The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Institute of Ismaili Studies: the Intellectual Issues of the Decade

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Abstract

Institutions stand to benefit from a periodic inquiry into, and review of their essential purpose and mission. In the Muslim context, as in that of the other kindred religions, modernity compels a renewal analysis of the place of religious belief and imagination in society. In outlining this analysis, the author explores the nature of religious language, elaborates a distinction between faith and ideology, and considers the relation of intellectual life to these issues. He illustrates these points through the example of Islamic history. After making a case for re-thinking the premises of Islamic historic research, he defines the possible contribution of an institution like the IIS to this endeavour. Lastly, the article describes, in brief, some of the concrete programmes envisaged or in existence at the IIS at the time of its writing.

Keywords

Modernity, Spirituality, Nature of religious language, Faith, Ideology, Intellect, Formative period, Islam, Interdisciplinary convergence, religious studies, Islamic studies, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, ITREB

Two years ago today, I issued a detailed statement, for publication in Ismaili journals worldwide, entitled *The Role of the Institute of Ismaili Studies*. My purpose in this statement was to set out, for the information of the *jamat*, the principles and ideals which the work of the Institute is meant to advance.

Institutions and Community Life

Institutions, as I then said, are but empty shells unless they are inspired and guided by ideals. Unless the philosophy that an institution is meant to further is kept continually in focus, perpetually examined, re-examined, reshaped and refined so as to address changing realities introduced by the passage of time, institutions lose their ability to speak to the hearts and minds of the community or society whose development they are intended to serve.

From time to time, therefore, in the life of an institution or an organised venture or community, one must take a fresh look at the convictions, the hopes and aspirations which lie at its origins and its foundations. Only thus can one ensure the growth (as opposed to mere survival) of the body in question, injecting it regularly with the life-blood of new ideas, checking the tendency, common to all human endeavour, towards fossilisation, inertia, and a hardening of the arteries of mind, spirit, and imagination.

To do this in any meaningful way, however, entails looking beyond the organisation or venture to the shape of the broader society of which it is invariably a part.

For the Institute of Ismaili Studies, therefore, one must ask whether and in what way intellectual enquiry or academic research have a role to play in the evolution of the Ismaili *jamat*s and indeed, of broader Muslim society as we approach the twilight of the twentieth and the dawn of the twenty-first century.

At heart, these concerns may be summed up, as I did in my last message, in the form of questions about the manner in which Islamic thought, as it emerged out of prophetic revelation some fourteen hundred years ago and then developed in various directions in the course of history is to be understood today. What resources does it offer for surmounting the challenges of contemporary society? With what voice is it to speak today to the minds and hearts of Muslims? Above all, what does it have to say, if anything, that is distinctive to its historical experience, and yet deserving of the interest and attention of a technically advanced but humanely uncertain world of today?

I wish to elaborate on these questions beyond what I able to do in my last communication. Following this, I will outline how the Institute expects to contribute its share to the exploration of these questions. I shall also indicate the upcoming programmes and activities at the Institute, so as to bring the *jamat* up to date in its information about its work.

Issues of Modernity

There are several principles that Muslim societies need to ponder on their confrontation with the issues of modernity. These include the meaning and place of the sacred in human society. This issue constitutes not only the essence of Islam but of all other major religious traditions of the world. A second important issue is the role that the human mind or intellect has in the ongoing realisation of the faith in history.

At the origins of all great civilisations in history there lay a sense of the sacred. The organisation of society, the laws by which human life was governed, were all attributed to a divine or sacred writ, transcending the here and now, but also interacting through a variety of means - prophetic pronouncement, scripture (as in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths), the oracles of poets (as in Ancient Greece), the teachings of the sages (as in Ancient India) - with the here and now, i.e. with finite space and time. Apart from social legislation and order, however, the perception of the sacred also provided the individual with a sense of the meaning of life.

It is this dimension of *meaningfulness* that, in theological language, is spoken of as "spirituality". Religions serve as a form of social control and organisation. But their essence lies in the element of spirituality. Indeed, in certain circumstances it becomes necessary, as I shall indicate below, to distinguish between the spiritual core and the religious or formal apparatus of a faith.

