

Reclaiming the Tradition: An Essay on the Condition of the Possibility of Islamic Knowledge

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The issue at hand for every Muslim who takes his/her Muslim identity seriously is to work toward the creation and maintenance of Islamic knowledge. The commitment to this agenda should not, however, be seen exclusively as an exercise in constructing yet another knowledge structure, for then it would be an empty academic exercise. The full truth and force of Islamization of knowledge is captured only in its being understood initially as a political act. Only later is it to be understood as an act that, for its completion, requires Muslims to engage in academic exercises without, however, ever losing sight of the political import of the entire undertaking.

The sense in which I am using the term "political" should not be understood in the narrow and parochial sense of belonging to a political party or an organization or even of being committed to some political ideology. I am employing the term to mean the exercise of power not for individual gains but for the betterment of the community viewed as a moral entity. Hence, the political is the realm within which moral debate takes place regarding the ends for which the community is to use power, by whom it will be exercised on behalf of the community, and how it will employ power to realize those ends. In this sense, the political becomes constitutive of the community considered as a moral entity.

This understanding of the political is consistent with the Islamic view, which does not separate the political from the moral. In fact, in Islam political activity has legitimacy and makes sense only if undertaken for a moral purpose. In the West, the moral understanding of the political was the cornerstone of Plato's and Aristotle's classical political theory, until it became marginalized as the West grew more secular and com-

mitted to free market economies. Recently, the moral notion of the political has been revived in the West by philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas and Hans-George Gadamer, who highlight the demise of the moral and the rise of the technical in debates over social issues.¹ Both Habermas and Gadamer are reacting to the increasing tendency in the West—in fact, in the world—to determine, evaluate, and judge social issues with reference to technical efficiency with little or no consideration for the moral dimensions of the issues.

In my use of “political,” however, there is yet another aspect with which the term is not commonly associated. According to Michel Foucault, the acceptance and rejection of knowledge is not dependent purely on validity claims made on behalf of that knowledge.² The standard epistemological questions (e.g., How do we know? How do we know what is true or false?) do not tell us much about how knowledge functions in society or how and why a particular knowledge formation gets accepted or rejected. The validity claims or the old epistemological concerns are only part of the story of why and how a definite knowledge structure gets accepted or rejected. In order to get the full story we also need to ask questions such as, Whose knowledge is it? and Who speaks for it and from which social location? Foucault, therefore, argues that knowledge claims should be considered not only along true/false but also along power/knowledge axes. In other words, he is arguing that knowledge and power structures are implicated in each other in the way they function in society. Knowledge claims are political claims and hence occasions for political contestation. To challenge knowledge claims is not to prove them invalid, for that would be acquiescing to the basic assumptions of that knowledge, but to put forward an alternative knowledge structure, i.e., to liberate subjugated knowledge structures. This way of looking at knowledge also assumes that to talk of knowledge in any meaningful way is to talk of it in a social context. In setting up the problem in these terms I have, I hope, given some indication of the terrain I wish to traverse in my exposition.

The subtitle of this article poses a very Kantian question. To that question I will give a very short non-Kantian answer. The condition for the possibility of Islamic knowledge is the reclamation of Islamic tradition. In other words, for Muslims to be able to generate and maintain Islamic knowledge, they have to reclaim the Islamic tradition. The rest of the article is an elaboration of this statement. Before we go any further, however, there is need to make one point clear. The sense in which the term “tradition” is being used here does not signify the handing down only of the Hadith and Sunnah as it is generally understood in Islamic literature, but suggests instead everything that comes down to us from the past. In another words, I am employing “tradition” in the broad sociological sense instead of in the more technical sense. Hence, the first order of

business is to expand on the sense in which tradition is being used in this article.

