

# Islamization as a Force of Global Cultural Renewal or: The Relevance of the Tawhīdī Episteme to Modernity

*Mona Abul-Fadl*

Islamization 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 worldwide, an awareness which was projected in the space of activities and events which marked the fourteenth centennial of the Islamic *Hijrī* 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 quests for institutionalization. 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 level of scholarship.

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 Islamizing response is inherent in the message of Islam itself. The relevance, however, 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>1</sup> 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 escapes the afflictions of a pervasive state of cultural disarray. The specific sources of this malaise may differ from one case to another and diagnostics

---

<sup>1</sup>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 varies, but its temper and its basic message is the common denominator. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, (1926) is probably the forerunner to this genre. But so is the little known works of authentic critics like the French philosopher and mystic writer of the 30's, Rene Guenon, whose incisive insights reflected in his *Crisis of Modernity and The Reign of Quantity* which anticipated the ideas of his compatriot and spiritual fellow-traveller four decades later in his manifesto for the Presidential campaign. See Roger Garaudy, *Appel aux Vivants* (Paris 1976). Better known perhaps are the documented reports by teams of experts like the Club of Rome.

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 hangover of civilizational atheism and secularism" are finally taking their toll of the Western psyche and everywhere the symptoms of an acute identity crisis prevail. 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 benchmarks of "modernity" and come to set the standards for the scramble among the subordinate cultures whose members now brace 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 gloom and doom.

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 and for the sanctification of the basis of our global civilization.<sup>2</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" refers to the *tawhīdī* paradigm of knowledge and action embedded in the Qur'ānic Weltanschauung; 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.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Life Chances, Approaches to Social and Political Theory*, (Chicago, 1979) a collection of essays by Ralph Dahrendorf, former E.E.C. 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.

The commonality of the plight of modern man<sup>3</sup> both in the East and the West, in the "hegemonic" and the subordinate, the "peripheral" and mainstream cultures, should not obscure the differences, for the origins and the causes of this affliction are not identical. While the elements of human folly abound on all sides, yet, it is fair to maintain that in the one case the onus lies more on a situational contingency, which includes the conventional cultural reserves available to the community as a whole, while in the other it lies more with the element of human endeavor and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> This has its implications for our argument insofar as it is necessary to distinguish between Muslims as the moral agents and repositories of a culture, and Islam as the source of that culture. To deplore the state of the Muslim Ummah is at the same time to call attention to a fundamental incongruity as to how Muslims relate to their heritage. Effectively, Muslims have come to relate more to the civilization of modernity, even if they do so only in a marginal capacity. For they remain by and large, "consumers of civilization," in the sense used by Malek Bennabi, or, to invoke a suggestive metaphor, they constitute another layer and encrustation in the swelling ranks of a cultural proletariat.<sup>5</sup> As such they have come to partake of "a civilization of countless means that knows naught of any single cause."<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the search continues for those in the vanguard who refuse to stand idly by and bide their ebbing fortunes. In the process it generates a frantic cult of method-consciousness, a "methodomania," characterized by an abundance of refutations and counterrefutations in the hope that somehow in the progression of cumulations

---

<sup>3</sup>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 of the dilemma of the modern day 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 on the same theme.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. "All civilizations have decayed; only they have decayed in different ways; the decay of the East is passive and that of the West is active. . . . The fault of the East in decay is that it no longer thinks; the West in decay thinks too much and it thinks wrongly . . . The East is sleeping over truths; the West lives in errors." F.Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 22, quoted in *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup>See *La Vocation de L'Islam* (originally published in 1950) for one of the earliest systematic analyses from an Islamic perspective of the plight of the Ummah. In view of the originality of his ideas, Malik Bennabi, (1905-1973; Constantine, Algeria) deserves to be identified as a key figure in the Islamic intellectual revival.

<sup>6</sup>S. Parvez Manzoor, "An Epistemology of Questions," *ibid.*

the Cause will crystallize and produce, for some a truth, for others, *the Truth*.<sup>7</sup> While the profusion of energies so dispensed creates the illusion of productivity, dynamism, and creativity, a cyclical regression is in fact entrenched. Truth remains as evasive as ever, not on account of its absence, but because it lies outside and beyond the purview of the closed circuit in which the quest proceeds. The growing cynicism does not give the pervasive cultural disarray any more coherence and the loss of meaning and direction persists.