By "spirituality" I do not mean any specific practice of the faith, such as prayer. I mean something more fundamental and more comprehensive, something which is constitutive of religious life, and thus defines its true nature. The spiritual dimension of life is related to universal enigmas and foundations of human existence, and the aspirations and ideals to which these give rise. All human beings encounter a sense of challenge and mystery at the limits and frontiers of existence: birth, death, suffering, hope and despair, freedom and its limits, the quest for love, justice, communion and fellowship.

What is meant by speaking of these as "limit-questions"? To speak thus involves making a distinction between problems of technique and questions of meaning. It is one thing, as I have said on some occasions, for an engineer to figure out a way of building a bridge across a ravine or a river. It is another altogether to ask the question: What kind of universe is this in which man can thus circumvent the limitations and harness natural resources as well as human ingenuity, to make organised life on earth possible? The former deals with a problem, the latter, something of a mystery. The former calls for technical intervention. The latter stimulates poetic, philosophical, or scriptural discourse and reflection.

Religious Language?

Much of our everyday life is concerned with dealing with day-to-day problems. These require know-how, experience, and pragmatic intervention. But in the course of our lives, through intellectual curiosity, philosophical enquiry, through the experience of fluctuations in one's lot and not least, through personal relations with others and with the depths of one's own selfhood, one comes face-to-face, now and then, with the depths and attitudes of one's existence. These are experienced and expressed in language. But there are many varieties of language. The kind that is specific to the issues I have just mentioned is not technical language, appropriate to the solution of human, natural, or mechanical problems and challenges. What I have here called the 'spiritual dimension' is related not to problems but to meaning - the meaning of nature, culture, and of the physical and intellectual limits as well as possibilities of life. This meaning is not given. It is not a datum - not something that descends, as it were, from outside. It is something which is developed as an aspiration, a continual search and realisation, in the very process of living. And it is articulated in its own kind of language, one which is evocative rather than informative. This language is best described as poetic or symbolic. Indeed, poetry, myth, narrative and parable are not merely vehicles for articulation. They are the very crucible in *which* religious imagination and aspiration are shaped and housed. They define the only way in which one may experience and speak of matters of the spirit.

One of the prime subjects for investigation in the field of religion, therefore, is the nature of religious language. What are the essential, defining attributes of religious discourse? And how does it differ from other modes of language or discourse? It is very important to note that these questions are not academic, though they may give that appearance. They have far-reaching, practical consequences for society. For they have a direct bearing on the kind of culture in which one lives, and in which one's identity, one's habits of thought and feeling, are shaped.

Monoism and Pluralism

Stable, advanced societies usually have two principal attributes. On one hand, they have coherent, symbolic structures which lend meaning to the lives of their members, providing them with an orienting compass, a ground-map as it were, for the conduct of life in accordance with governing ideals and values. At the same time, a progressive culture allows for individual variations of life and conduct. It makes room for tolerance and pluralism. The ideal order is one in which coherence and diversity balance each other. Pluralism without an overarching frame of symbols disintegrates into relativism - the belief that any belief, any ethic is as good as any other, provided that it has been freely chosen and that it does not harm others. While this principle can yield considerable tolerance, its logical extreme is a loosening

of social identity and collective coherence, leading to a deep-seated individualism, and a certain shallowness of interpersonal relations.

The other extreme is a monistic view which is coercive, demanding conformity and uniformity of outlook and behaviour, and mistrustful of individual latitude, creativity and diversity of opinion and expression. Liberal society in its modern form tends towards individualism and the weakening of social bonds. Religious dogmatism on its part tends to suppress individual creativity in favour of collective uniformity and compliance.

Faith: more than an Ideology

A religion can foster either outlook. A whole combination of factors may determine the kind of influence it exerts on the culture of a community or society. But one of the important pre-requisites of a liberating (as opposed to a repressive) influence is the capacity to separate what one might call the "existential" aspect of religion (i.e. its role in yielding personal meaning to one's existence) from its ideological function.