It is almost axiomatic for people to think of tradition in opposition to modernity. This way of conceptualizing tradition is the result of our uncritical acceptance of the dichotomy hoisted upon our consciousness by Western Enlightenment thinking. According to the Enlightenment philosophers, history has basically just two moments: the unenlightened past and the enlightened present. The past is unenlightened because it had not been liberated by the light of reason, and hence the thinking of the people of that period was shrouded in superstition and myth. The thinking in the enlightened present is carried out in the full glare of the light of reason, which does not allow superstition and myth to contaminate thought. Societies where thinking is stuck in the mire of superstition are those where traditional (instead of the rational) mode of thought determine thinking and hence are called traditional societies. In short, tradition is viewed as the opposite of reason because unlike reason, tradition cannot justify itself. Although the distinction between enlightened and unenlightened societies was initially understood as a purely European phenomenon, eventually it came to be viewed universally. Hence, when the Europeans cast their eyes across the globe they perceived the societies of the world as either traditional or modern; but, of course, there were no modern societies outside Europe. The world was thus divided into traditional and modern societies, with non-European societies falling neatly into the category of traditional societies.

According to this dichotomy traditional society is a society locked in the past, a moment of frozen history and hence backward, from whence it has to be brought forward to the enlightened modernity. In other words, tradition marks a primitive stage in the progressive evolution of society and modernity a more advanced phase. According to this view, therefore, both tradition and modernity are normative terms.

The fact that the non-Europeans accepted the distinction and judgment of the Europeans by which they came to be categorized as traditional is not an indication of the validity of European categories but of the power/knowledge nexus by which the European knowledge shaped even the self-understanding of non-Europeans. It is further evidence of the political dimension of knowledge which we lose sight of only at our peril.

When rebelling against Western hegemony, some non-Europeans gave tradition a positive and modernity a negative value, hence rejecting everything that smacks of modernity and embracing everything traditional. The reversal of valuation, however, is not a rejection of the dichotomous categories, but a reaffirmation of it. The distinction is accepted and left intact.

In recent years Western thinkers such as Hans-George Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre have criticized the Enlightenment mode of thought, or what is sometimes called the Enlightenment project.³ Instead of using tradition in a normative sense, the anti-Enlightenment mode of thought or discourse understands it to mean a historical continuum of past flowing into the present and present making the future possible. Furthermore, this discourse understands human beings to be bound by history. However, to say that human beings are situated in history is too abstract. A concrete interpretation of human historicity is to say that human beings are situated in tradition. According to this view, tradition is the collective historical experience that includes everything from knowledge formations to cultural products which people collectively create over time. It is all that which lends historical depth to human life. One way to understand tradition, both Gadamer and MacIntyre recommend, is to think of it as an ongoing conversation that members of a community have with all those who have preceded them. Tradition, they argue, both constitutes a community and provides continuity to it.

Individuals become part of tradition by participating in the ongoing conversation. Tradition, thus, not only constitutes community but also individuals who participate in it. In other words, the constituent elements of our identity are historical in nature and are given to us by our tradition. One learns who one is by and through participating in a tradition. Participation in tradition is, therefore, a learning experience. Hence the fundamental function of education is to initiate a person in the ongoing conversation of his/her forbears even prior to teaching useful and marketable skills with which the person is to make a living.

A living tradition is always contemporary, i.e., relevant to the demands of the day. It does not mean that each tradition has to define contemporary problems identically or that each has to provide the same answers. However, it does mean that each tradition addresses the issues that define the times and comes forth with its own unique answers.

To understand tradition as an ongoing conversation is to think of the past not as a record of events over and done with or a story which has come to an end but rather as events that address each new generation a little differently. Tradition neither grows through accretion or the sedimentation of events settling one upon the other, nor through extension like a *tasbeeh* upon whose string a bead is added. In other words, tradition is not a concatenation of disparate events strung up across time, but rather it is the temporal stretch within which events unfold, constituting each present by borrowing from the past and anticipating the future.

