The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Keynote Address at 'Intellectual Traditions in Islam' Seminar
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Abstract

One of the major features of the transformation of Islam into one of the great civilisations of the world was its vigorous intellectual and literary life which found expression in diverse schools of thought and communities of interpretation. To generate discussion on the nature and significance of this development, The Institute of Ismaili Studies organised a one-week seminar in the summer of 1994, attended by leading scholars and specialists in Islamic studies from around the world. In his Keynote Address for the seminar, Aziz Esmail reflected on the concepts and implications of the terms 'intellectual life,' 'tradition' and 'Islam'.

Keywords

Islam, intellect, intellectual life, tradition, history, education, modernity, Qur'an, monotheism, fundamentalism, ideologies, religion, religious studies, reason, Enlightenment.

Probing The 'Intellect'

This particular seminar in Cambridge is being held at a time in history — I mean the history not just of the Muslim world but of mankind as a whole — at which each of the concepts that are reflected in its title are in question. Take, first of all, the concept of 'intellectual life'. A great question mark looms over the very concepts of 'the intellectual' and 'intellectual life' today. What is the place of the intellectual in society? Is he an ideologue — a proponent or supporter of the prevailing or dominant thought, or is his role that of a critic? Is it a role which calls one to question the assumptions of the age? Are the corridors of power the proper place for an intellectual? Is that the place where he should take up his lodgings? Or does he belong, like the prophets of the Old Testament, beyond the walls of the city, where he calls out from the wilderness, from outside the dominant, prevailing powers and forms of thought?

There is an old saying, which you might remember, that a prophet is never honoured in his own country. In that saying, there is a statement about the distance of intellectual thought from the centre. But if this is so, if the role of the critic is to interrogate, to challenge what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, to open new horizons, new possibilities of thinking and feeling, of being and acting, how is one, then, to understand the responsibility of the intellectual to society? These are questions about the place of the intellectual in culture and in society. There are similar questions which concern the mind of the individual. What is the place of the life of the mind within the personality? What is its relationship to feeling? What is its relationship to character? What is its relationship to faith? What role does intellectual life have in the development of personal identity and character? What relation does it have to the ordinary joys, affections and sorrows of life, to friendship and love, and not least, to one's relationship with God? What place does it have in the individual's participation in society? To what extent does intellectual consciousness, which is often a critical consciousness, enable such participation, and to what extent does it impede it? And how exactly does the individual relate to the society through his intellectual activities?

Questioning 'Tradition'

These are questions, then, to do with the intellect. Now take the second concept that is present in the title: that, namely, of 'tradition'. What traditions is one to cherish or to uphold in a world in which an individual is exposed, as is the case nowadays, not to one group of traditions but to a multitude of them? The world of today is characterised by a pluralism of traditions. Numerous traditions criss-cross, overlap and jostle one another. Furthermore, modern electronic media and communications have made diverse traditions of the world uniquely, immediately and instantaneously available at various parts of the globe. How might one maintain anchorage in particular historical traditions in such circumstances? Which thread among these traditions relates to which one, such that the threads might somehow constitute a fabric that one can call one's own? And where, therefore, is one to find a sense of belonging, or what is called 'authenticity' or 'identity'

(words about which I have a series of other questions)? These are some of the vexing and uncertain issues that surround the very concept of tradition. Beyond them there lies a more fundamental question. And that question, which is a contemporary one, is not only about which traditions to call one's own, but about the likelihood of any traditions surviving at all in a world which is changing rapidly under one's very eyes. In a sense, one might ask: what is the future of the past? What future does the past have in a world which is changing so fast — a world saturated with the instantaneous culture of global communication? What role does history have here? And if there is no past, if the past has no future, what is one to think about the present and the future?