In consequence, method apart from truth becomes "Method against Truth."<sup>8</sup> The only way to reconcile method to truth is to break out of the closed circuit and, in the discourse of a contemporary and unconventional political philosopher, to opt for an "Openness to the Transcendental."<sup>9</sup> To become at all meaningful culturally, however, this openness to the transcendental must have some aspect of the temporally "concrete;" it needs to be rendered accessible and intelligible beyond the purely subjective plane and, in the more familiar sociological jargon, it needs to be "objectified." It is in this context that the relevance and the salience, the opportuneness and the uniqueness of the Islamic Tradition come into evidence. "Tradition" in the sense of "that which binds to the Origin through a message, revelation, or manifestation which comes from the Ultimate Reality"<sup>10</sup> provides a structured medium to the Transcendental. This function is assumed by the channels of transmission which keep the Tradition alive. To the extent that the former remain intact

---

<sup>7</sup>It is significant that linguistically the term "Truth" does not lend itself easily to the plural form, unlike "facts" and even "realities" which have for the past century conditioned the mind-set of modernity and its brand of scholarship so much so that we have become attuned to speaking in terms of the many "truths." The importance of a work like Gadamer's *Truth and Method* lies as much in its terminology as in its thesis, for having opened up another vista of inquiry in the "social sciences" today.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the title given to another excellent bibliographic review article on "Orientalism and Qur'anic Studies" speaks of the astuteness of its author. See MWBR, 7, no. 4, 1987, pp. 33-49.

<sup>9</sup>Eric Voegelin's political theory is currently witnessing a revival as his works are being reprinted, and more of the German originals are being translated into English and explored thanks to his students. His magnum opus, *Order in History* (4 volumes) is of doubtless originality and merit and his ideas, though difficult to communicate, are relevant to any innovative scholarship which is critical of mainstream currents. For a recent general overview see Barry Cooper, *The Political Theory of Eric Voegelin*, Toronto Studies in Theology v. 27 (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986). Also see an earlier avant-garde study by Dante Germino, *Beyond Ideology, The Revival of Political Theory* (New York, Harper and Row, 1967). Currently, an assessment of contemporary trends in Western Political Theory from an Islamic perspective, is among the works in progress at I.I.I.T.

<sup>10</sup>S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Crossroad, New York, 1981) p. 73 — Cf. Schuon's relating of these concepts for our context: ". . . the importance of . . . tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realizing the Absolute must come "objectively" from the Absolute; knowledge cannot spring up "subjectively" except within the framework of an "objective" divine formulation of knowledge," *Understanding Islam* (George Allen and Unwin, 1963) p. 130.

and accessible the Tradition remains a living one and retains its potential for rejuvenating the culture and civilization to which it gives rise.

Historically, of all the Traditions rooted in a Divine Message, Islam constitutes the only such Tradition where the channels of transmission have retained their integrity and where the sources remain accessible to an informed human endeavor and a reformed understanding. It is this accessibility which enables us to speak of a fund of "structured resources" that is available for cultural renewal. Moreover, granted that it is ostensibly in the nature of all living Traditions to provide the wellsprings of cultural renewal as the advocates of the traditionalist perspective seem to suggest, then the particular potential for rejuvenation and renewal which inheres in the Islamic Tradition on the one hand, and its specifically all-embracing nature on the other, lend significant credibility to Islamization as a force of global cultural renewal. Islam, the carrier of the Primordial Tradition, the *Dīn al-Fiṭrah*, is also historically the harbinger of a universal tradition that is equally distinct and unique. Expansive, as it expands, it accommodates the differences as it embraces the diversity, and it protects the other traditions while it prevails over them. As such, Islamization, which seeks to derive and develop its critical cognitive apparatus from the sources of this Tradition, constitutes a challenge to Muslims as much as to others concerned with the prospects of contemporary civilization. Its poignancy lies in the relevance of its message of rehabilitation and renovation. It is destined, if it succeeds, to play a major role in giving meaning and direction and, accordingly, in reorienting and renewing our global civilization. Projecting the role and mission of Islamization in these terms is perfectly justifiable.

## The Verdict of History

Historically, Islam has served as a catalyst for renewing culture and civilization. Indeed, where the foundations for such renewal were weak or eroded, Islam has provided the ligaments and consolidated the grounds for the requisite human and social development. The records are replete with accounts of peoples who, upon their accession to Islam, virtually came to make it into history.<sup>11</sup> The legendary breakthrough of the Arabs will perhaps

