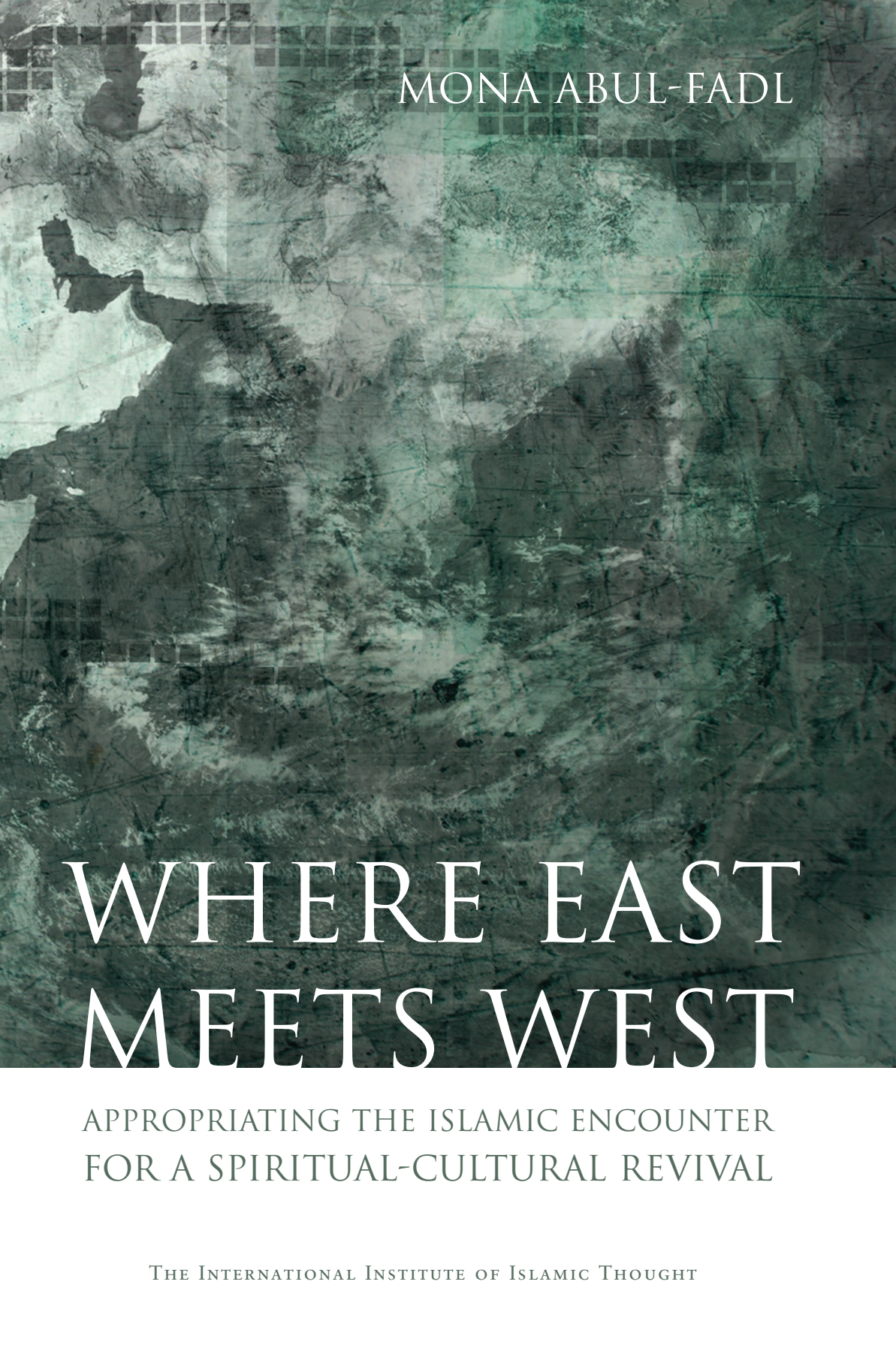




MONA ABUL-FADL

WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

APPROPRIATING THE ISLAMIC ENCOUNTER
FOR A SPIRITUAL-CULTURAL REVIVAL

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

WHERE EAST MEETS WEST:
APPROPRIATING THE ISLAMIC
ENCOUNTER FOR A SPIRITUAL-
CULTURAL REVIVAL

To turn from the literature of Hindu-Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian Asia to that of Islam is, to a Westerner, like moving from a low hanging humid, all-embracing haze into an upper region of fresh, clean air. There is a realistic, explicitly expressed definitiveness about the Qur'an and its Islam which permits one of the West to breathe more easily and to see things more clearly ... Islam gave to the West through its Arabian universities in Spain much of the source material and the enlightenment which made the West what it now is. Judaism, Christianity and Islam derive from common roots even though each adds its unique elements. There is the underlying solidarity of the Greco-Hebrew, Christian-Islamic world as well as the solidarity of Asia. Thus for a Westerner to move ... into Islam is ... , in a very real and fundamental sense to be coming home.

F. S. C. NORTHROP, *The Taming of the Nations* (1952)

A l'heure qu'il est, la condition essentielle pour que la civilisation européenne se répande, c'est la destruction de la chose sémitique par excellence, la destruction du pouvoir théocratique de l'islamisme ... Là est la guerre éternelle, la guerre qui ne cessera que quand le dernier fils d'Ismael sera mort de misère ou aura été relégué par la terreur au fond du désert. L'Islam est la plus complète négation de l'Europe; L'Islam est le fanatisme, comme l'Espagne du temps de Philippe II et l'Italie du temps de Pie V l'ont à peine connu; l'Islam est le dédain de la science, la suppression de la société civile; c'est l'épouvantable simplicité de l'esprit sémitique, rétrécissant le cerveau humain, le fermant à toute idée délicate, à tout sentiment fin, à toute recherche rationnelle, pour le mettre en face d'une éternelle tautologie: Dieu est Dieu. L'avenir est donc à l'Europe et à l'Europe seule. L'Europe conquerra le monde et y répandra sa religion, qui est le droit, la liberté, le respect des hommes, cette croyance qu'il y a quelque chose de divin au sein de l'humanité.

