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# Toward Global Cultural Renewal: Modernity and the Episteme of Transcendence

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- *Alternative Perspectives: Islam from Within.*
- *Contrasting Epistemics: Tawḥīd, Social Science and the Vocationist.*
- *Paradigms in Political Science Revisited.*
- *Islam and the Middle East: The Aesthetics of a Political Enquiry.*
- *Cultural Parodies and Parodizing Cultures.*
- *Where East Meets West: The West on the Agenda of the Islamic Revival.*

**Toward Global  
Cultural Renewal:  
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## THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

The publication program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has already addressed important issues in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge. In this respect a number of books have already appeared in several languages under fifteen main series: *Academic Dissertations*; *Accessing the Islamic Intellectual Heritage*; *Concepts and Terminology*; *Human Development*; *Indices*; *Islamic Methodology*; *Islamization of Culture*; *Islamization of Knowledge*; *Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought*; *Lectures*; *Occasional Papers*; *Perspectives on Islamic Thought*; *Reform Movements and Methodologies of Change*; *Research Monographs* and *Rasa'il Islamiyah al Ma'rifah* (Studies in the Islamization of Knowledge).

The *Occasional Papers* series, published by the Institute's London Office, covers a number of research papers, articles and lectures from the Institute's world-wide program as well as from Muslim scholars willing to make contributions. These are presented individually in the form of booklets that can be easily read or referred to. It is hoped that the booklets will reach students, scholars, and specialists as well as major sections of the world's Muslims alike in order to generate a fruitful debate on the vital issue of Islamization, and to create an awareness of the intellectual crisis in its various shapes and forms, while encouraging an active role in the proposed course of action and solution. This series is also translated into other languages.

The seventh paper in this series, *Toward Global Cultural Renewal*, was first published in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)*, Vol. 5, No. 2 under the title "Islamization as a Force of Global Renewal or: The Relevance of the *Tawhīdī* Episteme to Modernity."

The use of Islamic terminology in transliteration is a policy of the IIIT. Some of the terms used are untranslatable, while others are so important that the Institute felt that familiarity with them is necessary for a better understanding of Islamic issues. These terms have been footnoted once or sometimes explained briefly

between brackets. All those which have not yet been accepted in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries are in *italic*. As many of these occur more than once, readers are advised to refer to the relevant footnotes whenever necessary.

When mentioning dates the Islamic one comes first, separated from the Gregorian one by a slash. When an Islamic date is mentioned alone, it is followed by AH.

The translation of the Qur'an used in this series is that of 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī (Amana Corporation, revised, 1989). However, we made changes to verses quoted from it whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning.

IIT, London  
1413/1995

## **EDITORS' NOTE**

This paper—originally delivered as the Faruqi Memorial Lecture at the 16th Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists meeting at Plainfield, Indiana, USA, July 1987—puts today's quest for Islamization into historical and ideational perspective. It traces the movement to a new-found awareness among Muslims, cognizant of the immense worth and potential of their heritage, eager to emerge from their actual debilitation, whether enforced or self-inflicted. The drive towards collective effort and for the pooling of resources is highlighted as a prominent and auspicious feature of the trend. But the main thrust of the paper is directed at examining the capacity of Islam to tackle successfully the wide-ranging problems that beset the universal Muslim Ummah as well as the world at large.

In the course of this exploration, Dr. Abul-Fadl considers and evaluates various contemporary approaches to truth and compares them with the Islamic "mode of knowing," discovering it to be a superior and beneficent foil to the existing paradigms and epistememes of modern culture. She also advocates and in effect offers a blueprint of a new kind of scholarship, one that invokes the "vocational ideal" and has the power and the vision to absorb intelligently cultural diversity and transmute it into an overarching and transcendent, but realistic and humane, critique. The credentials of Islam to buttress and enlighten such an endeavor are presented with clarity and conviction. And while the pervasive and protean malaise of contemporary civilization is attributed to the sense of vacuity and absence of higher purpose brought about by the renunciation of God, that of the Muslim Ummah is seen to be rooted in intellectual lethargy.