Subjective Time

Now, let me clarify what I mean by this. I am not talking about public or objective time here, but what we might call subjective time. For objectively, there is always a yesterday, a today and a tomorrow. There is the time of the clock; but there is also, in the life of a society, what we might call historical time — the mode of time in which one is related to, and bears a kinship with, one's ancestors and with the inheritance of an age, a legacy which one carries forward into the future. And this is true not only of society, but also of the individual, because the individual has a life history. The importance of life history, not so much in the public, observable form, but in its subjective mode, becomes especially pronounced at certain critical junctures in life, for instance, old age as well as youth. Where old age is blessed with wisdom, one looks back at the course of one's life as the only course that it could have taken, with the feeling that it was as it ought to have been. One finds a new relationship with one's parents, free of the wish that they should have been different. More generally, one might cherish, at this stage, the sense of a connection with bygone ages, a kinship with history and with distant forefathers which is at the same time a relationship that is to come. For the passing generation gives its lifeblood, part of its soul, to the generation which is yet to come. In this way one closes, as it were, the circle of life history.

Youth is another stage in the life history where the same negotiation, a very difficult, delicate negotiation, between what has gone on in one's life and what is to come, occurs. And what is particularly important at such a time is the relationship of the individual life history to the traditions that are outside it — in a word, to culture. The young man's or woman's relationship to traditions is one of either dependence or defiance. Youth has two opposite yearnings: a yearning to be told what to do and a yearning to tell whoever tells him what to do, to get lost. You will notice that I am using slightly milder language than may be heard in practice. What, however constitutes dependency? What is involved here are not only issues to do with family. They also appertain to the whole question of education, of schooling and the place of the school, as an institution, in society.

Models of Education

There are two models of the school, located at opposite ends of a spectrum. One is that of a military camp; the other of a playing field. The school which is based on the model of a military camp is the sort of school to which most of us gathered here probably went. This is not unlike the model of the public school in England, although the public school has its own grim kind of playfulness. This particular model of education treats with the utmost seriousness the maxim that the child is the father of the man. What it proposes is that the child must be more adult than the adult himself, that he must bend before the objective imperatives of learning. He must learn to make of his life a sustained devotion to duty, a consistent obedience to objective rules. The other type of school, which is the contrary model of education, takes seriously, perhaps too seriously, the adage that 'all work and no play make Jack a dull boy'. Modern liberal theories of education carry this maxim very far indeed, to the point where what it really means is 'all play and no work make Jack a smart boy'. Its central premise is that discipline is something to be avoided at all costs. Now, this is the trend of education which shuns traditions altogether so as to give the child the privilege, as it claims, of 'finding himself,' of creating his own knowledge, of forming his own opinions, in the absence of external discipline or constraint. We in our time have been so conditioned, so accustomed to notice the defects of the formal model of education, now widely considered 'oppressive,' that we are as yet little aware of the grave deficiencies of that model which places all its emphasis on the self rather than on society. It should become obvious, when we ponder on this problem, that education is only a microcosm of the culture of the society at large. The model of education I am criticising leads to what I might call the tyranny of self-absorption. And one often finds among people who come from that particular regime of education a longing, a yearning for a system that will tell them what the world is like, what their place in the world is, and what one is supposed to do in the world.

The Longing For An Objective Order

In a nutshell, this longing is a quest for objectivity: that is to say, for a relationship to an objective order. Now, an objective order is accessible, especially for the young man or woman, through two channels. One is work, the other is culture. Work — a profession or occupation — gives one a firm relationship to a world of ideas, skills and tools. It is significant that throughout history, a majority of men and women have always found their identity in work, whether in hunting animals, in tilling the soil, in raising children, in making machines work, or in all those sundry occupations of an economic, political or organisational kind that enable these other kinds of work to proceed. They have always left to a minority, to higher institutions as it were, the task of complementing the satisfactions to be got out of basic, physical work. Thus, for most of history, political work was left in the hands of rulers; religious life was left in the hands of priests, rabbis and *'ulama*; and culture was entrusted to poets, artists, writers, philosophers and scientists.