To participate in tradition is to participate in the historical conversation which that tradition is. To participate in any conversation one has to be initiated into it, i.e., learn what the conversation is all about. One cannot take part in a conversation one knows nothing about. Learning about the

conversation one wishes to participate in is an exercise in learning how what has preceded is related to what is presently being talked about. This exercise is hermeneutic in nature and, hence, follows the logic of the hermeneutical circle. The logic of the hermeneutical circle prescribes that understanding proceeds by making sense of the part with relation to the whole and the whole with reference to the part. The meaning of the whole is not, however, the sum of the meaning of its parts. Both the meaning of the whole and that of the parts change with each movement back and forth. In other words, the meaning of the parts and of the whole are mutually constitutive of each other. Applying this logic to history, the present can be viewed as the part and the past as the whole. An attempt, therefore, to understand the present implicates our understanding of the past, while every understanding of the past necessarily implicates our understanding of the present. And if the present is an ever renewing and changing moment, so is the past. In other words, the meaning of the past or that of the present can never be determined or fixed for all times.

The indeterminate nature of the past's meaning allows it to be understood differently by each generation and hence helps to forestall acceptance of what the past means merely on authority of some agency or person. Although each generation feels empowered to determine the meaning of its past, it does so with the language borrowed from the past. Just as language determines what we can say but not what we will say, the past shapes the historical horizon of possible meanings within which the present has the freedom to fashion its meanings, and hence the world, and work out its destiny. Thus, although the present bears a family resemblance to its past, it has its own unique character. It is the characteristic of a healthy and vibrant tradition that it manages to preserve continuity in and through change. The knowledge that each generation has the freedom to interpret the past in light of its own experience gives each new generation a stake in the past and hence in tradition.

To say then that the meaning of the past is fixed is to view tradition as an accumulation of past dead events. In other words, it is to freeze the past, to truncate the conversation which is tradition. Every time the past is frozen, however, particular interpretations of the past are granted orthodoxy and hence made to prevail over all other meanings. With the meaning of the past frozen, the present finds its own historical horizon limited.

When the meaning of the past is totally determined, the present finds it difficult to relate to its past. The past is flexible and open-ended only because and only to the extent that it allows each generation to interpret the past in a manner it can understand. When the past loses flexibility, it is unable to relate to the lived reality of the present. "Lived reality" means the generation's concrete sociohistorical context of life. The issues and problems which each generation must resolve in order to give

itself coherence and meaning are the product of its lived reality. When the past cannot relate to the lived reality of the present, the historical link between the past and the present becomes extremely tenuous. In such a situation, the present cannot draw upon the past to make sense of its present experiences. As a result, the present no longer feels securely anchored in its past. In other words, the present feels alienated from its past and hence alienated from what it truly is. When this happens people living in the present find it hard to participate in their tradition and the tradition withers. Thus with the moorings in the past weakened, the present looks for cues from elsewhere to make sense of its experiences and resolve its problems. When this happens the present becomes susceptible to meanings emanating from other more vigorous traditions.

Tradition is not a spectacle to be viewed from a distance but an ongoing historical reality which is real only to the extent that we participate in it. If we withdraw our participation from it, it loses its vigor. If human beings are historical creatures, then they are so by virtue of participating in tradition. Participation in tradition makes possible the temporal stretch which extends us beyond our physical location and individual memories enabling us to draw upon the accumulated wisdom of our past.

If Islamization of knowledge has to have any substance and validity it has to be in the context of the Islamic tradition. Knowledge can neither be created nor sustained in a social vacuum. On the one hand, it is grounded in social practices which give it sustenance by providing it with objects of knowledge, goals, and objectives for which knowledge is to be acquired and, on the other, supplying it with norms which are to guide it toward its goals. In fact, production of knowledge is itself a social practice which presupposes other supporting social practices without whose support it would not survive.

To put it a little differently, every act aimed at acquiring knowledge expressed in the statement, "I want to know that," presupposes answers to questions such as "Why do I want to know that?" and "How did that object become the object of my knowledge?" Yet these questions are neither explicitly formulated nor answered. They are part of the taken-for-granted assumptions which together constitute the foundations of tradition. They are the background assumptions which make the explicit questions possible. It is by virtue of sharing the background assumptions with others that we get located in the same tradition as them. To put it a little differently, it is because we share the assumptions and social practices that we can understand and participate in the ongoing conversation which tradition is.