As an existential force, faith is primarily spiritual. It is more an aspiration than a possession, more in the nature of a horizon of ideals, than a system of precepts and doctrines. As a spiritual impulse it speaks to the "inner" space within the human personality. Ideology, on the other hand, seeks to eliminate this space as far as possible. In its anxiety to curb outward freedom, it curbs the inner freedom to think, search and experience.

The ideologisation of faith has several consequences. Ideology has a tendency towards totalism: the assimilation of all life - economic, cultural, political, public and private, national and domestic - under a single, sweeping scheme of rules and principles. Furthermore, it is closed rather than open: it takes its postulates to be *essentially* true - true by virtue of their conformity to divine will or to the laws of nature.

Marxism, for instance, laid claim to truth by insisting that its tenets were in accord with the intrinsic laws of social evolution, and that it was therefore a science rather than a doctrine. Religious systems are similarly totalistic when they are perceived as a fixed and completed body of principles and practices, transcendently true, with little or no room for historical development, personal understanding, and diversity of interpretation occasioned by the irreducible variety of human cultures in the world.

The essence of religion is not to be located in a system of beliefs and practices but in a perspective on the world; not in doctrine but in process; not in a fixed body of tenets and prescriptions but in a spirit open to varying embodiments and translations in the succession of cultures which constitute history.

The role of the intellect

There is a whole world of difference between the vision that lies at the heart of a faith, and the systems in which this vision is encoded. The latter cannot be eliminated, for human life is body as well as soul, system as well as vision. But the capacity to make distinctions, where true and appropriate, is a fundamental necessity. It is essential if religion is to be a force in society for creative evolution rather than static inertia; for tolerance rather than bigotry; for the life of the spirit rather than the strait-jacket of formalism; and for personal space and imagination rather than social control and conformity.

Here then is an example of how clearer thinking about what it is that constitutes religious life, has consequences of a practical kind on society. The same can be said, even more directly, on the subject of the human intellect, and on the attitude of a religion towards it - whether it seeks to suppress or deny the life of the mind, or whether it is able to harness it to its own ends and evolution.

The issue of the role of intellect in religious understanding is not simple or straightforward. It involves a series of fundamental questions. What is meant by such terms as 'mind', 'reason', or 'intellect'? What are their counterparts in Islamic languages, and what connotation do they have?

Above all, what place did reason come to occupy in the culture of Muslim societies in various lands and times? How was it conceptualised? How was it institutionalised? To what cultural efflorescence on one hand, and tensions and antagonisms on the other, did it give rise? How were these handled? What socio-political forces were associated with the developments at the cultural level?

The Formative period of Islam

While these questions call for sophisticated analysis and reflection, one fact is clear - so clear indeed that its neglect in ideological forms of Muslim discourse cannot but strike one as altogether remarkable. The great formative period of Islamic history (spanning, roughly, the four centuries following the Prophet's death was, in essence, a manifestation of the human intellect. I do not mean simply that the exercise of human reason had a prominent place in that history. I mean, rather, that reason was what constituted the *historicity* of this period.

Essentially, the whole of the formative age of Islam may be interpreted as a project to determine notions of 'Islam', i.e. of norms that could be related both to the founding memory of the revelation and the Prophet's life, and to the realities of the day. In the course of this historical construction or articulation of the norms, philosophy, and culture of 'Islam', rival ideas, influenced by different intellectual schools and fuelled by varied political interests, crystallised over time. The emergence of law, philosophy, theology and ethics in this period was an intellectual activity *par excellence.* It was, after all, the formation of a great civilisation. And the birth of a civilisation is a living testimonial to a humanistic outlook and achievement.

Once the civilising *process* comes to take the form of a *product* - once, that is, it is encoded and systematised - its historicity is apt to recede from view. The achievements of the civilisation take on the appearance of finished monuments, secluded from the flowing waters of time. Henceforth they compel admiration or investigation of their finished *structure*, not the formative process to which they originally bore witness. This process was an intellectual effort. Hence, to appreciate the role of mind or intellect in a civilisation is to focus upon its elements of dynamism, creativity, and historicity. To disregard it is to concentrate, instead, on fixity and timelessness. Intellectual creativity is a motor that compels forward movement. Where the intellect is not supreme, the mind has a tendency to operate under the impetus of nostalgia, harking back to a pristine, supposedly perfect era.