In the modern world this relationship has altered. It altered about three centuries ago with the Industrial Revolution when the unit of work shifted from the family home, the farm and the shop to the factory. Traditionally, the shop was a family-orientated affair. It was in a way an extension of the community. But the factory is not an extension of the community, and modern work has proceeded from this point onwards on a separate track from activities in a family, and in a community. Thus, it is very common nowadays to hear people say, 'I find my social satisfaction outside work and not in work itself.' Accordingly, the types of self-expression available in each sector of life differ widely among themselves. This development has many sources, all of which are characteristic of modern history. They include the automatisation and rationalisation of work which went hand in hand with the rise of modern commerce and industry. The twin consequences of this was a differentiation of society into distinct sectors, and a corresponding differentiation of the individual personality into a multiplicity of roles.

As a result of these historical changes, the ethos of modern work is strictly apart from opportunities for self-expression now available in the secular Western world only in the cinema, the concert hall, the theatre, or else in pubs or cafés. But these institutions too — institutions like the theatre and the concert hall — are less communal than was true in the past. One may recall, for instance, the fact that chamber music was largely played in homes and not in concert halls; or that the opera was an event where people came to meet and talk. If you look at copies of *The Times* in England for example, from the last century, you will occasionally find in them complaints about opera singing which was so noisy as to make it impossible for the audience to talk to one another, and so enjoy themselves. Today, however all such activities have become markedly impersonal, rather than communal.

Education and the Inroads of Modernity

In the Third World, two tendencies or trends may be found. On the one side, there is a greater prevalence of forms of art and recreation which are communal or social. There are, for instance, the rousing and rumbustious forms of music like *qawwali* performances, which are fundamentally communal, and where the social, the spiritual and the artistic seem to go together. Another religiopolitical form of self-expression is nowadays to be found in activities centred on the mosque, religious schools or *madrasa*s, and theological colleges. Some of these institutions are taking over a large amount of the functions of culture and communal solidarity in Muslim societies. This is a phenomenon which demands some explanation.

One of the reasons for this trend has to do with the inroads of modernity, which causes the alienation provoking the search, in turn, for social forms embodying what are seen as moral spiritual values. There is also, of course, the problem of education. In the West at least there is a wide availability of opportunities not only for education but for education to be followed by work — opportunities, in other words, for the acquisition of skills and a chance to exercise those skills. When education is denied altogether, or having been acquired appears irrelevant or fruitless, when one is denied what competence one has and

the sense of belonging that comes when that competence is exercised, then there is an enormous sense of anomie and moral vacuum among the young people affected by this trend. I think what is happening in the Islamic world is but a variant of what is happening in the Third World at large, in African and Asian countries, though not necessarily as much, perhaps, in the Far East.

The Rise of Totalistic Ideologies

One of the problems of modern history has been the rise of totalistic ideologies. In the Muslim world, the only major ideology which for a time seemed to be capable of mobilising the society, and in particular its youth, was nationalism, which was usually combined with a degree of real or ostensible socialism. These ideologies were seldom successful in ensuring social justice and solidarity, and hence were succeeded by a period of gathering disillusionment. There is, therefore, a hiatus in these societies: a hiatus in meaning, a crisis of meaning. It has often been said that the rise of 'fundamentalism,' or what is called 'Islamic fundamentalism' in these countries is best explained by politics. But beneath the political problem, there lies the cultural problem. One must, therefore, look at culture, and not just at the political issue in order to understand the matter fully. For regardless of whether an ideology is religious or secular, it is intended to relate the self to society and to a picture of the cosmos at large. Ideologies represent the human need for a unifying doctrine — something that will tell people, firstly, what the world is like; secondly, what man's place in the world is; and thirdly, what the principles governing human actions or conduct in the world are to be. Ideology is thus a total phenomenon. It answers several of those great questions that Kant asked about the order of things, such as 'What is man?', 'What is my place in the world?', and above all, 'What shall I do?' This last question, it will be noticed, is that of ethics.