These assumptions can be viewed as social tools and hence, have the potential of both enabling and disabling us historically. A social tool, like a mechanical one can become obsolete and outgrow its usefulness. To continue to use tools that no longer serve our needs and goals is to revert

back to previous needs and goals. In other words, to go back in history or to stay locked in one moment of it. Hence, it is these taken-for-granted assumptions and shared social practices which are brought to light and analyzed each time we critically look at our past. The point is not that all assumptions and shared social practices are to be discarded, which cannot be because all knowledge formations are built on shared common assumptions and practices, but that they need to be examined critically and those found no longer workable, rejected.

Perhaps the earlier statement that the condition for the possibility of Islamic knowledge is Islamic tradition makes more sense in the light of the above discussion. Now it should be clear that in claiming tradition as the necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge, I was pointing to the embeddedness and the situatedness of knowledge in social practices. Hence, the need for Islamic knowledge and the rejection of Western secular knowledge. However, this is not because Western knowledge is invalid; rather, we know it to be valid but only within the limits of its claims—in fact, we have been using that knowledge for centuries ourselves and continue to use it today. The truth is that we realize that the goals, objectives, and the norms on which secular knowledge is founded are incompatible with ours. In other words, we reject the tradition of which this knowledge is a product. At this point it should be clear why I call for the tradition to be reclaimed. I believe that for the last several centuries Muslims have, by and large, if not completely stopped participating in their tradition, then they have participated only partially. A tradition—just like a conversation—dies if people do not participate in it. Had the Islamic tradition been active and strong there would be no need to make a conscious effort to rebuild Islamic knowledge; had the tradition been fully functional the edifice of Islamic knowledge would be in place and we would be contributing to it as a matter of routine. The deeply felt need for Islamic knowledge signals the poor state of health in which we find our tradition today. Hence, the commitment to Islamization of knowledge has to be understood as a commitment to reviving our ailing tradition.

In order to revive the tradition and work toward the Islamization of knowledge, we have to confront and contest the knowledge that pervades the world today. No doubt, this knowledge has made the world smaller but not through understanding and mutual cooperation but by making everyone dependent on it. We have to realize that subjugation through knowledge is insidious because the agent of subjugation remains invisible to the one subjugated. Therefore, as long as secular knowledge is not successfully challenged we remain at the mercy of those who define, through the force of their knowledge, the truth to which we have to conform. As long as that knowledge is in place and has power over our lives, all our attempts to live in conformity with our truth will be judged as

abnormal and deviant and, as a consequence, we will be subjected to strategies and mechanisms to bring our behavior in line with their notion of truth. It is not only in reaction to Western hegemony that Islamization of knowledge acquires its political nature. By its very nature it is political.

From the Islamic point of view, the purpose of knowledge is neither the contemplation of the world nor seeking accommodation with it. The purpose of knowledge in Islam is to make the Truth concrete. All other purposes are subservient to it. Truth is not, as it was for Hegel and Marx, the result of the dialectical unfolding of history; rather, it is the result of the direct revelation from God to human beings through His messenger.

The concretization of truth requires direct intervention in the world. Hence, Islam interjects itself into the world and disrupts the normal course of events. It destroys old distinctions and differences and creates new ones in their places. In this way it is inherently political. And to realize its political agenda, to thrust itself onto the world stage and affect the course of events, Islam needs power. As a world force Islam implies Islamic knowledge, which in itself is neither powerful nor powerless. If, however, knowledge is to function in society so that its truths are acknowledged, it needs power. Here Foucault's insight regarding the knowledge/power nexus is germane.

As stated earlier, Foucault is interested not only in the truth claims of knowledge but more importantly in how knowledge functions in society. Foucault has shown in his several books how power enables knowledge to establish its regime of truth. It enables knowledge to produce effects, to cause things to happen. Truth or validity of an utterance, in other words, is largely a function of who utters it and from where. But even more profoundly, however, power is needed to clear up the social space by dismantling earlier distinctions and erecting new ones in their place, i.e., to establish new objects of knowledge and set up truths by which statements regarding those objects are determined true or false and accorded rightness and wrongness or normality or abnormality. For Foucault, power is articulated through knowledge just as much as knowledge functions through power. To render a system of knowledge socially ineffective, therefore, it is not enough to show it to be wrong, it has literally to be ousted from power. In order to overthrow the dominant knowledge and hence its regime of truth, the hitherto repressed and suppressed knowledge has to assert itself as an alternative to the structure in power. But the alternative structure does not gain dominance by sheer force of veracity, rather by virtue of its ability to remove the system in place. And with the alternative knowledge structure in power there will be a different set of objects of knowledge to know and different truths to assert.