Lack of interdisciplinary convergence in religious studies

The intellectual or humanistic processes which lay at the heart of the Islamic civilisation in its formative phase need to be reappropriated for today. In this as in other areas of endeavour, a look backwards is part and parcel of a look forwards.

However, with notably few exceptions, Islamic scholarship has not so far developed a philosophy underlying the scholarship capable of illuminating these issues. This is true both of Islamic studies in the West and in Muslim lands. In the West it is a failure of method as well as engagement. In Muslim institutions, the power of ideological discourse often impedes genuinely liberated enquiry and understanding. There are exceptions on both sides. But these exceptions have been less influential, less visible, less part of the broad mass of debate and discourse.

Anyone who is familiar with humanistic disciplines in Western universities cannot fail to notice the sophistication of analytic tools that have developed since the rise of modern philosophy, hermeneutics, and social sciences. But while this sophistication is apparent in the study of Western cultures, it is rarely matched in the study of Islam in these very universities.

Part of this sophistication lies in the capacity of a discipline to ask fundamental questions about its own premises and foundations. Take for instance the discipline of history. It is one thing to be able to translate the categories of the past into those of today. It is still another thing for the discipline of history to be self-conscious about its own premises and methods. Such self-consciousness issues in questions such as: how is the knowledge of past societies possible? What are the operative forces in history? Is history made by great individuals, or by collective trends and forces? What is the primary influence on events - is it ideas and philosophies, or is it rather economic and environmental? If both, what is the inter-relationship of the two?

These questions call for interdisciplinary convergence - an exploration of the common ground beneath philosophy, social science, literary criticism, economics and politics. But Islamic studies in Western universities seldom show this convergence of approach. It is, on the contrary, a fragmented subject, in which those who study the theology have a cast of mind hardly compatible with those who study the politics of contemporary Muslim nations. The anthropologists are apt by and large to concentrate on small-scale or rural societies, to the exclusion of civilisational studies. In historical studies, the disciplines of social and cultural history (as opposed to political history and biographies of great individuals) - disiciplines which have now come into their own in many areas of world history - have yet to make a significant impact in the field of Islamic history.

In Muslim countries, the problems are of a different nature. In many modern Muslim states, secular education in the humanities, sciences and professions is separated by a chasm from traditional religious learning and instruction. It is not only standards that differ. The world-view and mentality are equally far apart. It is as if two ages or epochs, the mediaeval and the modern, had been juxtaposed side by side in space, with little traffic between the two.

Consequently, the study of religion remains uninformed by the critical tools of analysis employed in secular disciplines. The underlying premise of such an approach is that the study of religion consists in the internalisation of timelessly true definitions. In this way of thinking, there can be little acknowledgement of the historicity of these definitions - the context in which they arose, and the ways in which they were operationalised for specific spiritual,

cultural and socio-political purposes. Yet the creative ferment of early Islamic history lay precisely in search and inquiry, rather than in accepted or given conclusions.

Re-thinking the premises of Islamic studies

These predicaments are not unique to Muslim states. Until recently, Christian education was similarly insulated, in method and content, from secular knowledge - indeed, in some denominations the heavy hand of traditionalism continues to perpetuate this separation; while in orthodox Judaism, the reaction to modernity is strong and unrelenting.

In all three faiths, however, there are strong voices urging a critical engagement with tradition, so as to preserve it from the pitfall of traditionalism on one hand, and uncritical modernity on the other. Fazlur Rahman was one such thinker in modern Islam. More contemporaneously, Mohammed Arkoun, in a radically different way from Rahman, has been advocating a re-thinking of the very premises of Islamic studies today.

