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"Towards New Horizons in Islamic Studies"
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Abstract

What role does the Islamic Studies have to play within the larger field of Education? What do we mean when we use the phrase "Islamic Studies"? Examining key concepts and issues that concern all interested in the study and teaching of Muslim culture, in all its varied aspects, the author explores the larger issues of the presentation of Islam and Muslim societies, both past and present.

Why Study Islam?

What purpose might the study of Islam serve in the midst of the uncertainty which pervades the field of education today? This question is, I believe, one of the most important among those which anyone having anything to do with Muslim culture and history may ask of himself. Yet the importance of the question is not self-evident and we must not take it for granted. The fact that scholars of Islam seldom ask this question of themselves — at least in public, and not, at any rate, in these terms — is, in this respect, highly significant. For this can mean one of two things: either the question is trivial or unimportant, or its importance, though great, is not fully appreciated by them. If the latter were true, what we have is a paradox, for on first consideration we may expect academic specialists of Islam to be particularly sensitive to this question. Consequently, the paradox itself would need to be explained. I shall not, however, attempt to do this here. It is more fruitful, I believe, to tackle the question not from within the terms of Islamic Studies but in terms broader yet inclusive: so that, having considered the wider issue, the circumstances within the field of Islamic Studies will become more intelligible because they will be seen in perspective.

Conceptualising Tradition

This wider issue is something which we may approach by reflecting, for a moment, on the concept of tradition. For any established discipline of study, with its characteristic skills and conventions of judgement, is by definition a tradition and hence Islamic Studies can be logically described as a tradition. But this applies to education as a whole, for the process of education is, in part, the onward transmission of methods of gaining knowledge, standards for distinguishing between true knowledge and what only masquerades as such and, at its best, the creative development of new methods, new standards of judgement, new horizons of knowledge. But we may well go one step further. For the term tradition may be applied not only to methods of study but to a way of life: ways of looking at the world; ways of behaving towards one another; and ways of distinguishing between right and wrong, the trivial and the

important; in a word, to *culture.* And if we add to these elements a faculty for distinguishing between the sacred and the profane (between ultimate and subordinate concerns) we obtain the concept of a *religious* culture. There is, in fact, no such thing, *ultimately,* as a non-religious culture. There are, and have been, anti-religious cultures. Such, for instance, was the outlook of the French Enlightenment, in the eighteenth century, and such, again, was the whole mentality associated with the Revolution which followed. But these were "anti-religious" movements only in the sense that they were relentlessly opposed to the received language and organisation of the sacred. The enthralling catchwords of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* demonstrate that the sense of the sacred was not here abolished but transposed.

Nor were the new values entirely unrelated to the old ones of the Judaeo-Christian (and by extension, Islamic) as well as the classical traditions. How "revolutionary" revolutions really are is in itself a fascinating question, but one obviously beside the point here. All revolutions are more than revolts: they go deeper by transforming; but often enough, they transform society by making it revolve, violently no doubt, yet, like the earth itself, on a central axis.

Nor is the "irreligious" culture of modernity devoid of sacred or spiritual mainsprings. One has only to consider the status of concepts like human rights and the fundamental value of democracy to realise this point. There is much more in common between so-called "religious" and "secular" cultures than the polarisation implied by these terms would lead one at first sight to suspect. What is now-a-days seen as the irremediable conflict of "secular" and "religious" values is in reality a clash between *ideologies* of the secular and the religious: a doctrine, on one hand, which ignores or underplays the role of the sacred in *all* culture; and on the other hand, a doctrine which insists that a supposedly traditional or historical, religious interpretation of the sacred is identical with the sacred itself. Ideologies spring from reality, but in the same breath, they distort reality. What, then, is the reality to which these doctrines, in a round-about way, through a glass darkly, as it were, testify?

