

Islamic Thought in the Modern World: The Need for an Integrated Approach

Abdul Majid Muhammad Mackeen

The conflicts and tensions in the world today have resulted largely from conflicting systems of thought, which in turn provide contradictory stimuli and breed contradictory human motivations and responses – a situation that has brought about a serious imbalance in the human behavioral and thought patterns. This tendency was particularly marked in countries that came under the political and economic determinism of alien ruling powers. In the lands of Islam, the process started much earlier with the disintegration of Islamic political authority, which weakened the political existence of the *Ummah* and gradually paved the way for the infiltration of a kind of “foreign thinking” among the ranks of the Muslims.

The ultimate result was the creation of a distinction between the socially realistic “secular” thought and the faith-oriented “religious” thought, with little or no prospect of ever closing the gap between them as these distinctions were perpetuated by powerful vested interests. The eventual outcome of this development was the insulation of Islamic thought from the main currents of thought predominating in the minds of the Muslim thinkers, planners, and administrators in the contemporary Muslim world. Though denied its proper place in modern planning and thinking, Islamic thought refused to be crushed out of existence but withdrew instead into sheltered precincts of its own and closed its door to the challenges flung at it by the vast expansion of knowledge in the modern world. This state of Islamic thought continues to prevail among the ranks of Muslims the world over.

A similar situation had confronted the early Muslim community when the over-rapid territorial expansion of Islam in the first and second centuries AH seventh and eighth centuries AC thrust them into the heartlands of the Greco-Roman and Christian domains – to places like *Al Iskandariyah* (Alexandria), *Dimashq* (Damascus), *Antakiyah* (Antioch), Mesopotamia, Baghdad and Spain and exposed them to the entire intellectual might of Greek sciences and Chris-

tian scholastic theology. The intellectual hegemony of the Greek and Byzantine Christian civilization of that time rested on such sophisticated tools as Aristotelian dialectics, physics, mathematics, and philosophy. Consequently the faith of the Muslims in the supremacy and transcendence of the Word of Allah was subjected to an enormous test of survival. The Muslim savants of that period did not abdicate their responsibilities in the defense of their faith, the viability of which has stood the test of all times. Instead, they maintained the supremacy of the *revealed word*, The Qur'ān, as the final arbiter of all causes. Hence the tools of logic and rhetoric were restated and extensively used in a number of instances; the commentators of the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth* used them in expounding the *revealed word* of Allah and the utterances and conduct of His Messenger; the scholastic theologians (*Mutakallimūn*) used rational criteria to the extent legitimized revelation to provide the philosophical arguments for monotheism; the jurists (*fuqahā*) of Islam constructed a comprehensive *fiqh* (jurisprudence) system by redefining many concepts in the light of the established norms of Islamic first-principles.

They accomplished this not by rejecting the tools of intellectual argument and the standards of rational criteria, but by a careful and extensive study of the nature and potential of these tools in order to convert them into new Islamic modes of expression within the framework of the first-principles set down in the revealed bases of Islam, the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*. The enormous intellectual development and literary activity which followed during the Abbasid period is a clear testimony to the assimilative and the creative potential of those men who understood the first-principles of the ideology of Islam. The understanding and preservation of the integrity of the Islamic world-view in all segments of human thought and behavior were the basic factor that provided the stability and resources to withstand the strains and stresses accompanying the internal expansion of Islam in the early centuries.

The sense of the integrity and wholeness of Islam was at its highest during the life time of Prophet Muhammad, (ṢAAS). Its impact was absorbed in the following centuries and found itself permanently enshrined in the entire range of Islamic literature. If we look at the titles of books produced by the early Muslim scholars—whether in the field of historiography, law, theology, or science—we cannot escape the conclusion that every single work authored by Muslim scholars, until very recent times, bore the imprint of a category of knowledge that had its roots in the *revealed* guidance of Allah.