The author finds such issues compelling in view of an unprecedented cultural hegemony fostering and promoting degenerative symptoms among the "subordinate" cultures of the earth. However, and despite the colossal challenges which face the



**quest for renewal and reintegration—challenges that are unflinchingly tackled and delineated in the paper—the final view is one of hope and affirmation in both human recoverability and the latent power of Islam to lead man out of the present morass.**

## Introduction

Islamization<sup>1</sup> constitutes a major force of renovation upon the contemporary world scene. A little over a decade ago, the mid-seventies witnessed a heightened awareness of Islamic cultural identity among the Ummah world-wide, an awareness which was projected in the spate of activities and events which marked the fourteenth centennial of the Islamic hijri calendar. One of the more auspicious developments on this occasion was an emerging trend that is distinctly novel among Muslims, namely, a growing appreciation for the importance of coordination and organization reflected in the quest for institution-building. The Muslims of the modern world, it seems, had at last come of age as they sought to transform the festivities of the day into a more enduring and effective enterprise. Islamization is a concrete expression of these concerns. It was born as a wide-ranging cultural movement which essentially sought to recover the vitality of the community by recovering the vitality of its heritage. As such, it received its first sustained impetus and its systematic articulation in the efforts to give effect to the resolutions of the various maiden conferences of the period.

The focus of this paper will be limited to exploring one aspect of this movement, namely the potential of Islamization as a force for cultural renewal and direction. The context of the discussion will be more general, taking the contemporary cultural setting as its framework and making it clear from the outset that the implications of Islamization have a universal bearing. The heuristic style of the discussion is intended to open up the forum for debate and to suggest areas of more in-depth inquiry and research in an attempt to extend and consolidate the terrain for a new kind of scholarship.

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1. Throughout this paper "Islamization" is used in a specifically cultural and epistemological context outlined in *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1989 [1981]) and with a general connotation of a process of human liberation as defined by S.M. al Naquib al Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978) pp. 41-42.

The main argument in the following pages can be summed up in a few salient points. Islamization provides a credible and viable response to our vital needs today. The pervasive cultural disarray characteristic of our times acts as a corrosive force on contemporary civilization. The credibility and viability of this message to the immediate context as an instrument of rehabilitation and renewal will need to be developed by a scholarship capable of bridging the gap between cultures for the benefit of all. The field of such scholarship must necessarily impinge on some of the following issue-areas: the implications of culture for civilization, the centrality of the episteme to both, and the principal characteristics of the Islamic mode of knowing and its effective consequences. Finally, some suggestions are made with regard to the operational and substantial requisites for activating the momentum of cultural revival. Clearly, each of these aspects is a topic of investigation in its own right. The purpose of the presentation at hand, however, is to do no more than outline, in barest form, a pattern of relationships in order to draw attention to its central thesis on Islamization as a potential force of effective global cultural renewal.

## **The Case for Cultural Rehabilitation**

The need for cultural rehabilitation is a common need which grows in urgency with the multiplying anomalies of our times.<sup>2</sup>

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2. The fact that the vast corpus of literature on this aspect is sometimes flippantly referred to as "prophecies of doom and gloom" does not detract from its quality and relevance. It is by no means a homogeneous body of writing; its caliber, sources, direction, and scope vary, but its temper and its basic message are the common denominator. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (New York: Modern Library, 1962) is probably the forerunner of this genre. But so are the little-known works of authentic critics like the French philosopher and mystic writer of the 1930s, René Guénon, whose incisive insights reflected in his *Crisis of Modernity* and *The Reign of Quantity* anticipated the ideas of his compatriot and spiritual fellow traveler four decades later in his manifesto for the presidential campaign. See Roger Garaudy, *Appel aux vivants* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979). Better known perhaps are the documented reports by teams of experts like the Club of Rome.

These anomalies are not confined to any one culture or system of thought to the exclusion of another. If we are to classify cultures in terms of power, we shall see that neither the subordinate cultures around the globe nor the hegemonic culture of the West escape the afflictions of a pervasive state of cultural disarray. The specific sources of this malaise may differ from one case to another, and diagnosis vary. In the case of the Muslim Ummah, there is a growing consensus that this state is to be attributed to an intellectual inertia and decrepitude which are projected, to its detriment, in every moment of its historical presence. In the case of the West, beneath a deceptive veneer of elusive dynamism and pulsating vitality, morbidity lurks. In the words of a perceptive and typically scathing analyst, "the hang-over of civilizational atheism and secularism...is finally taking its toll on the Western psyche..." and everywhere the symptoms of an acute identity crisis prevail.<sup>3</sup> The roots of this crisis lie in a deep ontological/epistemological morass. Having renounced God, Western man rendered himself impotent in the face of the problems of knowledge and power, and the "death of God" theology brought with it, together with the inevitable darkness of the human soul, an imminent blankness in the human mind, resulting in a sense of loss of meaning and direction.

The consequences of the aberrations of the hegemonic culture are by definition not confined to the generative culture. Instead, they become the benchmark of "modernity" and come to set the standards for the scramble among the subordinate cultures whose members now race to catch up on their doomsrace. In this way, the cultural disarray endemic to the West comes to be grafted onto the other cultures as well, adding confusion to inertia and morbidity to senility. But all is not necessarily doom and gloom.

