Islamic legacy will be readily available to researchers and specialists in a convenient and authentic form. Computers and information technology could provide invaluable service in this area. A critical study of contemporary thought must be undertaken so as to select the best of it according to strictly defined standards.

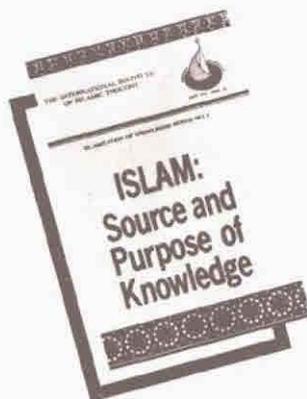
Finally, plans need to be drawn up to make use of and benefit from all this material. Textbooks used in colleges, institutes, and schools need to be rewritten, so that they will reflect the Islamic vision of contemporary reality and needs. They need to be written and designed in such a way as to make them attractive and convenient to use.

All Arab and Islamic universities must cooperate to help achieve these goals. The International Institute of Islamic Thought has detailed plans for all these matters and is willing and eager to share its expertise with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), as well as with anyone who seriously wishes to cooperate in these matters.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for bringing together Muslim scholars from all over the world to discuss and propose a concept for a cultural and civilizational Islamic system. Such a system is long overdue and is urgently needed. May Allah (SWT) grant us success and help us achieve in this domain what will please Him.

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