---

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Arnold's classic *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore, 1961—originally published in 1896) was precisely given to an investigation into the history of "the birth of this missionary zeal, its inspiring forces and the modes of its activity" as Islam spread into different parts of the world; it remains in its endeavor as an objective presentation exemplary of the more benign strand of Orientalist scholarship. In his *Aspect of Islamic Civilization* the late Professor Arberry spoke of the phenomenal spread of Islam in terms of "one of the greatest cataclysms

continue to provide the most illustrious example of such a people who, out of a chronic state of anonymity and marginality, rose to the pinnacle of glory and achievement. Within the space of decades, the Arabs had outgrown the phase of tribal parochialism to become the uncontested masters of an empire and the heralds of an open and expanding world community. This example was not confined only to the history of the Arabs, for it was repeated in the case of Berbers, Turks, and Mongols, Persians, Indians, Malays and the kingdoms in West and East Africa. The cultural florescence of the Iberian and Mediterranean cities which came into contact with Islam is another case in point. Despite the dense cultural barrier provided by the virulent anti-Islam crusading spirit in the medieval West,<sup>12</sup> it was the contact with "Islamdom" that, ironically enough, contributed to the rebirth of "Christendom" as a self-conscious culturally unified entity, a counterculture, in search of its political expression.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, it was the commercial, cultural and intellectual currents which followed in the train of the Crusades, that steadily came to disperse the shrouds of the European "Dark Ages" and to usher in the Renaissance. In each and every case, once the biases are discarded and the records are set straight, Islam may be confirmed, in retrospect, as a vital civilizing agent and a force of renewal and regeneration.

Here and there Islam acted as a agent of regeneration and renewal because in every case it acted upon the moral and the spiritual foundations of society.<sup>14</sup> It did so by channeling and orientating its latent energies into positive outlets and constructive avenues. In the case of those who accepted Islam as a religion and a way of life, the change was intrinsic as it grew out of a remolded psyche, personality, affinity, identity and aspirations. The channeling and reorientation here may be seen to have essentially sprung out of the human element to

---

in the history of religion" and attributed it to the "religious impulse" which he qualified as "still the most vital and enduring"; quoted in Abul-Fazl Ezzati, *An Introduction to the History of the Spread of Islam* (London, 1978) which itself constitutes a commendable work in an emerging corpus of Muslim scholarship in a field where much remains to be done.

<sup>12</sup>See R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962) and Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1966) An interesting and well-documented analysis of the process of cultural exchange and the workings of a "cultural filter" is found in Daniel's later work, *The Cultural Barrier* (1975) Ch. 9

<sup>13</sup>Marshall G. S. Hodgson's work *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vol. (Chicago 1974) constitutes one of the more challenging attempts to develop a conceptual framework to comprehend Muslim history within the civilizational perspective. The concepts, though not the analysis in point, belongs here. See Introduction and Book One in "The Classical Age of Islam" (Vol. 1).

<sup>14</sup>More work needs to be done along the lines of Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi's *Religion and Civilization* (3rd ed., English, 1979) (1943)

condition and encompass the social environment.<sup>15</sup> In the case of those who came to live and to develop within the Islamic Ecumene<sup>16</sup>—the *Dār al Islām*—as individuals and communities, Islam provided the setting and the congenial framework for achievement and self-development. In other cases, the Islamic agency influenced by way of the model or the example it provided and by the stimulus it gave to activating the impulses to self-betterment and excellence in the other.

In the context of our immediate concern with Islamization, it is important to recall that Islam acted on the level of the perceptions of the community. It served as a rationalizing influence upon the epistemological matrix within which the so-called “structure of scientific revolutions” evolves.<sup>17</sup> It is against this matrix that the social organization and the political institutions in a society also take shape.

## On the Epistemic Matrix of Civilizations

Historically, every civilization has its basic foundations and the characteristic parameters within which it grows. Yet, the quality of a civilization, its caliber, will invariably vary in both relative and absolute terms. Relatively, Islamic Civilization may fluctuate, experiencing its ebbs and flows, and other rival configurations may be at conspicuous advantage over time. In absolute terms however, there may be deemed to be a measure of intrinsic superiority in a civilization which is evolved within their parameters. By ascertaining the characteristic epistemic matrix generated by the *tawhīdī* paradigm of knowledge it becomes evident why this is so.

---

<sup>15</sup>Far from a deterministic view of history, Islam emphasizes human agency. (Cf. Qur’ān 8:53; 13:11) A theory of social change taking its cue from a Qur’ānic conception would challenge much of the established canon on revolutionary doctrine. For an overview, see Mazheruddin Siddiqi, *The Qur’ānic Concept of History* (Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan, 1975) Ch. 1; a significant attempt at conceptualization may be found in the work of Mosuli scholar Imad al-Din Khalil. See translated excerpts of “The Qur’ānic Interpretation of History” in Yvonne Y. Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History* (SUNY, New York, 1982) Appendix G.