Tradition and Modernity

The history of human societies may be said, in general, to comprise two kinds of moment. There are moments of replication and moments of break, discontinuity and (sometimes) transformation. The first type is characteristic of tradition, the second of modernity. The contrast between these is not total: traditions are hardly ever static; they change, and change inescapably, even when they are least conscious — and least desirous — of change. A river alters its course, willy nilly, as it makes its way through the land, collecting debris, depositing silt, so transforming, for ever afterwards, its bed and its banks. Even so, the march of a tradition through the terrain of history does not proceed without incurring alterations in its shape and substance. When Islamic society, equipped, at first, with the emotions and ideals of Arabic poetry on one hand and the values and imaginative insights of the Arabic Qur'an on the other, encountered the traditions of Greek philosophy, or the learning of the Hebraic, Syriac, Pahlavi or Indian traditions, its outlook was decisively transformed; just as these traditions, when they were assimilated enough into an Arabo-Islamic mould to feel the pressure of its vision, were also decisively altered. The theology of a Mu'tazili, the Neoplatonic mysticism of Ibn al-'Arabi, Suhrawardi's Irano-Islamic citadel of lights, are far from a mere "interpretation" of Qur'anic principles: they embody new shapes of thought, new channels of feeling. Even what was called the *sunna,* the trodden path, was a new path *interpreted* as an old one. The emphasis on tradition in al-Shafi'i is the creation, not the perpetuation, of a tradition. The *shari'a* is, theoretically, deduced from the Qur'an, from

prophetic precedent. and from the authority of other subsequent, complementary principles. But, in fact, it is at least as inductive — if not more so — as deductive. It is a temporal enterprise, sometimes creative, sometimes rigid, but at all times carrying the mark of historicity.

Recasting the Traditional

Traditions, then, are neither static nor homogeneous; they are dynamic, diversified, manifold rather than singular and sensitive rather than oblivious (even when unconsciously so — for there is such a thing as unconscious attentiveness, just as there is also such a thing as conscious inattention) to their surroundings. At the very least, in times of inertia or quiescence, when there is no challenge and hence no response, but only cumulative life, there is still change. For to accumulate is to build; building is growth; and growth confers novelty. Contrary to the modern habit (for it *is* modern) of speaking of Islam as "a tradition" (or still more narrowly, as a "religious tradition"), it is truer to history to regard classical Islam as a framework of institutions, languages, worldviews, aesthetic forms, technologies and intellectual systems, essentially of urban origin, but coexistent with numerous rural, vernacular cultures, socially differentiated, historically formed, historically evolving, and historically intelligible. A plurality of "traditions" is but part of this complex. And if we must have a name for this historical complex, the term "civilisation" approximates it far closer (while having yet another implication as I shall show below), than any other one at our disposal.

The Pluralism of Classical Islam

Classical Islam, thus conceived, had an overall coherence. This coherence was reflected in a plurality of cultures or civilisations. But lest one be tempted to take recourse, in a hurry (for normative anxieties have a way of inducing mental hurry) to stock formulae, such as "Islam is a total system", it is important to be precise as to wherein this coherence lay.

More than anywhere else, the coherence lay in the dialogue — the mutuality of reference — between the various traditions within the complex. Dialogue need not mean amity. It includes confrontation. And where confrontation was intensified into antipathy, and antipathy into conflict, the commonality of reference did not thereby disappear. For disagreement is not the same thing as incomprehension. And mutual antagonism may occur either when the parties to the dispute misunderstood each other; or understand each other only too well, and are, therefore, all the more fiercely alert to differences which divide them. Throughout, the existence of a finite universe of discourse, with a stock of common questions and mutually intelligible responses, sometimes convergent, at times divergent, often influencing each other consciously, more often unconsciously (as we see with al-Ghazali, for instance, who absorbed both philosophy, which he, in part, attacked, and Ismaili esotericism, which he attacked more vehemently, but by the appeal of whose ideas he could not help being influenced) — these qualities are what distinguishes classical Islam from the situation of Islam in the modem world. For this situation comprises an entirely new and ever-proliferating set of cultural traditions, intellectual styles, political forms and technological innovations, an entirely new scope of economic action, together with a wholly new scale of economic expectations and a totally unprecedented speed and reach of information, however superficial and superfluous, but not, for that reason, any the less powerful in its impact.