There is an acute need, therefore, for a re-visiting of age-old religious verities, but with fresh categories of approach and analysis, consonant with the modern state of knowledge in the sciences and humanities. This would be a genuine intellectual enquiry - one that is committed as well as scientific, engaged as well as objective, historically scrupulous, yet empathetic towards the subjective reality of religious aspiration and imagination. This is a calling applicable to Jewish, Christian, as well as Muslim communities, especially those living in the industrialised West, where political conditions offers a favourable opportunity for just such an enquiry.

Indeed, the vast changes that the industrial and post-industrial world has seen - in technology as in communications, in urbanisation as in the assumptions governing the social order - *necessitate* the exploration of precisely these questions. The concepts of the religious and the secular, tradition and modernity, individual rights and social obligations reflect pressing issues. Nothing would be more fruitful, in such circumstances, than a re-exploration of these issues in the light of modern conditions and in a comparative context, in all the three societies in question.

The IIS role in this process of re-thinking

The Institute of Ismaili Studies was founded in the hope that it would contribute a share, however modest, to this process of thinking and research. This is what I described, in my last communication, as the non-normative part of the Institute's work - the part that is committed to exploring those issues which are common and generic to all Muslims, regardless of sect or denomination, and indeed, beyond Islam, to the kindred faiths of Judaism and Christianity. A central mandate of the Institute, however, is normative or *tariqah*-specific: This aspect of the Institute's mandate seeks to assist the Tariqah and Religious Education Boards (ITREBs) at an upstream and intellectual level, in the religious formation of the international *jamat.*

Every single theme mentioned above - the spiritual basis of faith, the role of the intellect, the need for ongoing interpretation - are fundamental to the *tariqah.* Although they are better known today to scholars than they were a few decades ago, conventional scholarship on Islam has yet to accord the thought and attention to the Ismaili vision of these themes that it deserves.

To this day, much of the writing on Islam tends to gravitate, automatically as it were, towards its orthodox, legal and theological formulations, to the relative neglect of its poetic, imaginative, and symbolic wealth of expression. In its formative phase, Shi'i theology drew freely on the intellectual tools available in its day - those of Greek philosophy - to articulate its Islamic insight and vision. A philosophical re-construction suitable to the twenty-first century, would thus be in the spirit of an example set from the earliest period.

To the subjects of spirituality and intellectual inquiry, which have to be re-understood today, there needs to be added a third equally important theme, that of ethics. Religious vision is more practical than theoretical. Ethics thus belongs to the centre of religious concern. Nowhere else is the distinction between spirit and letter, between fundamental ideals on one hand and codes and statutes on the other, more significant. The modern world, with its radically different complexion from the mediaeval, poses a challenge for new departures and new formulations of the accumulated ethical insight of mankind, appropriate to the circumstances of today.

Prospective Programmes

It now remains for me to outline the prospective programmes or vehicles through which the ideas mentioned here will be communicated in the years ahead. One of these is academic publications; the other is liaison with the ITREBs; thirdly, there is the production of religious education materials; the fourth important vehicle is a new graduate training programme, now under consideration; lastly, there is the summer seminar, held two years ago at Oxford, for introducing the kind of issues mentioned above to selected candidates from the leadership, and from the business, professional and educated sectors of the international *jamat.*

Translations

In the non-normative area, this year will see the first publication of a series of occasional papers or essays addressing the broad themes mentioned above common to the study of Islam and religion as a whole. Simultaneously, the Institute will also publish the first in what is to be a series of translations, into English, of poetic texts which may be considered as literary landmarks in the history of Shi'i, and especially Ismaili thought.

This first publication in this series will be a translation of selections from the Diwan (the poetic corpus) of the Ismaili poet and philosopher, Nasir Khusraw. This translation has been made for the Institute by Professor Annemarie Schimmel. The figure of Nasir Khusraw, revered as pir by Ismailis, is, as is well known, the source of the tradition cherished by the Ismailis of Central Asia and the northern parts of Pakistan. Moreover, the figure of Nasir Khusraw occupies an important place in Iranian Shi'ism and more generally, in the intellectual history of Islam. The translation of his text would thus be of interest to the *jamat* as well as the wider Muslim and academic community.