<sup>16</sup>The term is used here in its original etymological sense which corresponds to the Arabic *al ma’murah*, literally, the inhabited part of the globe. Cf. derivatives in *imārah*, and *umrān* as in Ibn Khaldun’s innovative usage of *‘Ilm al ‘Umrān al-Basharī* for what in effect is the Sociology of Human Culture and Civilization. An Islamic influence is clearly discernible in Hodgson’s revival of the Greek root *Oikoumene* as he relates culture-patterns to geography, though nowhere does he confess to such an influence.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Kuhn speaks of a scientific revolution in terms of “a displacement of the conceptual network through which scientists view the world” (p. 102) and invokes a changing visual Gestalt in the shift of paradigms (p. 85 ff). Although the focus in this pathbreaking essay is the growth of scientific knowledge, yet the language of discourse, its referents and categories easily lend themselves to the point we are making here. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, Enlarged (The University of Chicago Press, 1970)



In contrast to the secular paradigm of knowledge, with its multiple spin-offs contending against its ever shifting sands, the matrix in the *tawhīdī* paradigm is a fundamentally stable one and integrally coherent. It is a matrix that is originated in and sustained by the pivotal and equilibrating role of a historically and generically incorruptible source. While accessible to the human cognitive circuit this source originates beyond that circuit and, at the same time that it indubitably relates to it, indeed penetrates it, it retains its genuine integrity and particular self-sufficiency. It is the only case where the idea of maintaining the wells of truth “untainted beyond the city walls” is promoted from a hypothetical construct to historical plausibility.<sup>18</sup> In this source, the medium of transmission and the message-content, the act and the deed converge to crystallize in the cosmic event of the *wahy*, or the *tanzīl*—terms designated in common English parlance as “Revelation.”<sup>19</sup>

In this context it should be briefly pointed out that those terms defining the extra-human, transcendental dimension of communicating knowledge are strictly Qur’ānic terms which have retained their specificity as such and which have, consequently, been spared the contaminations of the vernacular. In the same way as the term “Qur’ān” has been exclusively preserved to denote that specific Reading which was brought down to the Prophet (SAAS) by the medium of the archangel Jibrīl (Gabriel), so it is with the terms “*wahy*” and “*tanzīl*” which have similarly retained their exclusive connotation to indicate that which has been historically revealed to the Prophet, upon whom be peace, and that which has been recorded and preserved in the Qur’ān. In this way, there is no equivalent to this terminology in a vernacular which is an essentially “humanized” and “socialized” construct subject to all the constraints of relativism. In the Traditionalist perspective, all language contains something of a divine essence and the need is to restore that metaphysical dimension which has been eroded in the process of “secularization” and “desacralization.” Advocating Qur’ānic terminology here is more for the sake of consistency, to avoid ambiguity and to promote an understanding across cultures; for it does not need to be “Resuscitated” in this latter sense. The question is whether to use these vital concepts in their original when discourse is the expansion

<sup>18</sup>See editorial preface to Ernest Gellner’s *Relativism and the Social Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>19</sup>In the experience of this writer, usage of the conventional equivalent “Revelation” in public discourse among non-Muslims only adds confusion to ambivalence. It is best to define one’s concepts and apply them, rather than drop them out of deference to the norms of the dominant culture especially when such concepts are highly impregnated culturally and when the purpose is to pave the way for a cognitive breakthrough.

and transfiguration of the cognitive horizons.<sup>20</sup> The issue, however, is one that goes beyond semantics to substance.

In the Islamic paradigm of knowledge, the human intellect interacts within a cognitive setting which takes this integral Transcendental Source for its starting point and pivotal center. The circle of consciousness thus comes to operate within a setting where the subjective is bounded and embraced by an unbounded and infinite sense of the objective. Whatever forms and directions such a consciousness may then take, it retains a qualitative distinctiveness which sets it apart from the consciousness circuit operating with a similar referent. The latter will wallow in utter "subjectivity" which is only compounded by the efforts to disclaim it in the name of various scientific rejoinders of "objectivity." With no conceivable means of relating to an Absolute, the human mind will inevitably indulge in its own self-created measure of "absolutes," which, to resolve a contradiction in terms, can only disintegrate into the fragmented and fractured prism of infinite and infinitesimal relativities. It is this misconceived self-sufficiency on the part of the modern mindset<sup>21</sup> that has cut it off from an elemental source of human knowledge and rendered skepticism the dominant streak in our contemporary epistemic heritage.

## The Median Culture

The only paradigm of "knowing" compatible with the requisites of all "being" would appear to be one that could accommodate the elements of the intellects with those of the rational and the empirical modes of knowing.<sup>22</sup> Historically, the Islamic paradigm of knowledge has proven congenial to the different modes of knowing. The legacy of the Birunis, Ibn al Haythams, al Ghazzalis, Ibn Rushds, Rhāzis and Suhrawardīs is a monument to this capacity to integrate and accommodate the diverse modes or traditions within

---

<sup>20</sup>In this context the question goes well beyond a matter of distortion through transliteration to that of distorting concepts through their translation and the late Professor Ismāil al Fārūqī was perfectly justified in emphasizing the need of importing Qur'ānic terminology into English. See, *Toward Islamic English*, a IIIT Publication, 1988, Introduction. Muslims whose mother tongue is not Arabic and non-Arabic speakers may completely miss the point at stake and come up with some surprising "refutations."