Classical Islam began with the rationalisation of life, the ethical ordering of human relations, and the vision of a lawful but willed or created universe — all characteristics, typically, of the vision, common to all the three monotheistic faiths of the Near East, of a knowledge of the truth about things and of the right way to live, promulgated by a prophet whose knowledge was held to be inspired from on-high, and which was inscribed in a text. Armed with this philosophy and with the sense of the place it gave them in the scheme of things, the early Arab conquerors went on to confront a truly varied landscape of cultures and institutions. Jewish, Christian, Manichaean Zoroastrian and (later) Indian and African religious traditions, some expressed primarily in law, others in theology, yet others in folk poetry; the bureaucratic and administrative systems of old Persia; Byzantine, Roman and other Near Eastern traditions in art and architecture; the imperial traditions of Iran — all these were encountered, accepted, studied, put to the test, criticised, adapted, modified, developed in new directions. Amidst all this, a handful of theoretical questions, with a practical background and practical implications, preoccupied the thinkers and writers of the formative age — roughly the first four centuries — of Islam.

The question of authority after the Prophet; the status of the so-called "grave sinner" (a question prompted by the Khariji, who declared all such "sinners," politically conceptualised, as infidels); the debate over predestination and free will (motivated, in the background, by views about the scope and legitimacy of human political action); the question whether the Qur'an was created or not — again a theological question on the surface, but with a political significance underneath; the acceptability or otherwise of the foreign sciences, including, especially, Greek metaphysics; the whole vast enterprise of the collection of *hadith* and methodological disputes about which *hadiths* were authoritative and which were not, how this was to be ascertained and the respective roles of authority and reason in the formulation of law — these and other associated questions furnished the intellectual crucible within which the mental life of classical Islamic societies was moulded.

Modern Muslim Societies

It will be readily seen that both the material conditions and the intellectual issues which form the milieu of modern Muslim societies are radically different. This difference is so vast, and so many-sided, that it defies enumeration. But if the details are too voluminous to describe in a monograph — let alone in an article — the magnitude of the difference is obvious. It is this divide, this chasm between history and contemporaneity, between memory and experience, which constitutes the reality of Muslim experience today. Out of the hard, painful experience of these realities, there have flowed a small stream of individual, isolated, creative efforts, at an intellectual or cultural level, towards new horizons, new ideals of material and intellectual advancement, commensurate with our age: but in the course of which, some, at least, of the moral and spiritual ideals of the Islamic past may, far from being jettisoned, prove to have enduring, and perhaps even creative, resonance for today.

Meanwhile, a more turbulent torrent of fundamentalism, which, in its more extreme forms, substitutes moral absolutism for moral thought, utopian politics for pragmatic development, and psychological coercion, even terror, for education, has seized popular attention, drowning into near-inaudibility the quieter murmur of the stream of cultural and intellectual creativity. This, again, is a topic enormous enough to require many works reflecting many angles of view. But I would like to comment here very briefly on another way of thinking, superficially

convincing, but, in point of fact, equally problematic: the call, namely, to somehow return to and retrieve the essence of the Islamic "tradition".

The Idea of Tradition

Would, perhaps, that the answers were as simple but they are not. Those who speak of Islam as a tradition simply to be grasped aright; purified of the secondary accretions and dross of the centuries, would do well to ponder on how modern the search for tradition, by its very nature, is bound to be. For tradition is one thing; the idea of tradition, another. Traditional societies do not ever think of themselves as traditional. The sure sign, the unmistakable proof, of the traditional character of a society is the absence, in its language, of the idea of tradition. It is modernity which begets traditionalism. For tradition by its very nature is innocent of self-consciousness. The contemplation of the old or pristine as pristine is prompted either by the same curiosity which takes us to the museums (which, as we know, endow objects of art with a meaning wholly different from that present in the minds of their original creations or possessions), or by a repulsion from the present which generates nostalgia, or else by an urge to make the new palatable by re-defining it as old. Other such reasons may be added, but in each case there is a certain contrivance, a certain short-circuiting of the real.