Indeed, it is our contention here that the depths of global cultural disarray and disorientation are matched by potentially inexhaustible expanses of "life chances" for cultural renovation

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3. Cf. S. Parvez Manzoor, "An Epistemology of Questions: The Crisis of Intellect and Reason in the West," *The Muslim World Book Review (MWBR)* 7, No. 2, Winter 1987, pp. 3-12.

and the sanctification of the basis of our global civilization.<sup>4</sup> These chances are anchored in an accessible fund of structured resources which remain to be "discovered" in the Kuhnian sense, appropriated, integrated, and related to the relevant operational contexts. This discovery brings in its train a recovery—in the double sense of the term. The "structured resources" refer to the *tawḥīdī*<sup>5</sup> paradigm of knowledge and action embedded in the Qur'anic worldview; its recovery in the context of our times simultaneously spells a recovery from the malaise of the times.

Islamization, then, constitutes that process of reforming and revitalizing the current underlying structures of thought and perception by means of their exposure to a radical critique in the light of an integrated set of cognitive, affective, and symbolic values derived from the Islamic tradition. Invoking the latter as the source for developing and operationalizing the new critical evaluative apparatus calls for qualifying our statement on the universality or the ubiquity of the prevailing state of cultural disarray.

The commonality of the plight of modern Man<sup>6</sup> in both the East

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4. *Life Chances, Approaches to Social and Political Theory* (Chicago Publishing Company, 1979) a collection of essays by Ralph Dahrendorf, former EEC Commissioner and notable professor at the London School of Economics, provides an interesting summation of reflections in a career immersed in the continental sociological tradition.
  5. *tawḥīd* (adj. *tawḥīdī*): The act of affirming that Allah (SWT) is the One, the Absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master of all that is. Traditionally and simply expressed, *tawḥīd* is the conviction and witnessing that "there is no God but God." *Tawḥīd* is the essence of Islam. It is also that which gives Islamic civilization its identity, which binds all its constituents together and thus makes of them an integral, organic body which we call civilization.
  6. In *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (Longman, 1975) Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr provides a mystical interpretation of the situation of contemporary Western man caught between the "axis and the rim," as well as the dilemma of the modern Muslim. He eloquently pleads for a new affirmation of the principles of the Islamic revelation that would draw on the different branches of the tradition in order to check the corrosive influences of modernism and break out of its confines. Ali Shariati's essay "Civilization and Modernity" provides an interesting "sociological" variation

## **INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT**

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) is a cultural and intellectual foundation. The Institute was established and registered in the United States of America at the beginning of the fifteenth *Hijrah* century (1401/1981) with the following objectives:

- to provide a comprehensive Islamic outlook through elucidating the principles of Islam and relating them to relevant issues of contemporary thought;
- to regain the intellectual, cultural, and civilizational identity of the Ummah through the Islamization of knowledge;
- to rectify the methodology of contemporary Islamic thought in order to enable it to resume its contribution to the progress of human civilization and give it meaning and direction in line with the values and objectives of Islam.

The Institute strives to achieve its objectives by:

- holding specialized academic conferences and seminars;
- supporting and selectively publishing works of scholars and researchers in universities and academic research centers in the Muslim world and the West;
- seeking to direct graduate studies toward furthering work on issues related to Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge.

The Institute has a number of overseas offices and academic advisors for the purpose of coordinating and promoting its various activities. The Institute has also entered into joint cooperation agreements with several universities and research centers.

## ON THIS BOOK

Today's quest for Islamization is here put into historical and ideational perspective. It traces the movement to a newfound awareness among Muslims, cognizant of the immense worth and potential of their heritage, yet clamoring to emerge from their actual debilitation, whether enforced or self-inflicted. The author considers and evaluates various contemporary approaches to truth and compares them with the Islamic "mode of knowing," discovering it to be a superior and beneficent foil to the existing paradigms and epistememes of modern culture. It offers a blueprint for a new kind of scholarship, one that invokes the "vocational ideal" and has the power and the vision to absorb intelligently cultural diversity and transmute it into an overarching and transcendent, but realistic and humane, critique. The credentials of Islam to buttress and enlighten such an endeavor are presented with clarity and conviction. And while the pervasive and protean malaise of contemporary civilization is attributed to the sense of vacuity and absence of higher purpose brought about by the renunciation of God, that of the Muslim Ummah is seen to be rooted in intellectual lethargy. However, and despite the colossal challenges which face the quest for renewal and reintegration, challenges that are unflinchingly tackled and delineated in this paper, the final view is one of hope and affirmation in both human recoverability and the latent power of Islam to lead man out of the present morass.



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