<sup>21</sup>"An epistemology that aims relentlessly at control rules out the possibility of transcendence in principle" and provides the qualifying clue to this "mindset." For an engaging and translucent analysis of "What the Modern Western Mindset Is" see Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (Crossroad, New York, 1982) pp. 134 ff.

<sup>22</sup>For a brief, knowledgeable and enlightening discussion of the Islamic concepts in a comparative perspective with their equivalent usage in Western intellectual history see S.N. al Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur, 1978) pp. 30 ff. The origins, development and consequences of secularization in the West provide the context of this discussion.

what is more of a synthetic rather than a syncretist whole.<sup>23</sup> When one goes beyond the sectarian squabbles and the pedantic hairsplitting to the roots of the Islamic heritage, it is only fair to maintain that there was no essential contradiction or inherent and necessary antagonism between the experimental, the rational and the “*ṣūfī way*.” Theosophy, Philosophy and Science could cohabitate within the crucible of the median culture which is effectively the only logical and natural culture consistent with the temper and the structure of the *ummatan wasatan*. The designation “median,” it should be pointed out here, is not derived from the Aristotelian idea of the “mean” suggesting a middle ground arrived at by the elimination of extremes, or an aggregate amounting to a moderate stance. For the middle ground conceived along such lines would always be shifting and defined, moreover, in terms of the other positions, not of any intrinsic characteristics. Rather, the median culture, rooted in the *tawhīdī* paradigm of knowledge and deriving its elements from the transcendental sources, provides a stable integral core which serves in itself as a point of departure and a referent for defining and qualifying other positions, and not the reverse. In this way it constitutes an intrinsic core and it provides a vertical axis, or a spinal component round which the diverse elements and modes of knowledge in the circuit of consciousness can cohere.

The unique capacity for synthesis characteristic of the Islamic episteme was no accident of history. It is embedded in a distinct world-view which engenders the frame of mind and the psychic disposition inculcated by the *wahy*. The only source of tension which could arise from time to time in Islamic intellectual spheres was when the hubris of excess was indulged in and threatened to undermine the very matrix of the supporting culture. For the Qur’ānic Weltanschauung favors an integral culture, one that is not given

---

<sup>23</sup>In *The Majesty That Was Islam* (Praeger, 1974) Montgomery Watt’s reflections on Islamic intellectual scholarship in terms of a “tension between Semitic intuition and Greek reason”, is typical of the constraints which inhibit Orientalist scholarship in coming to grips with the Islamic heritage. It has always been the “mosaic” pattern, never the whole, which has been the object of interpretation from the subjective viewpoint of the hegemonous culture. Edward Said (1978) merely developed Foucault’s central thesis on the relationship between “power” and “words” and brilliantly applied it to the Orientalist context thus opening the door for a new wave of critical scholarship of varying acumen. See A. Hussein, R. Olsen and J. Qureshi, *Orientalism, Islam and Islamicists* (Amana, 1984).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Fazlur Rahman’s usage of the term “median community” in his *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, Bibliotheca Islamica, (Chicago, 1980), ch. 8. This concept has been initially developed in an earlier essay, Mona Abul-Fadl, “Towards Conceptualizing the Notion of Ummah in Islam” (Cairo, 1983) If the term *al Ummah al Quṭb* used in the Arabic version is to be explicated in a single sentence, Charles le Gai Eaton’s remark comes closest to defining it. “In the midst of a humanity polarized between East and West, North and South, Islam (the Ummah) represents both a connecting link and a center of gravity.” *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, p. 26.

to excess, and can, in the discourse of Sorokin, be contrasted to both the "Senate Culture" and the "Ideational Culture."<sup>25</sup> This is the domain of the median culture. At its apogee, the median culture had provided the optimum medium for a thriving civilization combining enlightenment, openness and dynamism together with meaning and direction. Its legacy is embossed in the relics and the monuments of Islamic Art and Islamic Science where function and purpose, utility and meaning/value, form and content are consistently harmonized. The rediscovery of its elements today is vital for a global cultural recovery.