For centuries we have listened very carefully to every word uttered in the West and have been convinced that their truth seemed more valid than ours, even though in our hearts we may have felt otherwise, because of the power behind their knowledge. And even today, on the eve of our emancipation we still believe that there is no alternative to Western science. The object of the Islamization of knowledge is to replace objects of Western secular knowledge with Islamic ones, and to deconstruct the distinctions and differentiations through and by which those objects of knowledge are determined and replace them with ones which find resonance in the Holy Qur'an, and to substitute their criteria of truth with the Islamic ones—in short, to empower knowledge grounded in the holy Qur'an. But empowering knowledge can have meaning only if the tradition in which that knowledge is grounded is empowered first. It is tradition that underwrites the truth that the knowledge proclaims as truth worth accepting.

The process of reclaiming the tradition cannot be undertaken without some guidelines. With that in mind, some tentative pointers are being suggested here that might help to chart the course through the difficult terrain ahead. For this purpose I have taken Malek Bennabi's notion of the Qur'anic phenomenon and developed it to serve as a guide in both understanding and making history.⁴

A distinction should be made between the Qur'an as an event and the Qur'an as a phenomenon. The Qur'an as an event is a historical episode, situated in time, while as a phenomenon it is transcendental. However, at the time when the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad it was both the phenomenon and the event simultaneously. The occasion of its revelation could be understood as the transcendental truth being made concrete. This event is marked by a break, a tear in the fabric of history. It was an apocalyptic event that sent seismic waves pulsating through time, energizing the events in history. Nevertheless, the energy of that event was to dissipate itself as it traveled further away from its epicenter and ultimately come to a halt, stopped by the sheer inertia of history. Today, we are standing at the historical fringes of that cosmic event and hence feel only a gentle, almost imperceptible, historical swell under our feet. The force of the Qur'an as an event could shape history only for so long before it was overwhelmed by the inertia of historical negation.

As a historical event, therefore, the Qur'an will always be located in the past of the generations that come after the event. The only means available to encounter the event to those coming after it is through history. However, history books cannot capture the fullness of the event in its pristine glow. History, as a study of the past, is by definition selective; it is always studied from a perspective. Thus, no matter how rich the historical understanding is, it can never exhaust the richness and the fullness

of a given event. Thus, if history is the only means by which we encounter the primordial happening of the Qur'an, then our experience will not have the immediacy which it had for those who were present at the event. Compared to the original encounter, historical experience is always impoverished. But if the Qur'an is true for all times and ages, then there has to be something more to the Qur'an than what is available only through history. The time situatedness of the Qur'an as an event and, hence, its availability only through history points necessarily to the Qur'an as the phenomenon.

The time situatedness of the Qur'an should not be understood as putting into question its divine nature; rather, it should be viewed as highlighting what is divine in it. What is truly divine in the Qur'an is the meaning of the text, which is to be distinguished from the event, for although the event can be folded up in history the phenomenon cannot because it transcends history. The meaning of the text constitutes the core of the Qur'anic phenomenon. Although its meaning is situated outside history, it has to be understood in history. But history does not act as a barrier to the original meaning because unlike the event it is always in our time frame. In fact, the changed historical situation becomes the condition for the Qur'anic phenomenon to unfold in history and renew itself by becoming relevant to the situation. We do not hear the voice of the Qur'an coming to us from way back in time but rather as if addressed to us in our situatedness here and now. In other words, the phenomenon of the Qur'an opens every moment of history to the primordial experience. If we fail to make the distinction between the phenomenon and the event, we restrict the meaning of the Qur'an to the way it was understood once, and hence prevent those not present at the event from experiencing the immediacy of its meaning. In short, we cause the divinity to suffer historical negation.