ERNEST RENAN, *Inaugural Lecture, College de France*, (23 FEBRUARY 1862)

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MONA ABUL-FADL

A REVISED EDITION



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT
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Note on this Revised Edition

IIIT has great pleasure in presenting this revised edition of Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl's *Where East Meets West: Appropriating the Islamic Encounter for a Spiritual-Cultural Revival*. The book was originally published under the title, *Where East Meets West: The West on the Agenda of the Islamic Revival*. Sadly, Dr. Abul-Fadl passed away in September 2008 before work on a revised edition could begin. Therefore, respecting the quality of her scholarship and in memory of her work no content or structural change has been made to the original edition, other than correction of typographical and other errors which had crept into the typesetting and design of the original.

PREFACE

IN presenting this book to the reading public, the International Institute of Islamic Thought places an important brick in the metatheoretical foundations of its Western Thought Project (WTP), for it was with the intent of encouraging an active and critical presence of the Muslim intellect that the broad outlines of the Western Thought Project were first conceived. Now, with the Publication of Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl's *Where East Meets West: The West on the Agenda of the Islamic Revival*, the Institute is confident that its Western Thought Project will bring about the discourse it envisions. This work represents a call by the Institute and its Western Thought Project to discriminating Muslim scholars the world over – a call to share in the development of an original, constructive, and intellectual Islamic stance as regards modern knowledge at both the conceptual and the methodological levels.

The author of this challenging work is a close and long-standing associate of the Institute. Abul-Fadl's work was first noticed by the former president of the Institute, *al-Shahīd* Dr. Ismaʿīl Rajī al-Faruqī, and his wife, Dr. Lois Lamyā' al-Faruqī. A meeting was arranged and, a few months before his assassination, al-Faruqī met with Abul-Fadl and came away from that meeting impressed by the scope of Abul-Fadl's reading, her knowledge of Western thought and tradition, and her ability to criticize these both from Western and Islamic perspectives. Although al-Faruqī was anxious for Abul-Fadl to use her skills and knowledge for furthering the cause of the Institute's Western Thought Project, this did not materialize until after his assassination.

When she arrived at the Institute, Abul-Fadl took full responsibility for the Project, started processing materials which had been collected under al-Faruqī's supervision, and then began to cover new ground. After taking another look at the entire project in relation to the Institute's fundamental goal (the Islamization of knowledge), she drew

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up two charts offering two plans of action: one showed intellectual dealings with Western thought from an Islamic point of view, and the others showed academic cooperation and the preparation of synoptic textbooks in major academic disciplines. It soon became obvious, however, that preparing the envisioned systemic text books would require the continuous and combined efforts of a significant number of specialists – something which the Institute with its limited human and financial resources would find difficult to achieve within a reasonable period of time. This realization led the Institute to reconsider its priorities and strategies in addressing Western thought: it would now concentrate on developing a theoretical matrix of inquiry and providing a methodology for dealing with Western thought from an Islamic perspective. Both of these were done with the intent of understanding and evaluating Western thought in order to go beyond it after weighing it against the Islamic theory and sources of knowledge and the distinguishing traits of the Islamic imagination with its values *vis-à-vis* existence, humanity, and life.

Abul-Fadl decided to undertake the exploration of this vast field on her own. She went through hundreds of books and studies in order to immerse herself in the Western intellectual tradition, its roots, history, attitudes, and classifications. Over the next two years, Abul-Fadl recorded her ideas and observations in both English and Arabic. Then, gathering her data together, she submitted the first systematic report on the Western Thought Project, a work which documented her proposals and laid the groundwork in a manner that would be accessible to a cumulative, critical, or creative effort by others.

The report in itself is a serious study in the field, for it contains several constructive suggestions about how to deal with the logistics of undertaking such a monumental project. This report, together with its supplement of nearly six hundred pages, has not been published and at presents constitutes a reference for review and internal circulation. Indeed, Abul-Fadl might have been able to enrich the library of the Institute and of Islamic learning in general with several studies if only she had access to the same facilities as her Western colleagues. Often, the only thing a Western scholar needs to worry about is the idea itself, for the preparation, research, documentation, structured formulation,

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editing, correction, rewriting, and production of the final draft is commonly delegated to qualified research assistants and editors. If Abul-Fadl and many other Muslim thinkers could avail themselves of such facilities, the library of contemporary Islamic thought and culture would be a very rich one indeed.

In this volume, Abul-Fadl defines the Islamization of knowledge and elucidates the present state of thinking on this subject by explaining that one element of the Islamic religious imperative is to activate the Islamic worldview which, in turn, is contingent on the ideal of *tajaddud* (renovation). It is this ideal or commitment that the program of intellectual revival known as the Islamization of knowledge assumes.

The relevance of the Western Thought Project, Abul-Fadl further explains, is in reactivating the Muslim mind so that it can effectively interact within the contemporary epistemic chart, rather than merely introduce Muslims to the West or vice versa. What is at stake is a new type of encounter with the West in terms derived from the *tawhīdī* episteme, so that a dynamic and equitable process of cultural interaction may be set into motion. The contemporary Islamic revival obliges Muslim thinkers to reconsider the world and their place in it, while the Islamization of knowledge (the revival's intellectual response) qualifies the nature of the Muslim's reconsidering the Other, particularly in the case of the West. Ultimately, by drawing on the sources of their rich spiritual heritage, Muslim scholars can effectively contribute to the resolution of many of the more acute social problems that threaten the course of an afflicted humanity.

Surely, too, this is a noble calling and aspiration that must engage the hearts and minds of all those who share a stake in a better, nobler, and more humane world. It is a tribute to the WTP, as it is at present promoted by the Institute (IIIT) and as it is here ably outlined and formulated by the author, that it is all-embracing in its audience and concerns. True to the spirit of the faith and the message that inspired it, it is conceived in the conviction that the renewal of the Muslim intellect and the betterment of the condition of the Muslim Ummah are inseparably intellectual and spiritual enlightenment of all.