Beyond the cognitive merits of the *tawhīdī* paradigm of knowledge, lies an ethical imperative which reinforces the renovating potential of the median culture. For here again, unlike the secular paradigm, knowledge in the Islamic episteme is anchored to morality, not independent of it, neither by way of indifference, nor of autonomy.<sup>26</sup> The notion of *ilm* invites its corollary in the category of *amal* and the synthesis of both lies in the conception of *ibādah*. Just as it requires a conceptual leap beyond the contemporary dominant paradigm to apprehend the different connotations of reason and rationalism (*aql*) in the Islamic episteme, so too this leap is necessary if we are to overcome the constricting dichotomy which opposes the "theoretical" to the "practical," "understanding" to "praxis" and, "philosophy" to "ideology." Value in the Islamic episteme is an integral dimension of the cognitive, and the demonstrable superiority of the latter, drawing on the uniqueness of its sources, is matched by the excellence of a moral code, which is derived from the same sources. Here, the transcendental core is aptly projected in the Authority which does not emanate from any individual segment of humanity, but indiscriminately encompasses all. It is this Authority which upholds a binding standard of morality that, independent of any particular historical configuration, is all-embracing in the scope and reach of its universal compatibility. The *tawhīdī* paradigm is grounded in this code—a fact which makes for a knowledge qualified by its intrinsic morality and its inner predilection, or "bias" to Truth and Justice. Knowledge here is not amoral, neutral, and certainly not a vacuous ideal in itself.

The significance of this observation lies in the context of assessing the epistemic matrix of modern civilization and ascertaining the need of its radical recharting. It is not enough to be aware of the flaws and to conceive of an alternative, but this cognitive enlightenment must be accompanied by the

<sup>25</sup>Pitrim Alexander Sorokin (1889-1968), an eminent sociologist of Russian stock, emigrated to the United States in the twenties. In view of his pronounced culture/civilization orientation, he never became part of the mainstream American tradition. For an overview of his works see, T.K.N. Unnithan, ed., *Sociological Theories of Pitrim A. Sorokin* (Bombay, 1973).

<sup>26</sup>Cf. S.N. al Attas, "Religion and the Foundations of Ethics and Morality" in Altaf Gauhar, ed., *The Challenge of Islam* (London, 1978).

resolve to act in the direction conceived. Only a paradigm where “knowing” and “being” are conceived as integral and complementary facets of one reality can ensure the coordination of Will and Knowledge. This is where the moral dimension of the *tawhīdī* episteme enhances the renovation potential of the median culture.

## Prospects and Opportunities

At the outset of our presentation Professor Ralph Dahrendorf's metaphor of “life-chances” was extended to account for the prospects of overcoming the civilizational impasse. In the above exposition on the *tawhīdī* epistemic as an alternative to the dominant paradigm, some of the features of the “structured resources” for global cultural renewal were outlined. It remains to be seen whether the opportunity for activating these resources does exist and what their activation entails. The potential contribution of Islamization to a global cultural renewal is the function of our reading of the prospects and the opportunities for its realization.

Today, possibly more than any other time in the past, there is a historical opportunity for an intellectual rapprochement between East and West. Here “East” is taken to imply the fount of Tradition and to invoke the sapiential perspective.<sup>27</sup> “West” is used to convey modernity with all its accoutrements of a secular heritage of rationality and empiricism. Sapiential knowledge draws its validation from an inner dimension which is denied the rational and the empirical enterprise. In the meantime, rationality and empiricism have combined to produce an imposing civilization which, for all its ambiguities, holds out immense promise for mankind. There is however an inner dimension to all being which is integral and cannot be ignored. In its absence, as noted earlier, all material achievement is stripped of meaning, direction and purpose. A vicious sense of futility becomes pervasive and an elemental insidious cynicism takes over. It is this substantial dimension which lies outside and beyond the scope of the empirical and the rational. At the root of this predicament is a fundamental misconception of the essence of civilization which results in a fatal ambivalence and a flagrant contradiction “. . . the attempt to make a better world on the basis of a worsened humanity.”<sup>28</sup> In the resulting void, the tensions and anomalies inherent in modernity undermine

---

<sup>27</sup>For a perceptive elaboration of this perspective in a comparative and relevant account see lecture on “Knowledge and its Desacralization” by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, *ibid.*, p. 33. Like Guenon, Schuon's original and inspired writings provide an example of the critique of modernity from within the sapiential perspective. See above n. 1.

its own achievements and indeed, come to threaten all prospects of planetary survival.

The growing awareness of these anomalies has had its practical implications for research and public policy as well as for general institutional and cultural trends. Special institutions have been set up to promote an ethical awareness of public policy issues, while existing institutions have established special programs given to an investigation of ethical dimensions.<sup>29</sup> The outcome of these efforts may be gauged in a gradual but perceptible and steady shift toward a new center of gravity, characterized by wholeness, balance and integrity, in short by a global drift in the direction of an "integral culture." However, like the notion of an "openness to the transcendental," the ideal of the Integral Culture is likely to remain just as vacuous unless it too is substantiated. In the absence of a concrete model and guidelines, the steering process will inevitably flounder, for typically modern culture may be astute at providing the mechanism and the devices for the steering but not the direction and the measure. Only in recovering the elements of the median culture can the ideal be substantiated. This brief recapitulation aptly invokes the imperative and the opportuneness of embarking on a discovery of the Islamic episteme.