The work produced in the successive periods of Islam carried titles, reflecting to some extent, the mood of the historical period concerned, but at no time did the Muslim ideologues compromise with the tendencies of their times, (which were foreign to the Islamic base), and abandon the centrality of Islamic thought. This was particularly so in the realm of Islamic literary activity. Unlike events, the record of man's inner thinking always remain a silent, though can-

did witness to his innermost thoughts. There can be no clearer evidence of this integrity of Islam than the format and substance of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic Law), which represents the finest example of the integration of Islamic thought. In the early political organization of the Islamic state and in the social organization of Islamic society too, the same integrity of Islamic thought was maintained. Although political and social structure failed to absorb the pressures exerted upon it by certain historical processes, the organization of Islamic thought constructed upon the twin foundations of the immutable Qur'an and the exemplary *Sunnah* has survived the ravages of time and—thanks to the labors of many great Muslim minds—they remain our sole custodian of the integrity of Islam.

At this point it is worth remembering that the great literary movement of Islam, which received its greatest stimulus from the Qur'an and the personality of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), was the result of the endeavors of dedicated individual scholars who emerged to answer the need for a theoretical elaboration of the substance of Islam. The possession of a common language of exposition, Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, proved to be a significant factor in maintaining a community of interests among scholars from the diverse regions of the then Muslim State. The whole history of Arabic literature during the Islamic period demonstrates the fact that Arabic is not so much the language of the Arabs as the language of Islam—the language of the speech of Allah (SWT), and that of His Messenger (SAAS), or the language of revelation. Many an Arabic term developed significant changes in conceptual meaning in the Islamic period. The language began to embrace a whole range of a highly technical vocabulary to express specific norms of thought and patterns of behavior. The importance and value of Arabic therefore, for a sound and safe knowledge of Islam, cannot be denied. Muslims, the world over, should concern themselves, very seriously, with the study of Arabic as a means to reach the first and secondary principles of Islam in their most original form and sources. Conversely stated, it is a matter for serious concern that resulting from the political dislocation the Muslim countries suffer today, numbers of ardent students of Islam have laid themselves exposed to half-truths and to adverse propagandistic writings without being adequately equipped and trained to challenge distortions of facts in the "knowledge" they acquire. The immediate task therefore is to acquire the knowledge of Islam from the proper sources and through the proper channels and components of Islamic learning.

As I mentioned earlier, the magnificent response of the early Muslim scholars in the elaboration of the entire theory of Islam was a brilliant exercise in the integration of Islamic thought, an exercise in which they captured something of the inscrutable will of Allah as it works in the life of this universe. The march of history, however, as engineered by man, led to some sad though inevitable consequences; the abuse of political authority cost them their

freedom and caused the totality of Islamic thought to disintegrate.

In recent studies, scholars have suggested that the anxieties facing the present generation of Muslims the world over are to some extent comparable with those that troubled the Islamic State from the early years of the Umayyads. The comparison is, no doubt, striking, for which the rapid spread of Islam during the century following the death of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), the Muslims inherited an extensive geographical area embracing peoples and states of widely differing cultures and traditions. The age of the Umayyads, which began in 41 A.H. / 661 A.C. was an era of fresh challenges and political resettlements. The immediate tasks that agitated the minds of the Umayyad generation were the elaboration of a constitutional and legal tradition and the construction of Islamic thought in conceptual terms within the framework of the revealed criteria. This challenge produced the minds and the minds produced the books that to this day have continued to provide great stability to the intellectual horizon and spiritual fabric of Islam.

The present generation of Muslims has also inherited a situation of equal, if not of greater, dimension because the vast expansion of knowledge in the modern era in the social and natural sciences, and a whole series of other technological and scientific developments have called for the same vigilance and determination displayed by our pioneer Muslim scholars in maintaining the integrity of Islam as communicated in the revealed sources. True knowledge cannot but bear witness to the true nature and behavior of all forms of existence, which by the true nature of its laws must accord with the universal law of the creator as revealed to Allah's creation through specific channels of communication. Any incongruities with the revealed law of Allah can represent only a distortion of the essence of natural being and must be rejected. New conclusions with respect to the essence of the revealed universal law, must be utilized for the fulfilment of the divine purposes.