IIIT, 1412 AH/JUNE 1992

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RECENTLY, an avant-garde Muslim critic stated that to have modern consciousness is to live in a world shaped by the Western mind. If in any doubt, one had only to reflect on how the contemporization of the world always entailed the Westernization of its mind.¹ This imposes a challenge to the modern Muslim who is called upon to reconcile his conscience as a Muslim with historical realities.

The strategic goal of Islam's conscience and the grand problem of its thought concerns the realignment of the moral and the natural, including the historical worlds. The ultimate focus of Islamic discourse ... is the problem of world order, in which the West figures as one historical entity ... the Islamic tradition approaches the theme of universal order through a critical reflection on the human situation, both existentially within history and transcendently within the self, from the Quranic thought categories of *ẓulm* and *ẓulm al-nafs*. The problem of relating the Islamic self to the world thus presents itself as a problem of world order which in itself forms a part of the more original and comprehensive theme of *ẓulm* in history and *ẓulm* in the soul. A critical theory of the self and the world that is derived from these two categories ... would go a long way towards ending the spell of spuriousness which victimizes Muslim thought at present.

At some point in shaping the Muslim discourse on conscience and history it will be necessary to reach out to others, particularly to the West itself, in order to evolve together the terms of a new global consciousness which is inclusive. In so doing the question which will inevitably arise is which West is to be expected to contribute to this encounter? Our critic predicates the answer to this question in the light

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of the commonality of interests which are likely to exist between the participants in the discourse. In this vein he suggests that:

Notwithstanding all the historical rivalry, the two faiths share a religious world view whose incontrovertible givens are God, man, history and revelation. As such there is considerable community of interest between Islam and Christianity which ... (they) both lack vis-à-vis the modern West ... (which embodies the “Faustian heresy”) ... Western atheistic humanism challenges the very *raison d’être* of *homo islamicus* (who is the *homo religiosus par excellence*). Why base a religion, culture, civilization and global community on faith in an unseen God, when man on his own can provide all the felicity, prosperity and power that has ever been achieved by any human society?

In this sense, then, reclaiming an Islamic consciousness means more than just repossessing the world as it now exists, as some modern critics might suggest. It entails reshaping the future of the global order along lines which are bound to be endorsed by the generic *mensch*, the *insān al-fiṭrah*, who also happens to be identical to *homo religiosus*. In this sense too, reclaiming an Islamic consciousness can mean the end of the modern predicament of an all-pervasive alienation – a theme which provides much of the animus for the soul-searching debate in the Western encounter with modernity.

The above glimpses of an intimate “dialogy” seen through the fragments of a discourse selected for a critical appreciation would suggest that, within Muslim intellectual circles, the debate on the West has already begun to take a turn unforeseen a few decades ago. The issue is no longer to defend the Islamic identity and heritage on the assumption that it qualifies Muslims for modernity, or that it is as good for Muslims as the standards set for the world by the West. Rather, the question is whether the standards of a modernity which may be seen to have imposed itself on the globe, West and non-West alike, are those most conducive to promoting the moral well-being, or even the physical survival, of the communities which constitute that world order. It is against this challenge that the Muslims are rediscovering the meaning

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and relevance of their Islamic heritage. At the same time as they recover their own identity and values in the light of that heritage, they strive to share it with others and to relate it to the world order of which all have become irrevocably bound. Yet history is real enough, and the balance and weight of a mixed historical experience between the West and the non-West in general, and that of the West and the Muslim world in particular, will have to be confronted if the future is not to be “ransomed” to the past.

It is with this understanding and vision, and with a sense of urgency drawn from reading the trend of the times, that the bid for renegotiating the terms of the global encounter is made here. It begins with a summons that is addressed to the intellectual community comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims. It urges on all concerned the need of reviewing their own attitudes and intellectual projects in the light of a fresh understanding of the context and needs in a global community/communion. The new understanding it proposes should draw on the principles and precepts enshrined in the authentic and verifiable sources of a divine guidance. The universality and timelessness of this guidance carry it beyond Muslims to non-Muslims and beyond the past into the future. This is an issue which will first have to be debated among Muslims for the sake of clarifying and articulating a coherent stance/stances on the score. The summons accordingly addresses Muslims in the first instance. But even as they debate amongst themselves, Muslims are part of a whole, and it is impossible not to take that whole into consideration even in the earlier phases of shaping the features of a new cultural response to the times. It is here too that renegotiating the terms of the encounter between the East and the West will have to be addressed in any such project of redefining cultural positions in a common world. On this account, the West figures on the agenda of a Muslim revival. On this account too, the repossession of their claims on history by the Muslims must be seen in terms of a new structure of empowerment, not of expropriation; it is a structure grounded in apportioning a share of dues to all who can responsibly stake their claims on a universal and noble trust.

The present volume is not in itself intended as an intellectual debate on the issue of the Muslim encounter with the West. Dimensions of this

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debate have already been taken up elsewhere and will continue to be the subject of future publications. Instead, the work at hand, as it stands, sheds light on a very practical project which has been on the agenda of the Islamic revival for some time and which has been addressed in different ways. Even when it has not been directly and exclusively broached, there is no doubt that the problem of the West figures significantly in any such agenda, as the historical attempts by Muslims to come to terms with the modern world in the past century so eloquently indicate.

One of the more original contemporary responses in this respect has come from the International Institute of Islamic Thought over the past decade. Its originality is due to the attempt to articulate and resolve this problem in a practical and comprehensive manner as part of a more general and fundamental need for restituting and reconstructing the modern Muslim mind. Already this terminology alerts us to the historicity of this process and draws attention to the current critical and reflexive turn among Muslims as they wrestle with the ravages of the postcolonial and, indeed, the precolonial condition. There is no doubt where the Muslim will take recourse in this process as he exercises his faculties of reasoned discrimination and enlightened understanding in locating his pristine sources and models. But this is not the place to expound on this theme, for our intention is merely to highlight the context and the spirit of the more immediate task. The problem of the encounter with the West then is being carried beyond the political and the economic arenas to an intellectual and an essentially cultural realm where it is conceived to properly belong. This is not to deny the importance of the other areas of encounter and exchange, but to give the latter activities and domains the depths which belong to the human civilizational venture.

