Research Notes

The Intellectual Role of
Islamizing Librarianship

Rashid Siddiqui

Mawlana Mawdudi (may Allah be pleased with him) has made a very thought-provoking remark in his introduction to "Al Jihad fil Islam". He writes: "It is a natural weakness of human beings. If one is defeated in a battlefield he is also overwhelmed in the field of knowledge. He cannot contest in penmanship *with one* by whose sword he has been defeated."[1]

The inferiority of Muslims in the intellectual domain is well documented and does not need any elaboration. Now it is the task of Muslim scholars to take up the challenge of redressing the imbalance. One area of scholarship often neglected by scholars is library science.

The task required to Islamize science calls for immense intellectual capacity. One should be expert not only in the field of library science but should also possess deep insight into the faith of Islam, its culture, and civilization. It is only through the combination of these qualities that a new creative discipline can be produced.

Library science, as developed in the West, is bound to reflect the image of Western civilization. Subject classification, the rules for cataloguing, lists of subject headings and other techniques employed to exploit literature all portray the Western way of life.

Islam has its own world view of human affairs and Islamic literature naturally will reflect this world view. To restrict Islam under the heading "religion" following the Western conceptualization violates the very basic concepts of Islamic principles. The response of librarians when faced with this challenge is to adapt the existing classification. Though such adaptations may be useful they not only hopelessly fail to tackle the real problem, but distort and disfigure the serene harmony of Islamic values. What is needed is totally new and radical approach by Muslim librarians to work out a new

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[1]Mawdudi, Abul Ala', Al-Jihad fil Islam. (Lahore: Idara Tarjumanul Qur'ān, 1930,) repr. 1974, pp. 15-16.

system compatible with the dynamic Islamic world view thus doing full justice to Islamic literature. However, this is the task and challenge which still remains unfulfilled. Librarians are still trying to pragmatically adapt and modify information to fit into the Western system. Let me start with presenting the problems:

Cataloguing: Librarians specialized in cataloguing who follow the Anglo-American cataloguing rules find it difficult to catalog books by Muslim authors. Ashour states the problem as follows:

> "At present, cataloguers have to check all the authority lists and references of Arabic-Muslim names such as Carl Brockelmann's Deschichte der Arabischen Literature, Ibn al-Nadim's Fihrist, Ibn Khalikan's Biographical Dictionary, Sarkis' Mu'jam al-Matbu'āt al-'Arabīyyah wa al-Marraba and others, in order to verify the proper form of entry of a Muslim author. This operation requires a great deal of time and effort on the part of the cataloguer.
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> As a solution to this problem, an attempt should be made to establish a Standard Authority List, International Union Catalogue or Cataloguing in Publications for Muslim Authors. Any of these three will help the cataloguer a great deal in establishing the proper form of entry of Muslim names and save him a lot of time and energy".[2]

Classification: Most libraries use Dewey Decimal Classification for arranging material in their libraries. Its American and Christian bias is undisputable. Several adaptations are made by various libraries to suit Islamic material. None of these are really suitable. Ziauddin Sardar has attempted to produce a classification scheme on Islam based on a general idea from Ranganathan's Colon Classification, but this is still untried. Despite all the inadequacy of classification schemes none of the Muslim countries have done anything on a national level. Adil Usmani has urged the formation of an International Islamic Committee to review various schemes and produce one scheme which is practicable.[3]

Islamic Subject Headings: I have already mentioned the difficulties which are faced in choosing subject headings as these reflect Western concepts. Some libraries have started translating Sears or Library of Congress subject heading lists. As everyone will realize it is often difficult or impossible to find equivalent terms. Others have tried to translate Islamic terms into English. Thus Shari'ah is often translated as "law" which is seriously inadequate and

[2]Ashour, M.S., International Library Review, 9 (4), 1977, pp. 498-500.
[3]Usmani, A., Pakistan Library Review 1982.

even misleading. To shelve books on Shari'ah as if they dealt with law is to contribute to and to confirm the misconception that arises from equating the two terms.

Conferences of Muslim Librarians and Information Scientists held in 1982 and 1986 highlighted some of the factors causing the lack of bibliographical control of Islamic material by Muslim countries and recommended setting up of a World Islamic Bibliographic Centre. So far no progress seems to have been made in this project.
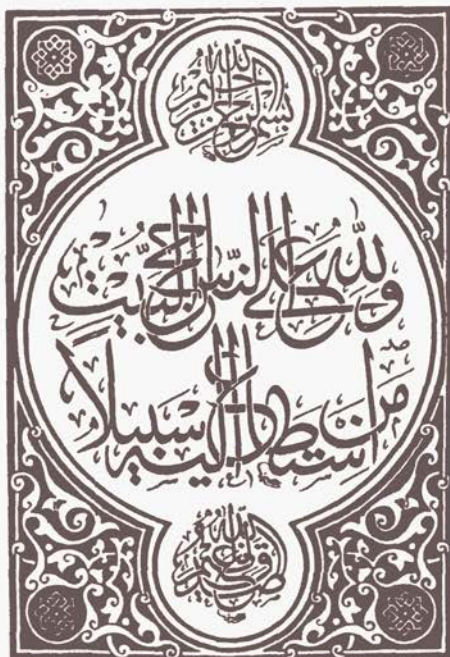
Information Services: Libraries are not just brick walls containing books and other material. The most vital part of the library is its staff who have to interpret the collection and make it available to its readers. With the introduction of computerized databases, the retrieval of information has become more thorough and quick. But, here again, computer output will be what has been put in it. Lack of bibliographical indexes and bias inherent in Western bibliographic data continues to produce biased and slanted list of references. This is well illustrated by Sardar in his review article: "Muslim scholars and journalists who use reference tools like the Mideast File and the Middle East suffer from two intrinsic diseases: because they do not see their works indexed and abstracted in these journals they are led to believe that the quality of their scholarship is somewhat inferior and journals in which they publish are not very important. And, they lack a real feeling for and appreciation of the intellectual activity now thriving in the Middle East. A whole array of disciplines that are about to emerge or have emerged in the area cannot be found in the pages of these journals. Disciplines like Islamic economics, Islamic anthropology, Islamic science and Islamic features will not be looked at with favor by Western academics and by the editors of Western journals. There is no place for "Islamic" alternatives in the dominant culture, and the system will allow access and entry only on its own terms."[4] Thus if Islamic scholarship and learning has to progress and make advancement it has to produce its own bibliographic tools as well. Unless we boldly carve out our own niche and proclaim the creativity of the Islamic bibliographic tradition, which started as far back as 4 AH (i.e. 1000 C.F.) by Ibn Nadim, we cannot hope to achieve recognition of Islamic learning and scholarship in the world at large.

Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, speaking to a gathering of Near East librarians, depicted Muslims as follows: "We are dealing here with the fragile delicacies of a people who are no longer articulate; who, frightened and bewildered, withdraw behind a protective defense that they do not themselves understand, or into a silence that is neither serene nor eloquent, or else fight back with a strident, overstatement by which not only we, but they themselves

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[4]Sardar, Z., Muslim World Book Review 4 (2), 1984, p. 7.

are not convinced. The Islamic world today is in profound movement; let there be no mistake about that—but let no one imagine that it is easy to discern."[5]

I have presented the intellectual challenges provided by the Islamization of librarianship. The question is, are we ready to pick up this challenge and reshape and Islamize the vital key which opens the avenues of all knowledge.

Pilgrimage is a duty people owe to Allah — those who cam afford the journey.

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[5]Smith, W.C., Library Quarterly 35, 1965, p. 286.