Working with ITREBs

In the area of children's education in the *jamat*, the Institute has now provided the ITREBs with texts and teaching guides (in an as yet unprinted form but ready for use by teachers) from Primary I to Primary VI levels. This year will see the printing of Primary I texts. The rest will be printed in two phases, in 1993 and 1994.

The annual conference of the Institute with the Chairmen of worldwide ITREBs has proved valuable for the clarification and communication of issues of mutual interest. This year the Institute intends to provide upstream input into the objectives and national strategies of each ITREB. The Institute will also carry further the process of communication to other levels of ITREBs, begun last year through a seminar held there for the religious education co-ordinators of worldwide ITREBs.

Graduate Training

Either this year or next, the Institute will be announcing the start of a new programme for the training of graduate manpower in the field of Islamic Studies, contemporary affairs, issues in the philosophy and practice of contemporary education, and the ethical and intellectual questions relating to modern communications and technology. This programme will be expected to reflect the interdisciplinary convergence indicated above, and will provide superior human resources to the *jamat* over the next decade.

Seminars

The Institute feels that it is necessary, from time to time, to introduce members of the *Jamat*, be they leaders, professionals, or men and women with leadership positions in business or in the public domain, to the kind of issues pertaining to contemporary Islam and to the *tariqah*, which have been mentioned above. To this end the Institute organised a seminar at Oxford in 1990, where leading scholars from various parts of the world gave lectures on relevant topics, while the Institute, which was chairing the seminars, helped to tie these lectures into a coherent perspective, and to intimate their bearing on issues within the Ismaili *Jamat.*

The feedback of the participants - which numbered around 30, and were drawn from an international spectrum - showed that the effort had been fully worth its while. The Institute plans to hold a second such seminar in the summer of 1993. Announcements of the programme will be made nearer the time.

Conclusion

These, then, are the perspectives that guide the vision and work of the Institute, and the programmes and activities that are meant to give them a concrete expression, enabling them to reach out to the *jamats* and the society beyond. The Institute's work is international in scope. This means that it does not get overly involved with any single national or regional set of programmes. It is also upstream in nature, which means that it cannot afford to get overly engaged at the level of implementation. It is for these reasons that the *jamats* as a whole do not see the presence of the Institute amidst them as vividly and from as close a range as they might do those institutions which work with them directly and at close quarters.

This is as it should be, for in the life of a society, it is important that while some institutions implement the day-to-day functions required to solve ongoing needs and problems, a community which looks ahead and not only to the here and now, must have a space or an institution within it where the wood is not lost sight of for the trees, and where long range perspectives are explored and shaped. The Institute was established precisely to engage in frontier thinking of this kind. But this thinking can ill afford to be academic and abstract, without a clear vision of the concrete ways in which it can be disseminated to the *jamat* and the world beyond. It is hoped that the account given above has served to show how this is

expected to be done and the positive implications it will have for the intellectual and cultural advancement of the *jamats* and beyond.

We stand at the threshold of a period of great hope and promise. In the West, in the erstwhile Soviet Union, in many parts of the Third World, the pursuit of freedom, justice, cultural creativity and spiritual values is finding support from some of the clearest and most sophisticated voices to be heard in these societies. The Ismaili *jamats* are a tiny part of the world scene. But under the Imamate of Hazrat Imam Sultan Mohamed Shah and Mawlana Hazar Imam, they have acquired a range of strong, meaningful institutions which can make a contribution, however small, to the sum total of progress in the world.

The intellectual and spiritual share of this task within the *jamat* falls to the Institute. But, as I have said before, the strength of an institution derives from the strength of the individuals whom it serves - in their willingness to put narrow and parochial considerations aside, and to join their energies and initiatives to the pursuit of the common good. As the Dean of the Institute, I am determined to give it a direction and a support which may one day make it into an institution of learning and thought noted for its creativity and excellence. I invite the *jamat* on their part, to appreciate the importance and magnitude of these tasks and to give it the support, the goodwill and the understanding with which alone it can flourish at this hour of need and promise.