Problematising "Islamic"

Muslim societies did not always speak obsessively of Islam. Their texts speak of many issues and problems which we categor ise as "Islamic", but these texts address themselves to problems, not to "Islam". If we try to penetrate these texts, reading carefully between the lines rather than staying on the surface, we are likely to appreciate that these issues were human issues, issues that we can well imagine, if we make the effort to reduce, mentally, the distance that separates our world from theirs, to be inherent in the nature of the human psyche and human life in society. Such issues were perceived by the authors in question in terms derived from their literary sources. But this does not make the problems unique or idiosyncratic. Nor does it make the answers that were offered by one or another author as unique and sacrosanct. Texts which were prompted by defensive or self-conscious instincts, while appealing to Islamic sources, were nonetheless not about Islam. In his classical defence of philosophy against his critics, for example, Ibn Rushd mentions the divine law; he quotes from the Qur'an; but he does not give us a formula about whether "Islam" allows philosophy, and to what degree. For this reason, formulae about what Islam has to say about the environment (the concept of which, and the awareness of which as a problem, is essentially modern) or about the various economic systems born of industrial society stand subject to the same critique. Such formulations may be divided into two categories. There are the theoretical issues and there are the practical ones. The theoretical issues cannot be straitjacketed into Islamic and non-Islamic ones. Biology, for instance, can only be biology. There is no Islamic biology any more than there is Western biology or Marxist biology. (The latter was, of course, attempted in the Soviet Union under Stalin, with results which were objectively comic, and tragic for scientific culture in that country). But the practical domain is very different. It demands not open-ended research but reference-points for conduct and laws and regulations for orderly life in society. These two, however, are evolved rather than given. They reflect a combination of various elements: ethical principles; practical wisdom; a political calculation of what will and will not work in a given context; an understanding of the psychology of those who are affected by those ordinances and whose willing compliance with them is of the utmost importance for their success; a sense of precedent — "tradition" if one likes, *(here*

tradition is a valid concept) — something which is characteristic of Islamic law as it is of English Common Law; and not least, a cumulative advance beyond the weight of precedent. This practical side of human life, as opposed to the intellectual or theoretical, is often constrained to be more conservative than radical: more cautious than daring, because the regions where the human mind may roam in its search for new discoveries are more spacious than those open to human action. Each has its own place and importance. What is common is the equal danger that doctrinaire ideology poses to each of these realms. For genuine thought, it substitutes slogans; and in the place of genuine action, it fosters herd-behaviour.

Resuming the Dialogue

It is arguable, therefore, that the need of the hour, as far as Muslim societies are concerned, is not for more re-definitions of Islam, nor for a return to "authentic" Islam, nor for a resumption of battle against foreign or infidel nations. It is, quite simply, a need to resume an interrupted conversation. I have suggested above that one place where we may locate the integrity, the coherence of classical Islamic cultures is in its discourse, its conversation. This conversation needs to be re-activated and broadened, and broadened with a view to a new coherence, not a hasty or premature coherence in the here and now, but, rather, an ultimate coherence, visible in the distant horizons.

What does it mean both to resume and broaden this conversation? The content of a conversation, and the parties to it, vary between one age and another, one social world and another. The scholastic puzzles which preoccupied the classical Muslim mind — puzzles such as the relative scope of freewill and predestination, the relation of divine essence to divine attributes — are in some instances of no more than historical interest today; in those others which expressed more general perplexities, arising from the conditions of human life in society, we may discover new facets and dimensions of interest when we are thus able to recast or reinterpret them. Yet others have been subsumed, rather than superseded, by the new knowledge of human nature which has now come to the fore and continues to accumulate day by day: knowledge of nature; of the biochemical basis of behaviour; of patterns and varieties of human behaviour in society, studied by sociologists and anthropologists; of new directions in philosophical (including theological) thought necessitated by this empirical information; of new directions in politico-ethical thought warranted by the modern phenomena of the nation-state, mass politics, and shifting notions of the relation between the private and the public, the individual and the corporate and between state, society and culture. How can these phenomena be excluded from renewed conversation, whether in the Islamic context or any other equivalent context in the world today?