Within ideologies, there is a distinction to be made between what the psychoanalyst Eric H. Erikson once called, respectively, 'totalism' and 'wholeness'. 'Wholeness' may be defined, negatively, as an absence of disconnection or fragmentation. It represents a sense that one is connected to the universe; that one is connected to fellow human beings; and that within oneself, the various parts are interconnected, giving a unity to the personality. 'Totalism', which in some respects is preferable to the term 'fundamentalism', denotes a unifying system of thought which spells out everything, dictates everything, and makes, moreover, a very sharp distinction between its own world and other worlds, between what is deemed to belong inside and to lie outside its own sphere. Totalism insists that what belongs outside must not be let in, and what belongs to itself must not, at any cost, be left out. This rigid separation of the inside and the outside is a dichotomy found in all totalising ideologies. It is present in the West's image of Islam as antithetical to everything for which Western civilisation stands, and it is equally present in the absolutist definition of Islam, which opposes itself entirely to the culture of modernity.

It is important to realise that this totalistic definition of Islam is a modern one. Although it invokes history, it is not itself based in history. Historically, Islamic thought, or Islamic

culture, was a composite phenomenon. It was a product of many cultural influences, a river into which many a tributary flowed. It had a certain central unity, some central integrity, which is very difficult to define. For instance, when we look at art across the Islamic world, it has a sufficient commonality, and a sufficient distinctiveness, to justify our calling it Islamic. Yet the diversity is considerable, and the influences from all the corners of the globe are also quite extensive.

The Idea of Tradition

Before going further, I would like to add several points of clarification. Often enough, when people say that they are looking for a Judaic answer to the problems of the world today, or a Christian answer, or an Islamic solution, what they seem to be saying is that they wish the tradition in question to continue. But there is every difference in the world between tradition and the desire for tradition, between what I call 'tradition' and 'traditionalism'. The idea of tradition is not a child of tradition. The idea of tradition, which is traditionalism, is born, so to speak, out of wedlock. It emerges from a divorce between ideals and the society in which those ideals are supposed to reign. It is the product of a divorce between past and present. In fact, traditional societies are the one kind of society which are singularly free from the idea of tradition. In the Islamic world, for instance, there is considerable talk, which has been going on now for an odd fifty years or so, about the Muslim 'tradition', the Muslim 'heritage', and so on. These are peculiarly modern preoccupations, however. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger has a lucid image to describe something analogous to what I am speaking of here. A hammer in the hands of an artisan is a very different thing from a hammer in the hands of a repair man. In the hands of the artisan, when the hammer is in working order, it is almost an extension of his body. It is part of him and it is part of the workshop, hence a part of the economy of which that workshop is in turn a part. The moment the hammer breaks, when it no longer works 'naturally,' it becomes an object of scrutiny. It is separated from its function, and when one now looks at the hammer, one looks at it as an object, as a tool, whereas the artisan was probably using it almost unconsciously when it was working. If the economy runs into a problem and the workshop encounters difficulties, it becomes an object of attention, whereas formerly it was not. In the same way, tradition becomes an object of anxiety, nostalgia and attention when it ceases to work, not when it is actually at work. Therefore, it is not in traditional societies that one gets the idea of tradition. It is not in traditional societies that you get the attitude of mind or the cast of mind that I have here called traditionalism.

The measure of a traditional age lies in the amount of life that it is able to take for granted; and the amount, by contrast, that it cannot take for granted, or is no longer able to take for granted. In the distance that separates these two kinds of society lies the distance between the world which was once dominated by Athens, Jerusalem or Mecca, and the world dominated by Washington, Tokyo, by post-imperial London and Paris, and by all those cities in the rest of the world which are satellites of these metropolises. And even when societies which revolve around the modern cities seek to recapture the spiritual dominion of

Jerusalem or Mecca, what they display, in so doing, is not their closeness or proximity to those ancient cities, but rather their nostalgic distance from them.