To this end, the Institute published *The Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* in the early eighties and through it addressed the need for reconstituting the disciplines of modern inquiry in light of the Islamic precepts of knowledge. This was taken up as an element in a radical epistemic breakthrough in tackling the intellectual dimension. As work progressed it was more and more convincingly realized that the disciplines tendered in the modern academy were

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by-products and promulgators of a historical culture with its epistemologies and methodologies which were distinctive to an integral whole: the Western heritage. This could only mean that philosophy, history, and culture had to be tackled at a metadisciplinary level. A strategy was clearly needed for elucidating the nature and thrust of the knowledge chart of our times and for exploring the ways and means for its renegotiation. This is, no doubt, a demanding challenge which calls on the resources, the skills, and the imagination of all the community and which, indeed, invites an openness to others as well. The present slim volume responds to this need and articulates this realization. It is launched with the intention of sharing with all those concerned some of the initial conceptions as they are at present being developed within the Institute. The idea is to strive for their further enrichment and elaboration in the future by other contributions from an ever-expanding circle of interested, capable, and committed elements in the future. Let us briefly in closing touch on its background.

In the course of the spring of 1989, preparations were afoot at the Institute for a restricted round table on the Western Thought Project. *A Convocation* and a *Work Paper* were drafted to this end. When the meeting convened in the early summer, some background was given to participants on the nature of the project, its purpose, and its place in the overall Islamization of knowledge movement. What follows is a collection of these papers and the notes which were prepared for this session. It is hoped that publishing them in their essentially unpolished format might provide some food for thought to those who read them. More than what a “finished” product could achieve, the present material would hopefully prove to be a stimulus for taking up the threads and stringing them together in more original and thought-provoking directions.

MONA ABUL-FADL

Herndon, Virginia, USA, 14 I I AH / 1990

CHAPTER I

A CONVOCATION: THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

THE fate of our civilization lies in the balance of culture, not power. Indeed, the terms of the culture of our times will determine the future of our politics and societies. Moreover, this simple truth applies equally to each constituent part of the global world, including the Muslim world.

Islam today continues to be, as much as it was in the past, at the hub and crossroads of contemporary civilization. The difference, from a historical perspective, lies in the West's control of the political setting, the primary factor in qualifying the terms of today's civilization, and in setting its pace and direction accordingly. These terms however are unsatisfactory, not simply on account of the inequities underlying Western power structures, but in view of the inadequacy of the cultural underpinnings which lend it its qualitative dimension. Any attempt therefore to influence the course of civilization must rely on the modes of interaction that occur between a dominant West and the emerging power centers all over the globe. In essence, these modes need to be seen as a function of culture and not merely as politics.

A digression here may place this relationship in due context. It goes without saying, or so it would appear, that the prospect of rival power centers conjures the image of a scramble for substituting one hegemony for another. But this should remain at the level of an assumption open to historical refutability. Admittedly too, the emergent power centers are

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bound to constitute a threat to the current dominance of the West through their challenging its supremacy. The implications of this challenge, however paradoxical it may appear, need not necessarily imply a loss for the West; it can indeed mean, through its consequences for the global system, a net gain for all the parties concerned. Obviously, however, this is not a foregone conclusion.

To the extent that the emergent power centers develop in the context of the prevailing power economy, rooted as it is in the domination/subjugation model, the outcome can only be conceived in terms of a zero-sum game. To the extent, however, that the emergence of these power centers brings with it the possibility of an alternative to the conflict model, the challenge must be conceived in terms of its implications for a new paradigm of world order that transcends the constituent identities of those who are the parties to this order.

The possibility of this alternative is contingent on the cultural factor, not the political. The significance of the Muslim world as an emergent power center lies in its claim to a cultural identity and heritage that qualify it for a paradigmatic contribution of this nature. In order for it to assume its role, however, it is essential that it revive its culture, recover its *tawhīdī* ontology, and rediscover and activate its episteme, all of which call for a measure of cultural autonomy. Given the nature of the world system and the historical realities of the Muslim Ummah, the extent to which this may take place is severely restricted. In considering the need for such autonomy, the limitations imposed by pervasive cultural penetration and hegemony will have to be addressed. This may be an onerous task, but it invokes its own ardour; one that is only augmented by necessity.

To assure the premises for a cultural revival, it will be necessary to give priority to consolidating a measure of cultural autonomy. This calls for redressing the anomalies of the prevailing cultural imbalance between the Muslim world and the West. The difficulty lies in defining boundaries in a context where the very rationale of autonomy becomes problematic. Reviewing the West becomes in part a process of reviewing the self in its contemporaneity. Having become an endemic feature of the cultural setting in the Muslim world itself, the culture of the West can neither be neglected nor ignored. However, it is the way in which

this pervasive intrusion is approached which constitutes the difference and the challenge. Hitherto Muslims have been at the receiving end, and the prevailing logic of encounter has oscillated between a dialectics of imposition and a dialectics of seduction. In the tidal revival in the Muslim soul, the recovery of the consciousness of self and identity is currently accompanied by an appreciation in self-confidence and a revalorization of the Muslim identity. This has reflected positively on various attitudes, include those relating to the enduring encounter with the West.

The novelty here lies in the initiative taken by Muslims to evolve a serious and credible reading of the West. They realize that they will first need to understand the West in its own terms before they can evolve an objective and critical reading of their own. On the other hand, they equally realize that unless they can develop a viable and credible Islamic platform for their intellectual venture, their critical and discriminating aptitudes will be severely impaired and their version of the account of the West will be of dubious value. Furthermore, it may be pointed out that, for Muslims, such a reading of the West cannot be an end in itself; it is valued more for its potential contribution to redressing the intellectual equilibrium of an entire culture that finds itself threatened. The core of that threatened culture lies in the Muslim hemisphere, but its range and reverberations embrace the globe.