The impending challenge of the problems caused by the expansion of unfiltered knowledge, the active evolution of behavioral patterns of humans, and their conflicts with rationally accepted conclusions and morally approved norms of behavior, is enormous. We must mobilize the resources at our command to produce the minds and the books to ensure the proper understanding and realization of the relationship between the knowledge of Allah and the knowledge of man, the act of Allah and the act of man, and the power of Allah and the power of man.

Although the predicament of the Muslims of this age may be compared in one sense with the position of the early Muslims on whom fell the onus of pinning down precision with the terms of the Islamic Civilization, yet the contrast between them in the nature and ability of their striking power seems so helplessly marked that nothing short of a major offensive to halt the fur-

ther disintegration of the mentality of the Muslims can save the situation. The early Muslims had accepted, without reservation, the postulates of a revealed thought-world and the integrity of Islamic thought and channelled their energies toward the realization of these concept both in thought as well as in deed. This stamp of an integrated mind, that had understood the first principles of Islam, has disintegrated dangerously and needs immediate corrective measures.

The corrective measures at our disposal seem limited in their capacity to prevent the collapse; the seeds of Islamic knowledge are being sown on shallow soil and are germinating in a restricted area. Our energies should be directed toward a re-exposition of the first principles of Islam with the aid of all the useful and effective weapons at our disposal. Let the Muslims re-construct upon the foundations of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS), the first principles of Islam, test them in their own lives, and bestow the benefits of their re-discoveries to the world at large.

In the exposition of first principles, care must be taken to ensure finding one perfectly in accord with the will of Allah, for by definition a Muslim must submit to the Will of Allah, and the Will of Allah is represented in the revelationally-guided behavior patterns of all matter and thought. But what is important is not just to verbalize our submission to the Will of Allah and to witness the natural behavior of the universe as a manifestation of His Will but to understand and surrender to the law of Allah with full awareness of its implications. This alone can protect man from the consequences that may follow the rejection of this law of Allah.

Although Islamic law accepts the fact that man is fundamentally free, the form of his freedom on earth is not a subject for negotiation either with Allah or with man. Consequently any law we make, or theory we expound, or any act we undertake, must necessarily follow the revealed behavior patterns envisaged in the scheme of Allah; such behavior patterns have been exemplified by Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS), in the organization and conduct of government; in the enunciation of political and legal concepts; in the organization and use of economic resources, in the cultivation of ethical conduct, and in the organization of all other forms of human life. This normative conduct of Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS), should serve as an ample commentary on the first principles enunciated in the Qur'ān.

It is worth resrating at this point that the relationship between theory and practice or theoretical fundamentalism and historical development, insofar the viability of ideologies is concerned, must be viewed against the first principles of a given ideology; the deviationist tendencies of interest groups or the evidence they have left behind in history should be rejected as bad evidence because the law of Allah cannot be made subject to the verdict of those men who failed to discover the direction of that law. The canons of modern historical

criticism might reject this interpretation of history as being normative, but historians of today cannot deny the fact that they too rely on professional definition of historical norms in order to evaluate historical processes.

History is generally considered to be the beneficiary of diverse sources of knowledge concerning human behavior in response to a given set of stimuli. The evidence gathered from such diverse sources provides the criteria of historical evaluation. The danger inherent in this method of historical criticism is that the preponderance of the human will in defiance of the law of Allah assumes a normative pattern and thus leads to serious error of judgment in determining the order of human life and society. There are many examples and periods of what may be called "deviationism" in the historical development of Islam. It is no easy task to identify the deviationist elements of Islamic history. The whole process is complex and sensitive. There have been too many instances of human interference with the law of Allah, and of political intrigues being hailed and ratified as valid precedents. Islamic historians must distinguish between evidence of positive conduct in accordance with the revealed law and those of negative behavior in defiance of that law. The entire history of Islam needs a critical re-examination. That re-examination can attain its objective only if there is integration of thought.