Let me move on now to some very general observations. I began by saying that each of the concepts that we have in the title of this seminar is not a topic but a question: that the life of intellect is a question, that the idea of a tradition is a question, indeed the idea of Islam itself raises a question. What is meant by Islam, and what is the relationship of the past and present in Islam? One of the functions of the seminar is to define these questions more sharply, because in these matters more than half the battle is accomplished by asking the right kinds of questions. Let us remember that for nearly the first four centuries of Muslim history, the nature of Islam was contested between different interpretations which had not yet hardened into fixed and compartmentalised positions. The notion that Islam had spelled out literal answers to every question to be encountered in history, and that the only impending task was to put it into practice, to effect it, is a misconception. What actually happened in history was, first of all, the fact of the tremendous expansion of Arab rule over large parts of the world, in historical terms an astonishingly brief spell of time. That rule raised all kinds of questions about governance, about ideas and values, about law and the organisation of society. It also provoked considerable variation and dissent. From the beginning, there was a great divide over the question of authority, as to how the Islamic dominions were to be legitimately governed in a spiritual and temporal sense (the distinction between these two realms was not really made till much later). There is, I think, increasing evidence to show that the Shi'i viewpoint on this issue, which located authority in the *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet Muhammad's family, began very early, not withstanding the orthodox Sunni view as well as the view of Western Islamicists who had greater access to Sunni than to Shi'i sources, and whose view was correspondingly shaped. So there was a period of ferment and formation, and that is why one may appropriately call this period, to which I have assigned a loose and necessarily arbitrary date, the formative age of Islam.

From the historical vantage point where we now stand, all the societies that originated from the Mediterranean region — I refer to all societies and not just Muslim societies, leaving out the great civilisations of India and China which have a very different history — appear to share a triple heritage. One is the heritage of a monotheistic faith, which believes in revelation inscribed in a scripture. Hence the term 'societies of the book,' used by Mohammed Arkoun. The second mainspring of their culture is Graeco-Roman. Ancient Greek culture was not, of course, monotheistic. It was based on poetry and philosophy, on ritual and, of course, the theatre. The third major heritage of the modern world is that of the Enlightenment which took place in Europe in the 18th century, with the preceding events of the Reformation and the Renaissance. We must not forget the very close kinship in this context between the Judaic, Christian and Islamic societies. All of them are founded on a concept of revelation; all trace the foundation of their meaning back to the written word, even in Christianity, in which the *Logos*, the Word of God, is not a book, but the person of Jesus. But one only learns of Jesus through the Gospels,

which then is the word that gives access to the figure of Jesus. In the case of Islam, of course, the primacy of the Word is wholly central.

Textualising the Universe

It is relevant, in this connection, to make a few general observations on the Qur'an. On the one Land, the Qur'an is a historical response to a historical problem. The tendency to read the Qur'an solely as a transcendent text tends to leave out the fact that it was a response to real historical events of the time. Yet, in answering the dilemmas of immediate history, contemporary history, what the Qur'an does is to place its response in a larger, a grander statement of the condition of man in the universe. In this sense, the Qur'an is an immensely integrating text. It integrates, gathers together all meanings under the aegis of the concept of the One God. The concept of the unity of God gathers together all the meanings that would otherwise be scattered. That is the way in which the Qur'an addressed the issues of the day, and the issues that pertain to the human condition at large. If we simply look at the very notion of what the Qur'an calls signs, the *ayat,* the context in which one is familiar with that term is in the designation of the verses of the text. But the same term is used in the Qur'an for the phenomena of nature. Again, the Qur'an treats history, the fate that befell former nations, as 'signs' of divine providence. It thus effects what I might call a textualisation of the universe. It shows the entire universe as a text, of which the Qur'an is the central, shining paradigm. It converts the signs and marks of existence into a map. It integrates diverse facets of the world as we experience it — as the Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries experienced it — into a unitive, all-encompassing meaning.