The value of a revival which takes its measure from an Islamic core lies in an implicit model of world order more congenial to the times and more compatible with the needs of the future. It is a model that bears the imprints of a global universality that stops short of abrogating the centers of autonomy. The proverbial capacity for accommodating diversity within the parameters of unity has, in the past, constituted the hallmark of the historical civilization of Islam. There is no reason why this should not be so in the future. In this sense, an Islamic reading of the West can contribute to the sanctification of the culture of the West, not to its subversion. Meanwhile, it will contribute to redressing the global balance of culture to the advantage of other less advantaged centers as well. In this way, it would also be contributing to the safeguarding of all parties from their own excesses. At the bottom line, an Islamic reading of the West will signify the rebirth of an authentic tradition of learning

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and knowledge that has for long been unjustifiably submerged. Through redressing the anomalies of a civilizational perversity, the excesses of the prevailing paradigm may be alleviated.

The International Institute of Islamic Thought, as one of the many robust young institutions which the first decade of the fifteenth century *hijrī* has spawned, has consecrated itself to the cultural imperative. Lying within the range of the Institute's priorities, the Western Thought Project is significantly conceived as part of a comprehensive and systematic workplan which is essentially flexible. It is open to periodic revision and "upgrading" in the light of a growing experience in the field and its anticipated contribution to a concomitant conceptual sophistication. The essentials of the plan, however, remain. These are predicated on a close-knit set of principles that are logically integrated and bound up together through an underlying revivalist rationale. The following is a recapitulation of these principles as they are briefly expounded against this rationale:

- (1) The *Workplan* begins with a fresh reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah on the understanding that they continue to constitute now, as much as in the past, the enduring foundations for any viable Islamic civilization. These are the wellsprings and immutable sources of an Islamic culture and knowledge, and any genuine intellectual error in the Ummah is contingent on the efficacy of this fresh reading in the modern context.
- (2) This is corroborated by a critical and objective reassessment of the Muslim cultural and intellectual heritage of the past to sift out the wheat from the chaff. The nature of the modern intellectual error calls for a reflexive and reflective interaction with the thought processes and products of past generations as they responded to the challenges of their times in the context of the Islamic moorings of their civilization. The counterpart to this reflexive and reflective interaction may be found in the Muslim assessment of the modern heritage projected by the West.

- (3) It acknowledges the necessity of a similar critical and objective reassessment of the Western mind, its processes, and its cultural and intellectual artifacts. The objective is to develop the insight necessary for discerning its strengths and weaknesses, the negative and the positive aspects that are to be found in another distinct legacy, and to identify its sustaining dynamic and mechanisms of production, transmission, and reproduction, or perpetuation.
- (4) The objective is to develop a valid methodology that will enable the reconstruction of the modern Muslim mind along lines that will ensure the recovery of its originality and creative potential. Given the premises of the venture, the lessons learnt in the course of critical cultural exposure and in the reflexive dynamic of intra- and cross-cultural interaction, a distinct Islamic vision will crystallize and this, in turn, will generate a fresh civilizational impulse in our own time.

In assuming a responsibility on this scale, the Institute is under no illusion as to the enormity of the task and the limitations of the available resources. It is, nevertheless, intent on contributing, to the best of its ability, its share to the realization of an impending historical ideal – if only to constitute itself as a model to the Ummah and to provide the stimulus that others might follow. To this end, it has taken it upon itself not only to articulate the ideal and thus to actively promote it Ummah-wide, but, furthermore, to spare no effort in mobilizing the talents and the competences needed to ensure the most effective mode of implementation. Each phase of the *Workplan*, each facet, and each level of its implementation calls for a variety of such competences. In the final analysis, the substantiality of the achievement is contingent on the complementariness of these efforts. The Institute has been established in order to tap new potential, to encourage and preside over an expanding pool of resources, and to see that an effective coordination is sustained without losing sight of the purposeful orientation of the whole enterprise. This too is the operational context in which the conception and the implementation of the Western Thought Project takes place.¹

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Beyond any immediate plans, there is a need to bring the Western Thought Project into clear focus and to overcome any inertia on this front of the workplan. The idea of interlocking round tables to debate on the Western Thought Project, or aspects of it, is expected to mark an important landmark in promoting a greater consensus of opinion among Muslim scholars and intellectuals on an issue that is critical to the long-term prospects of an Islamic cultural revival. In the final analysis, success will be contingent on the ability to systematically set out the terms of the modern encounter with the West along lines more conducive to a genuine parity of cultures.

CHAPTER II

CHARTING A COURSE: BEYOND THE FAUSTIAN DELUSION

BEYOND THE FAUSTIAN DELUSION

THE Western Thought Project is part of an extensive program to Islamize knowledge. This program calls on modern scholars to review the products and processes of modern culture, including their modes of thought and their fields of scholarship, from a perspective which looks at the sources and standards of the Islamic episteme. In view of the secular origins of modernity, the force of this appeal lies in its challenge to the exclusiveness and the validity of the prevailing episteme. In essence, Islamization contests the reductionism of this episteme and questions its validity. In making the case for an alternative model, it is opening new possibilities for a discourse which will admit new participants who may share elements of its particular Islamic perspective on knowledge. This would include the scholarship cultivated in the living traditions of the culture areas of the globe, as well as that coming from the biblical tradition in the West. However the Islamic episteme brings with it, in addition to its transcendental sources, a historical model of learning with a wide-ranging scope of *mundane* interests. In this sense there may be grounds for convergence with certain aspects of modernity, without conceding its foundations and ordering framework.