On the other hand, we cannot neglect the event either, for that is both the historical axis and the point of origin of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the past provides hints to the circle of understanding. As was discussed above, the understanding of one moment of the hermeneutic circle changes the understanding of the other. Hence, we cannot have one without the other. The tension between the two is important and necessary and thus the significance of establishing the distinction between the event and the phenomenon.

The Qur'an as an event is the guide to the Qur'an as the object of Islamic knowledge. To understand the Qur'an as the object of knowledge, however, we have to first make clear the distinction between knowledge and epistemology. The Islamic view of knowledge (*'ilm*) should not be confused with epistemology. Epistemology attempts to answer questions such as, How do I come to know? and How do I know what I know is true or false? Epistemology, in other words, is neither

concerned with the object of knowledge nor with the knower (the Cartesian *cogito*) but rather with finding the proper method of coming to know whatever there is to know. Ever since Descartes, the nature of the right method has been defined quite independently of both the knower (*cogito*) and the object of knowledge in yielding objective and universal truths. Islamic knowledge (*'ilm*), on the other hand, is concerned both with the knower and the object of knowledge. Coming to know in Islam is not an issue of having the right method but rather an issue of the knower possessing the correct virtues and the frame of mind adequate to the object of knowledge. The object of knowledge is not accessible to just anybody but only to one who exhibits such virtues and moral qualities as are considered necessary to proceed successfully on the road to knowledge. The very first lines that were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad asked him not just to read or to read only the name of God but to read in the name of God. To read in the name of God is not an epistemological directive about method but a moral injunction regarding human beings' relationship to God, which is to be founded on the belief that God alone is the source of knowledge and truth. Hence, faith is the cornerstone of knowledge. And as a guide to knowledge, the Qur'anic event delineates the path for a knower to follow in order to develop the moral rectitude required to understand the Qur'anic phenomenon. In Islam, knowledge and morality are not two unrelated realms as they are, for example, for Kant.

When knowledge is a thriving project, the tension between the event and the phenomenon is palpable and internal to the intellectual and spiritual experience of Islam. It is the tension which has animated the thought of all the great minds of the Islamic tradition. It is the same tension that propels and guides the Islamic tradition on as well. If, for whatever reason, the tension is lost, both knowledge and tradition become moribund. In the absence of the tension what we have is only the event which draws us back in time and nothing to guide us on in time.

The enterprise to reclaim the tradition should therefore attempt to recreate the tension between the Qur'an as an event and the Qur'an as a phenomenon. One reason why the Islamic tradition is in a state of disarray today is because we have become captives of the event and no longer possess the awareness of the phenomenon. Our sensibilities have been formed, unlike those of the great minds of the past, only by the remembrance of the event. In other words, we have our eyes glued to the past and hence are neither present nor future oriented. While the phenomenon has the openness to the future, the event is enclosed by history. With the event as the guide, we cannot escape history. It was the Qur'anic phenomenon which caused the seismic event that disrupted the established meanings and tore the fabric of history, to create a window of opportu-

nity for human beings to step out of already exhausted reality and set in motion a new historical reality.

The Qur'anic phenomenon also serves as the point of reference for the Islamic tradition. It helps us to review both our past and our present and look for departures and deviations in the traditions from the path defined by the Qur'anic phenomenon. In other words, the Qur'anic phenomenon should serve as the basis for critique of our past deeds and our present commitments and also our future plans. We should not accept the Western or some other tradition as the point of reference or as the basis of critique of our tradition, nor would it serve us to look to our past as the basis of critique of the present. The Qur'anic phenomenon alone serves as the basis for criticism of the past, present, and future.

As both our knowledge and tradition languish we should cultivate the habits by which the Qur'anic phenomenon was once accessible to us.

Notes

1. Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1971). Hans-George Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

2. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, trans. and edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

3. Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and edited by Garret Barden and John Cummings (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

4. Malek Bennabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, trans. by Abu Bilal Kirkari (Malaysia: Polygraphic Press, 1983).