At present, the Islamic paradigm of knowledge has lapsed into the recesses of human history. Yet it remains a dormant potentiality. The elements which generated and nurtured it are impervious to the corruptibility inherent in all temporality and all the attendant artifacts mediated through human agency. It is part of the Divine Economy, however, to provide the seeds for a cultural regeneration and to leave it to human endeavor (*jihād* and *ijtihād*) to sow and to reap. The need is for a new brand of scholarship.

---

<sup>29</sup>Eg., the Ethics and Public Policy Center (1976, Washington, DC) presided over by E. W. LeFever is given to examining public policy issues, including global affairs, in the context of a developing Christian social ethic. Other institutions like the prestigious think tank, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies projects itself as a "non-profit, international organization" focusing on evolving a "human-centered point of view to deal with interrelated issues of society"; its programs include one on "Science, Technology and Humanism" designed to mobilize leaders of public action, business leaders and members of the scientific and engineering community" towards the humanistic issues of science. See Sidney Hyman, *The Aspen Idea* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1975); "The Ethics Program at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stafford" is another influential locus working an ambitious project exploring new dimensions in a theory of human culture along lines conceived in upcoming French and continental anthropological scholarship. Other global trends include the "inter-faith" and "cross-cultural" dialogues sponsored by various organizations and eminent. A specialized organ, *Science, Technology, Human Values* published by John Wiley and Sons, New York, adopts Einstein for its motto, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive" — a thinking growing out of a new synthesis between physics and metaphysics. See Ziauddin Sardar, "Quest for a New Science." *The Muslim Institute Papers I*, (Open Press, 1976.) For an emergent Islamic scholarship in this area, see *The Touch of Midas: Science, Values and the Environment in Islam and the West* (Manchester, 1984) edited by Z. Sardar.

## The Requisites for Revival

In laying the foundations for the Median Culture, Muslim scholars are called upon to exercise a decidedly moral responsibility. In Muslim intellectual circles today there is a growing consensus on the need to adopt a “vocational” as opposed to a purely “professional” perspective. A vocational scholarship is a scholarship that is dedicated to the actualization of an ideal.<sup>30</sup> One of the most patent features of the emergent Muslim scholarship has a direct bearing on our immediate context. It is a scholarship that is deeply imbued with the civilizational ethos.<sup>31</sup> Over the past decade there has been a noticeable trend to promote the intellectualization, the professionalization, and above all the “vocationalization” of Muslim scholarship. The late al Fārūqīs, Professors Ismāil and Lamia, were among its most tireless and ardent advocates by way of word and deed.<sup>32</sup> Invoking the vocational ideal is indeed the natural corollary of any authentic Islamic scholarship. Muslims should keep in mind the fact that they are heirs to a rich and vibrant tradition of scholarship—of *fiqh*, *ilm*, and *ḥikma*—which originally grew out of the wellsprings of *tawḥīdī*. As such it was a self-transcending scholarship which reached beyond itself and carried within it the imprint of its transcendental origins and aspirations. In this sense, Islamic scholarship is by definition a vocational scholarship par excellence.

<sup>30</sup>As one of the earlier works of Bennabi, *La Vocation de l'Islam* can be interpreted in this light and contrasted with his later writing which directly addresses the image of the Muslim intellectual. Also, *Histoire et Destine*, provides one of the best single compact sources for Shari'ati's relevant reflections and his own introspection as a intellectual with a calling. Each in his own way attributed the civilizational debacle of the Muslims to a “subverted” and “alienated” intellectual elite and part of their enduring contribution to the current revival lies in their efforts to conceptualize this blight.

<sup>31</sup>Scholars here tend to see Islam not just as a religion and a culture but as a civilization with its civilizational apparatus intact and waiting to be rediscovered. For an instructive overview of the modernist intellectual movement in Turkey see, Ziauddin Sardar, “Refloating the Intellectual Enterprise of Islam” in *Inquiry* February, 1986, pp. 32-37. The quarterly *Ilm ve Sanat* edited by a team under Prof. Dr. Esad Cosan is a representative forum of this trend. In fact, wherever the Islamic movement is carried beyond the practical, power, political plane and is intellectualized, it tends towards a civilizational perspective. The intellectualist turn in the Tendence Islamique movement in Tunisia is an interesting case in point. See the collected articles of Rashid al Ghannoushi, *Maqālat* (Dar al-Karawan, Paris, 1984).