How the Western Episteme Came to Dominate

The dominant epistemological mode today crystallized during the epoch of the European Enlightenment which reached its apogee in the

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course of the eighteenth century. Then, in the following century, the latent historical trends bred in the early modern period – circa sixteenth century and after – led to the inflation of the power of Europe and culminated in its domination of the globe by the turn of the twentieth century. Its ideological bias notwithstanding, Immanuel Wallerstein's model of the world economy distinguishing the center from the periphery, with a Western European culture zone occupying the former and a loose amalgam of Afro-Asian and Latin overlapping culture zones constituting the latter, provides a reasonable classification of this development.¹ In this way, the diffusion of the Enlightenment model followed in the tracks of the advancing hegemony of the West to challenge and dominate in its turn. With the balance of power in favor of the rising West, there was little chance for a parity of exchange in this modern encounter of cultures. Where the regional culture survived, despite the onslaught of the intrusive power-backed culture into their field, they would continue to survive in a submerged state.

The Globalization of the West

For all intents and purposes then, the triumphant Western culture would henceforth assume the character of a global culture exerting its influence for good and evil on every other people. In practical terms, this meant that the standards of acculturation to the times were those set by the West, and that the global aspiration for modernity, to which the peoples of the Third World turned in their national development programs, really constituted a more euphemistic expression for a blatant Westernization. From there it was easy to confound the paradigms of modern and Western and to project the universality of the Western heritage.

In the meantime, the twentieth century in the Western world saw significant flux in the cultural climate nearer home. Although the forebodings were there earlier on, by the closing decades the exuberant optimism which had marked the onset of the century had to all intents and purposes become extinguished. There was an impoverishment in philosophy, the cornerstone of the Western intellectual tradition, and theology, periodically resuscitated from recurrent bouts of exhaustion, could hardly shoulder the burdens of a new transitional epoch unfolding

in the guise of a “postmodernity.” Confusion and skepticism became pervasive. Today, the metatheoretical debates in the social sciences and the humanities reflect and reinforce this general desultory mood.

The Opening Out of the West

If there is one advantage to be sought in this condition, it is perhaps to be found in a new disposition of openness in the Western mind together with, or in spite of, an inclination to a growing measure of introspection. The West is opening up to its past, seeking to “remember” in ways it has not done for nearly two centuries. It is more significantly searching out neglected elements of its past in ways it has not done since its earlier renaissance. Where the Enlightenment had sealed certain gates to the modern mind, the contemporary phase of high modernity seems to be reopening them. An example may be sought in the revival of the debate on the limits of human rationality and a renewed interest in the possible relevance/meaning of revelation.² On the other hand, the West is seeking its past today in a historically transformed context where history is no longer a closed stage, and where it is no longer the only hero in the play. In other words, there is today a noticeable disposition on the part of the modern/postmodern West to turn to other cultures and traditions in an anticipation that they too might have something to offer. This is presumably done in the spirit that there is something there to be learned. There is still, however, a long way to go before this quest is approached in a spirit where curiosity is tempered more by humility than pride. The time has not yet come for the Western scholar to willingly squat at the feet of an Indian guru.

More particularly, in the case of Islam, the West is afforded a ready cultural arena, which in more ways than one is nearer to the West than any other oriental tradition. F.S.C. Northrop’s genuinely enlightened remark, cited as an epigram to the present volume, comes to mind.³ It constitutes a perspicuous and honest confession, although admittedly it may not be the most representative of its kind. The opposing reflection by the free-thinking French philosopher, Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who supposedly projected the historical Enlightenment in all his works, including his secular inquiry into the life of Jesus (*La vie de Jésus*), affords a dramatic illustration of the more typical attitude in this regard.⁴

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Fortunately, this brand of vitriol is losing its edge: and so it must, of necessity, if not of prudence. Yet the attitude of the West continues to be hedged in by a persistent ambiguity. The legacy of the historical encounter, compounded by the politics of contemporary times, makes the opening up to the Islamic heritage and to its heirs far more problematic. The initiative here will have to be taken by Muslims, although if the interaction is to gain momentum it will have to be reciprocated by responsiveness from the West. The real question though is this: Are Muslims prepared and qualified for this kind of initiative?

The new *da'wah*, or the summons to "Islamize" knowledge is a move in this direction.⁵ It renounces claims to power in favor of a bid for truth and it gives priority to politics of culture and cultural reconstruction rather than to a culture of politics and power-mongering. Knowledge may be a means to power, but it is also an access to virtue and wisdom, and the Islamic perspective on knowledge has much to offer in a direction that reconciles antagonisms and dissolves artificial dualisms. In other words, this Islamization of knowledge brings into circulation a currency that is much needed by the times. In its appeal to knowledge, it appeals to common symbols which, once understood, cannot fail but to command a widening and deepening allegiance of a variety of scholars from all walks and hues. However, the immediate challenges to the Islamization of knowledge may not lie in the West, where it is out to contest the foundations of its still dominant paradigms, but in quarters nearer home.

Thus far, we have made the case for Islamization largely in the context of a Western perspective. We have suggested that the West is currently going through a process of rethinking its own heritage and that it is doing so in a relative openness to its own past as well as to the cultural experience of others. The catalyst to this critical re-examination is the deadlock which has ensued from the West's becoming hostage to a reductionist paradigm of knowledge and being that has found its way to the Western, and now a pseudoglobal, mind in the gospels of the Enlightenment and Modernity. We have also suggested that in the attempt to transcend the present predicament, Islam as culture, episteme, and heritage has much to offer the West and the modern world, to the extent that the latter has become Westernized or

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to the extent that the West has arrogated to itself the category of universality. The anomaly, however, lay in the obstruction caused by an essentially subjective dimension which was likely to impede access to an available Islamic model.

Auspicious Anticipations

The implication so far is that a free and open interchange between the West and Islam could not be left to the West to initiate, and that on the contrary, the Muslims would have to pave the way to this end. Indeed, we might go so far to suggest that once the historical and subjective barriers have been effectively addressed, then the principles animating the plea for the Islamization of knowledge are as likely to find fertile soil in the West as they are within the historical Islamic heartland. Nonetheless, a shift of perspectives is needed to allow us to examine the Islamization of knowledge and the Western Thought Project within the Muslim context.