Another topic which I would like to comment on very briefly in this connection is that of symbolic language. The specific point I have in mind is that there is a certain difference between symbolic religious language on the one hand, and ideological religious language on the other. There is a certain distinction to be made between spiritual religion and ideological religion, between symbolic faith — which keeps everything open, which fosters a plurality of meanings, because symbolic meaning cannot be tied down in a dogma or a formula — and a system of closed meanings. So, this contrast between the openness of the symbolic mode and the closure of ideological religion is something which, I think, is well-worth keeping in mind. One can talk about this in the context of the other faiths as well, but here I am confining my remarks to Islam.

Graeco-Roman Heritage

The second component of the triple heritage was that of Greek philosophy, which contributed a specific discipline of reason. In speaking of reason, one must remember that the Qur'an itself represents a rationalisation at work, because it combats myth. Owing to its symbolic language, there is in the Qur'an the notion of the supernatural, of supernatural beings like angels, jinns, and so on. But it is nonetheless quite parsimonious about the concept of miracles. The Qur'an mentions the Quraysh as demanding a miracle

to be sent down from God as a proof of the prophethood of Muhammad. However, it resolutely repudiates the expectation of such a miracle, and refers instead to the signs of God in the natural universe and in human history. There is thus a certain distancing from magic and miracle, and a rationalisation which corresponds to the transformation of social structure brought about by the preaching of the Prophet. In Greek culture, philosophy emerged with Plato and Aristotle as the preferred pathway to truth. The ideal of reason had the same pre-eminence in ancient Greek society that God-fearing piety has in the monotheistic faiths. For that reason, when in the first few centuries following the Prophet's death, Muslim intellectuals came into contact with the philosophical tradition initiated by the Greeks, they were forced to wrestle with the differences between, on the one hand, the traditions of monotheistic faiths, which were embodied in the *shari'a* and based on the authority of scripture, and on the other hand, what the Greeks had said about reason as the gateway to truth. And what is most interesting about the efforts of the few, but towering, intellectual giants in all the three faiths, beginning with the Islamic domain, who studied philosophy, was the nature of the reconciliation that they tried to achieve between them. This reconciliation involved something which has not been emphasised sufficiently, what I would call political theology: the theology of life in a community or society. What philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd were emphasising was the unity of truth. Given this unity, the paths of reason on the one hand, and of tradition, based on authority and revelation, had to be both distinguished and related.

The intellectual path in the thinking of these philosophers, who clearly echoed Plato in this respect, is one that only an elite with the requisite intellectual aptitude can pursue. For the masses the same truth needs to be couched in terms of imagination — figurative language, parables, metaphors, symbols, stories, narratives. Furthermore, in this view, the Prophet is uniquely gifted not only at perceiving the truth, but in being able to relate it to the masses — in other words, in being able to couch it in the language of creative imagination, which is the only language that can mobilise people and recruit them into the service of the order of the body politic, while ensuring their own well-being and happiness. To this end, the philosophers disapproved of any attempts to expose the masses to philosophy. For they thought that this was something that would create havoc — undigested reason among people who cannot master it would cause them to lose their faith and attachment to traditions, without giving them the comforts or solace of the way of reason. That was one particular response to the issue of the relationship between philosophy and the traditions of monotheistic faiths.

'Reason' and The Enlightenement

The third major development in history relevant to this question is that of the Enlightenment. Here, reason came to mean something quite distinct. To an extent, the Enlightenment harked back to the classical philosophical heritage. But the operative model was that of modern science. The science of Newton provided the model for all human knowledge and all human activity. The philosophers of the 18th century associated religion in Europe, among other things, with the corruption of the clergy and the power of

the Roman Catholic Church. The reaction to what was seen as the history of religious oppression and obscurantism came from several quarters. There was the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment, but earlier on there had been the Reformation launched by Martin Luther. It was, I think, one of the most important events in human history when Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular. For it gave to the ordinary man access to the scripture which had previously been monopolised by the clergy. Finally, the rise of the nation state was also crucial in all these developments, because the nation state broke the unity of Christendom, just as in the present century the abolition of the Sunni *khilafa* in 1924 by Kemal Atatürk and the formation of the Arab states with the retreat of the British and French powers in areas of the Middle East, also had a great influence on the way that Islam is understood today.