<sup>32</sup>“The Role of Muslim Scholars in the West was the theme of the keynote banquet address on July 5th, 1985, at Plainfield Indiana, by Professor Fārūqī at the Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists. In retrospect, it was his timely testament and farewell to a body he had co-founded 14 years earlier; For echoes of this plea, see text of a previous address in Amman, Jordan “Reckoning with the University Scholars” in *al-Muslim al Mu'asir* vol. 8, no. 31. For Lamy' Louis Ibsen, aesthetics became suffused with the ethics of *tawḥīdī* as music and the arts were sublimated into a medium for regenerating an Islamic cultural sensibility.

However, it is not sufficient to understand vocational scholarship in terms of a pursuit that is animated by purpose, anchored in a vision, and oriented towards the realization of an ideal. Given the civilization stakes of the pursuit, vocational scholarship must also be conceived in terms of an effective scholarship or not at all. The challenge is to devise the means that can match the ends. If the ends entail the revitalization of the Islamic episteme as a integral part of the living global culture as a premise for its own renewal, then effectiveness calls for the capacity to stimulate, activate and galvanize the prevailing intellectual inertia to ensure the resources needed for a cultural takeoff. It also calls for the capacity to generate a sustained momentum in a comprehensive and systematic goal-oriented scholarship. It is essential to change the ideal of a vocational scholarship from an intermittent and scattered pursuit of some inspired and isolated luminaries into an entrenched and accelerated current that constitutes its own mainstream. In short, vocational scholarship must be institutionalized. This can only be secured if it is "routinized" in the Weberian sense of the term. A masterplan is needed to orchestrate the diverse and varied efforts and to marshal them into an encompassing, self-sustaining and viable structure which can ensure the continuity, dynamism and orientation of the pursuit. Only a unified design can integrate, command, and propel the augmenting resources some of which already exist, but most of which can be expected to be generated in due course of an accelerating momentum. This is the process we have referred to as the "architectonics of cultural transformation."<sup>33</sup>

The premise and the condition for fulfilling this task is to understand the culture we hope to transform and, at the same time, to master the principles of the transforming culture which we seek to put into effect. It is in this spirit that the project for the assessment of the contemporary heritage of modernity, essentially the Western heritage, is currently being critically reviewed and upgraded at the International Institute of Islamic Thought. It is firmly believed that the prevailing secular paradigm of knowledge which underlies modern culture has maintained its ascendancy more through default, and not on account of an inherent superiority, nor for reasons of any standing validity. Project RECTOCC, or the Project for the Critical Evaluation of the Cultural Occident, sets out to substantiate this observation as a matter of fact. The initial work in this field has provided some promising indicators which suggest the feasibility of a strategy for reviving the Islamic paradigm of knowledge that, in addition to the essential task of ploughing the Islamic sources, draws on the critical assimilation and the discriminate evaluation

---

<sup>33</sup>This was the theme of the lecture delivered at the International Institute of Islamic Thought on August 29th, 1987, as part of its public lecture series.



of the dominant secular paradigm itself.<sup>34</sup> This strategy accommodates a perspective of “contrasting epistemics” as it pursues a two-tiered approach to the Western heritage. In the first instance, it understands the culture from within, on its own terms. In the second stance, it delineates it from without, in terms of an Islamic perspective. Exploring the characteristic features of the respective paradigms—the secular and the Islamic—against each other, the one highlighting the other brings out the characteristic features of both to the benefit of an accelerated dual process. In its course, the ground is cleared and simultaneously the foundations for a new paradigm are laid. In this way, working towards the recovery and the reconstruction of the Islamic cultural identity, Muslims would be contributing to a global cultural renewal.

As a nascent intellectual current, and as a potentially sweeping cultural movement, Islamization cannot be restricted in its appeal to the Muslim Ummah. While it is only natural that the latter should constitute its kernel and its most immediate protagonist, yet it is equally evident, in the light of the above exposition, that Islamization provides a beacon on the receding horizons of our planetary community. As such it ought to become the common cause and general concern of everybody with a stake in the moral well-being of a sane society and sober civilization. To this wider audience, Islamization is more than just another alternative in the quest for a new point of departure. Its merits lie in a historical credibility anchored in a superlative foundation that combines a cognitive certitude, a moral authority, and an irrevocable spiritual authenticity. These are the indispensable ingredients for any effective paradigm for regeneration. Needless to say, the regenerative paradigm constitutes the goal and substance of the movement of Islamization.

---

<sup>34</sup>For original conception see the Islamization Workplan in the first edition maiden version of *The Islamization of Knowledge* (1981) pp. 39-49. The Arabic version has since been revised and enlarged (1986). Work on the “Islamization II” as a sequence to the initial Workplan is currently in progress.