Charting the Muslim Setting: Cultural Cleavages/Blockages

In the Muslim heartland, the triumph of the Enlightenment model still seems to carry the day and, ironically, it would seem to inspire greater loyalty there among some of its devotees than it would among its own veterans in the West. However, this observation must be qualified by the realization that the cultural milieu here is severely strained, for the Western model, however pervasive, remains subject to all the constrictions which attend an intrusive culture. Meanwhile, the home culture, which continues to be thoroughly Islamic, has shown its resilience in its persistent appeal not only to the masses, but also carries it to a growing proportion of the modern educated sectors of the public. This resilience, however, bespeaks a latent or a potential, rather than an effective vitality. The latter is contingent on the state of its scholarship, and this, for various reasons, has been hamstrung and hemmed in by debilities of its own which antedate the colonial interlude, although the latter no doubt precipitated the corrosion.

Cultural Immobility

The general setting in the Muslim heartland is immobilized by a

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complicity of factors. The discontinuities in the intellectual circles among the pockets of the thoroughly, moderately, and ambiguously Westernized on the one hand, and the uncompromising adherents to the Islamic heritage on the other creates a permanent fissure at a critical node in the prevailing culture. Rarely, however, is the breach complete. Indeed, a truer picture would be of a murky and blurred pool subject to conflicting currents diluting and diffracting the input from the different sources. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the educational establishment, itself so central to the processes of cultural production, transmission, and reproduction.

Afflictions of the Traditionists

For various reasons, rational and otherwise, Islamist circles are immobilized by their own divisions, reluctances, and rigidities in such a way that any renovationist appeals are likely to be resisted as much out of an instinctive and cautious reserve as out of any genuine religious or academic factor. There may be a vague awareness among Muslims in this group that they do indeed preside over the seeds of a genuine intellectual and cultural renewal, but then they are too submerged in their own inadequacies to be able to articulate this awareness. Those who might be in a position to do so are themselves hopelessly out of touch with their culture, and their plight is doubly compounded by a false sense of confidence deriving from an illusion that they are living their age. In contrast to the traditionists who hark back to a cultural heritage they are unable to animate, there are the modernists who have made some bold leaps across space and time. Their greatest merit, though, lies more in their conspicuity than in their perspicuity.

Self-Banished Exiles

The modernists or the Westernizers in the Muslim cultural spectrum are self-banished exiles to a no-man's zone where they are stranded in the twilight of a cultural "metaxy" – a cultural in-between. Their position is more pathetic than heroic, since they are doomed to fighting a doubly losing battle. They claim to be out to transform a culture and breathe new life into it, when in fact they little realize how presumptuous is their claim. A resilient culture has its own mechanisms and

dynamics which defy an exogenous approach to tamper with it. In presuming to act on a culture, they lay untenable claims to a capacity to influence and a power to act which they do not in fact sustain. For one thing, in renouncing their historical culture they are seen to have opted for foreign loyalties – and as far as the core of Muslim community goes, no amount of rationalization can conceal the fact that they have abdicated a trust and forfeited their claims to be the representatives of a culture.

The affective element is compounded by a cognitive one, as these modernizing/Westernizing elements have also succeeded in marginalizing themselves from their own culture by depriving themselves of its medium of communication. Lost to their adopted language and its values and symbols, they further fade into an illusory cultural horizon which they seek to perpetually create and recreate by a simulated vitality. Indulging in their brand of sterilities, they remain peripheral to the culture they claim to transcend but which they have in effect betrayed. Wherever their influence surfaces, they proclaim it as testimony to their virtuosity and enlightenment. In fact, this serves as a poignant reminder of the pervasiveness of the cult of power in the contemporary Muslim world, where culture has become an industry contingent on organizational and manipulative skills and carries little affinity for the virtues of knowledge and learning. In making this statement, we have in mind the dominance of Westernized coteries in the ruling elites throughout the Establishment, including the all-important media sector, which is the case in most Muslim countries today.

Changing Contexts

However, by definition the cultural situation is a fluid one, and times are changing. In some circles, Islamic sensibilities are becoming more alive and, in others, a new sensibility has been provoked by the awareness of the pervasiveness of an enduring Islamic reality. Modernists are no longer as prone to dismiss the relevance of the Islamic cultural heritage in their attempt to address their times. Islamists are no longer immune to the disaffections of the age and are increasingly awakening to the futility of their own defensiveness and to the need for overcoming their self-imposed closure in their attitudes to their cherished heritage as well

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as to an alien world. It is these stirrings in the wind that blows over the Muslim landscape that have been invariably expressed in different forms and arenas and which have been dubbed the Islamic revival. They are in reality the signs and symptoms of a recovery of identity and consciousness and the rebirth of a resolve to have a historical presence.

In steadily coming to terms with the self in the Muslim heartland, the modernists may not have changed their goals in opting for modernity, but they have at least evinced a flexibility and a willingness to review their means as well as in formulating their goals. Islamists too are now more disposed than ever to reflect more critically upon their history, since the coming of the era that signalled the rupture of their Islamic history, and they are more inclined to examine the consequences of the great intrusion represented by the colonial interlude. Here and there, there is a dawning awareness that what is amiss in the present must have its roots in the past, and that the will to break into the future is contingent on an honest and critical reexamination of a number of contingencies and categories including the self, the other, and the historical situation that embraces and conditions the cultural leavening.