Coming To Terms with 'Intellectual Life', 'Islam' and 'Tradition'

All these three traditions — that is, the traditions of monotheistic faith, Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment — have come under explicit or implicit pressure and questioning in the contemporary world. There are many reasons for this. Here I will confine myself to alluding only to a few of them. One is the fact that in the modern world the very awareness of a plurality of cultures makes it very difficult for any one culture to believe in itself to the exclusion of others. It poses the danger, or to put it more mildly, the challenge, of relativism. Relativism says that all doctrines, all ideas and values can be explained by reference to time and place. But if all ideas and values are to be thus explained, one's confidence in upholding a single culture or tradition is seriously dented. It is this dilemma which is partly reflected in the controversy currently raging in England, for instance, over whether schools ought to teach world religions in a neutral tone, that is, without advocating any normative religious positions. Is then the function of religious education to provide facts or is it to inculcate belief? There are those who will say that to inculcate belief in a young child is a form of indoctrination. There are those, by contrast, who will insist that the neutral way of teaching religion, that is, of imparting only facts about religion, is anything but religious education.

Another central issue of our times concerns the relation of the individual to society. In the late modern West, the dominant model, which is the model of the market, dictates attitudes towards culture. Culture, in this way of thinking, becomes a supermarket of ideas, values and doctrines, where one chooses according to taste, not according to objective essence — where the desire of the individual is the final arbiter of choice. Thus, if I choose to live a particular life, it is not because I am justified in believing in the objective rightness or suitability of that particular option, but because I so desire it. For freedom goes hand in hand with desire, and it is one's desire which eventually dictates what is right and what is wrong. Now this model presupposes a different conception of selfhood than the models which it has displaced. And although at one level it may be felt as liberating, it also harbours a potential for moral crisis. For, when morality is predicated on choice, that means there is nothing else but choice to dictate what the morality of the age shall be. A society based on this notion is more in the nature of an association than a

Gestalt, a whole bigger than the sum of the parts. In earlier cultures, community came first and individuals second; individuals drew their lifeblood, as it were, from society. But in the contemporary world, society is seen as the product of individual decisions to band together, to come together in random groups, and that in itself constitutes one of the major cultural and intellectual dilemmas of the present age.

In answering, or in at least asking these questions, in exploring these issues, which represent the need of the hour in the world today, the monotheistic faiths have a great role to play. But this role will be effective only under certain conditions. One of these conditions is the growing need for a genuine mutual appreciation between the faiths which share a common origin, what we call the Abrahamic faiths. Attention to this common heritage, the Abrahamic heritage, which is a source of shared issues and problems, is especially important for Muslims who live as minorities in the Western world. The second condition is that to engage with the contemporary world means to take it seriously, which means to understand it, not to dismiss it. The theological rhetoric which says that the modern world is the antithesis of what the Islamic tradition teaches us — in other words, the rhetoric which sets Islam and the modern world as separate, opposing blocs — is a maladaptive rhetoric. Engagement does not mean surrender; for criticism too is a form of engagement.

One of the great mistakes that Protestant Christianity and Protestant Christian theology made in recent history was to take on board virtually all the concepts of the modern age. When the age passes, so do its concepts. If Protestant theology becomes too strongly wedded to the modern concept of modernity, it will find itself left behind, because it will have succumbed to the drift, the fashion, of a particular age. It will have abdicated the critical distance, which is the gift of prophecy, from the world in which it operates. How Islamic theology may engage with the modern world without becoming a prisoner of the modern understanding of modernity is one of the major challenges facing Islamic thought today. How it will meet this challenge is anybody's guess at the moment. It is something that still awaits the verdict of history.