Repositioning "Islamic Studies"

If we were to narrow this reflection to the more specific sphere of education, and within this, to the still more specific corner occupied by Islamic Studies — the question with which this article opened — we can, surely, raise a parallel question. Can the enterprise of Islamic Studies divorce itself, without deleterious results to itself — deleterious in the sense of being relegated to the margins of contemporary intellectual life — from the questions which seriously challenge the meaning of education itself? For here too, there are pressing questions. What, for instance, is to become in these days of new, multiplying, supposedly educational fields, such as "social studies", "media studies" and schools of "communication" — of the time-honoured disciplines of learning in the liberal arts and the sciences and the relationship

among them? And lest these issues be considered at best of tangential interest to the subject-matter of Islamic Studies, there are other questions which involve this subject directly. Can Islamic philosophy be studied, for instance, except in the context of medieval philosophy as a whole, and can this ever be studied, in turn, without taking into account the whole critique of the scholastic outlook by Kant and his successors? What, on a different note, is the meaning of "Islamic Studies" itself? What does it logically include and where do its outer boundaries lie? What explains or justifies, if anything, the inbuilt peculiarity of the name itself? For we can hardly imagine some such counterpart to it as "Christian Studies" with a symmetrical range of subject matter. One can, of course, think more easily of Jewish Studies, but here race provides a measure of unity not present in the other cases. Other labels of convenience, such as "African Studies", or "South Asian Studies", have the advantage of clear geographical reference. This does not accord with "Islam", and when geographical categories are interposed on the subject matter of Islam, the result is sometimes a skewed emphasis, such as that inherent in the assimilation of Islamic Studies into Schools of Middle Eastern Studies, whose larger resources (due to geopolitical realities) in comparison to schools, say, of South Asian Studies, result in a less than fully conscious (and hence less than fully analysed) statement about Islam. Alternatively, this tenuousness of nomenclature is managed by rule-of-thumb labels. like the adjectives "central" and "peripheral" which divide the two volumes of the well-known *Cambridge History of Islam.* These issues are of more than procedural or organisational significance. They touch upon the deeper issue of not only how one is to approach a particular subject but of *what* that subject is — wherein lies its identity. And this, in turn, is related to still other, no less significant issues of intellectual life as a whole.

It is far from my intention to argue that scholars need to make their work "relevant". Relevance is a flimsy notion. What is relevant today has the built-in risk of being relevant only today. And what was of relevance yesterday can too easily be assumed to be only so, because it happens to be of no relevance today; whereas tomorrow may reveal, in what may by then have been dismissed as a dead past, wholly fresh and unsuspected levels of pertinence. The intellectual vocation has the greatest chance of producing fruits of quality when it refuses to bow to political imperatives. For political impulses feed on ephemeral realities; whereas intellectual — artistic or scientific — achievement, when it is genuine, has about it a quality of timelessness.

It is out of no mere instinct of being "abreast with the times" that we must, if at all, re-consider the whole scope and meaning of Islamic Studies. It is rather, with a view to greater consciousness of the dimensions of Islamic history itself, and of the human spirit of which it is, historically and today, an expression — it is to *this* end and not to the political ends of today (including those of academic politics) that we must seek to think widely and deeply. For any reasonable acquaintance with Islamic history enables one to assert, safely, that there was much more to it than a good many standard accounts of it, whether in terms of creed, sectarian divisions, or dynastic chronologies, would lead one to suspect. It is, again, reasonable to conjecture that Avicenna, had he lived today, would have been challenged, rather than been indifferent to, those sciences which have something to say or to claim about the universe and the conditions of human life. (This is, of course, to speak crudely, for a contemporary Avicenna would not be, in any recognisable sense, Avicenna. But this is said only in a manner of speaking, appropriate to the purpose at hand.) And to take *these* into account is not to add but to expand. It is to expand the dialogue beyond the frontiers which the passage of time may have caused to recede; and beyond those other frontiers, whether

imposed by modem notions of religion, or of the glamorised or demonised "other" (for these two are reverse sides of the same coin), whose net effect has been to fence in the phenomenon of Islam, rather than recognising it as one of the major players in a common human history.

Islam as Civilisation

The understanding of Islam in terms of civilisation has, therefore, this other implication, which was left pending above. The notion of civilisation implies, almost automatically, a *comparative* point of view. It is hardly possible to address the elements of Islamic civilisations without addressing corresponding elements of other civilisations; hence, of civilisations in general; and thus, ultimately, of issues of human culture. The approach of civilisation, therefore, is, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, a humanistic approach. It is, among other things, an antidote to exoticism — to the treatment, whether romantic or dismissive, of a culture as self-contained, different, irreducibly unique, and therefore, irreducibly alien.