Without realizing it, the gaps and schisms between the different circles are narrowing, as traditionalists and modernists are coming to stand on converging grounds: simply as Muslims striving to reconcile the self to the age without denying the one or renouncing the other. In seeking to preserve and safeguard the tradition which is the foundation of their identity and the cornerstone of their history in the future, it is increasingly realized that innovation and renovation are the requisites to the goal. This inevitably calls for reviewing the relationship of the traditional, i.e., it calls for a new, vibrant, and relevant reading of the Islamic heritage. Conversely, the unmistakable salience, relevance, and dynamic of the latter has forced itself on the attention of the cultural defectors of a more recent past, and as they too find a place in their agenda to review it in the light of their priorities, they may also come to realize that modernity itself is a negotiable destination. The crux of the matter may indeed lie in a new reading of modernity, and it will perhaps be on this platform that the terms of a new encounter between Muslims and the West will unfold.

The Nature of a Summons

It was in this general setting that the Islamization of knowledge was launched as a catalyst to a more critical and reflective mood, invigorating the process of self-examination and giving it direction. The Islamization of knowledge is explicitly targeted at examining, exposing, and transposing the characteristic modes of thought and learning current among Muslims. Moreover, it seeks to raise an awareness of the nature and the process of cultural formation, reformation, deformation, and mutation in the Ummah with a view to generating a genuine renovationist momentum in its ranks. The idea is to articulate and develop an Islamic episteme that will inspire the standards and criteria which may be used to institute and rationalize alternative thought modes and cultural output.

Scope of Address

While the Islamization of knowledge is primarily addressed to Muslims as a way out of their cultural and civilizational malaise, its message is by no means exclusive. Two factors preempt any such exclusiveness. The one inheres in the intrinsic universalistic calling of the Islamic standards which are being invoked as the measure for cultural sanification. The other evokes the inherent characteristics of the situational contingency, as was shown above, a matter which equally obviates any notion of complete cultural autonomy in a system of global hegemony. In this context, rethinking the dominant culture calls for a fresh reading of the West and its legacy. Given its premises and its objectives, this reading stresses objectivity and originality as much as relevance and utility. In this way, an Islamic reading of the modern West becomes an integral part of any program aimed at rectifying the cultural scales in the Muslim world. By the same token, this reading is likely to be as relevant to the West itself in its own soul-searching. These are the yields of mutuality in an age of global interdependence.

Appropriating Global Interdependence to Promoting Islamic Goals

By absorbing the Muslim ecosphere within the sphere of its own hegemony, the West has made it impossible for Muslims in the modern world to contemplate their cultural survival as a distinct civilizational

entity, or their renewal as such, without also addressing their predicament from within the global framework. The great transmutation referred to by Marshall G. S. Hodgson has indeed made some version of Western culture endemic to the local setting of practically every urban center in the world today, including the Muslim centers.⁶ This has its positive implications to the extent that the Muslim reading of their particular text must produce a corresponding reading of the global text as well. Just as addressing the Western heritage becomes an imperative in restituting the cultural chart in the Muslim world, it might also be conceded that the efforts produced in the venture are likely to affect a restitution at the global level as well.

*The Idea of a Profitable Exchange: A Tijāratan Rābiḥah*⁷

Conversely, this transmutation has come, in turn, to exact its retribution in kind as the circulation of influence can no longer be confined to its original concerted and authoritarian version. The West can no longer monopolize the reading of its own culture any more than it can claim such prerogatives for the culture of the other. As long as it maintains its capacity to learn from its own insights as well as those of others, it can only reap the benefits of the breakdown of an erstwhile monopoly. The rules apply to all the players. To the extent that Muslims are willing and able to produce their version of the global text, they will be contributing to transforming a dominant, one-track model into a diffusion model where ideas, unlike commodities and power-interests, will create their own trajectories. It is in this sense that the above assumption about the balance of modern civilization resting on culture rather than power should be understood. Ultimately, the reading of the one and the other are not exclusive. Once a perspective coming from the Islamic episteme finds its way into the global cultural horizon, it will then be possible to conceive of an alternative mode of thinking which goes beyond the either/or matrix to one where the options included the “both and more” variant. But this can only crystallize as the Western Thought Project advances and as the Islamization of knowledge platform is consolidated.

We may sum up the point of what we dubbed at the outset as the passing of the Faustian delusion in a key statement. Coming as it does at

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this juncture in time, and conceived in the cultural context of Islamization, the Western Thought Project acquires a particular significance. The end of modernity in the West, and the dawning self-consciousness beyond, beckons the emergence of a new discourse which can overcome the prevailing sense of moral depravity and intellectual aridity which threatens to engulf all in an age where boundaries fuse. In order that it might persuade and pervade, this discourse will also have to infuse the kind of vitality and direction which are currently lacking. For various reasons which have been mentioned elsewhere, the Western Thought Project in its Islamizing habitat is assumed to meet with the measure of this discourse. Whether it is seen from a strictly Muslim perspective or from a more general one, the relevance of this project can hardly be overemphasized. Nor can its urgency be overlooked.

THE fate of civilization lies in the balance of culture, not power. This penetrating work argues that the terms of the culture of our times will determine the future of politics and societies. Islam continues to be, as much as it was in the past, at the hub and crossroads of contemporary civilization. The difference from a historical perspective, lies in the West's control of the political setting, the primary factor in qualifying the terms of today's civilization, and in setting its pace and direction accordingly.

The modern West takes pride in its rational liberalism, yet for all its reverent skepticism it is not at all sure how it can handle its growing human problems. As such it makes sense to recall a timeless exhortation of natural wisdom, confirmed in divine revelation, handed down over the generations and understandable to all, in both East and West. It needs to be taken seriously on the agenda of any future encounter between East and West which presumes to address the future ecology of a moral global economy. When the individual has become a measure unto himself, the community dissolves: or at least, its matrix is severely undermined. In the meantime, there is nothing that can secure the individual against his own excesses. In forgetting their Creator, their origin, and their destiny, God has made them oblivious of themselves.

Given today's "global village," where a century's technological accomplishments have dissipated the physical distances between communities and cultures, the East/West encounter has become doubly imperative: not just to avoid the consequences of potentially explosive misunderstandings, but also to deliberate together and to redefine the bounds of rationality and the meaning of community. This is a task which challenges a common endeavor to bring together values and good will as well as the power to give them substance.

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