

# INFORMATION AND COMMENTS

## INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM

ISLAM

and the Challenge of Modernity:

Historical and Contemporary

Contexts

1st-5<sup>th</sup> August 1994

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE

OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CIVILIZATION

(ISTAC)

Modern science has often been set against religion and depicted as one of the principle agents of the retreat- of traditional religions in the modern world. From the 17th century forward, the sacred and mystical gave way to a view of the world as self-contained causal nexus shorn of providence. Religion was forced to account for itself and to justify itself both as a social

institution and as a collection of fundamental articles of belief about the world and its operations. This is the result of secularization as a philosophical program, which has evolved in the mind of Western man since earlier centuries, and which has led to the secularization of society and its disassociation from its spiritual concerns. The intellectual endeavour which fuelled this predicament was not, however, confined to the development of a new science'. Concomitant questions of morality, unity, psychology, politics, etc., also played an important part. The emergence of the modern mind and the problem of modernity, in general, is therefore not a local or an isolated phenomenon, it involves a comprehensive conceptual shift.

It is, however, important to note that some of the products of the modern science and humanities that are antagonistic to religion are rooted in the metaphysical worldview that is often associated with them. The problem of modernity is, therefore, not only the product of modern science but also the by-product of its metaphysical foundation.

Religion's regal status, on the other hand, lies in its commitment to seek the deepest possible level of understanding. One of the most profound human motivations is the need we feel to make sense of our experience, to gain a coherent and satisfying understanding of the world. It is a quest which unites science and theology for they are both attempting to explore aspects of the way things are. Each surveys the one world of experience from its own perspective and therefore there are possible points of contact between them. But once we realize that we need not accept the metaphysical worldview often associated with science, the interaction between human and revealed knowledge, which is actually what grounds the problem of modernity, can be seen in an entirely new light. This mutual interaction need no longer present itself as a clash; it can be viewed, rather, as an opportunity. After all both science and religion, though not of the same level of attainment in their perception of the ultimate reality and truth, are creatures of one and the same God. It is, therefore, the analysis and critique of the metaphysical foundation of modern human sciences that still remain the prime tasks of religious thought today.

From the Islamic perspective the problem looks even more compounded. The fragile socio-economic status of the contemporary

Muslim world has led to the erosion of its confidence, making Muslim ‘ intellectuals quite vulnerable to the influences and challenges posed by the rise of modernity. The need for a proper response and attitude towards such a challenge is thus more urgent than ever. "Isolationism", on the other hand, is neither possible. It is not possible because the modern means of communication has virtually left us with no hiding place. It is not desirable because Islam requires of us to attain a comprehensive rationality within which everything finds its just and proper place. The quest for a comprehensive understanding of the world requires us to take into account all other forms of knowledge and consolidate them into one single grand scheme. It is only by squarely facing the changing conditions of modern life and thought that Islam can remain a vital part of social and intellectual activity and play the role it once did in world history.

This is by no means an unprecedented endeavour as the intellectual heritage of the Islamic world clearly indicates. Faced with the new and challenging ideas emanating from ancient Greece and other cultures Muslim scholars showed a remarkable capacity to respond to, and digest those ideas, and to elaborate upon a new metaphysical foundation for a comprehensive, understanding of man and of the world. It is precisely for this reason that the contemporary discussions of modernity have to be conducted against the historical context of Islamic intellectual tradition. In general, any response to the challenges of modernity has to start by situating modern knowledge in its historical context. For not only what knowledge means has been confused from one historical period to another, its very conception has been shaped by each period's particular view of man and his relation to the world. Furthermore, modern Western interpretations and applications of ideas concerning knowledge, progress, and development have resulted in combination of wonderful achievements and deplorable and unending tragedies. Modern Western civilization needs to resume the dialogue with Islam for its own self renewal as well as for the sake of humanity at large. Against such a background, we need to consider the ways in which the modern and Islamic views of the world impinge upon each other, and to find a proper perspective from which their interaction can in fact be fruitful and enhancing.

A symposium highlighting these ideas was held on 1st to 5th August 1994 at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization,(ISTAC) Kuala Lumpur Malaysia.

Keynote address was delivered by YM. Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-'Attas entitled, The Worldview of Islam An Outline\*. About 200 scholars, senior Government officers professionals and graduate students participated in the sessions of the symposium.

## **THEMES OF THE SESSIONS INCLUDED:**

### **\* Modernity and Religious Worldviews**

Discussing models through which religion has interpreted the world and its conceptual interaction with science. This can be conducted within both historical and contemporary contexts. In particular case studies can be made of some of the attempts made by the early Muslim scholars to bring the practised sciences of their own age within an Islamic perspective (e.g., in philosophy, astronomy, medicine, etc.)

### **Modernity and Political Thought**

The rise of modernity has shaken the foundation of political thought. We need to consider the sort of stance that Islamic thought may adopt in the face of the modern theories of such concepts as democracy, liberty, justice, etc.

### **\*Modernity and the Changing Models of Naturalism**

Discussing the models through which the natural world has been analyzed and manipulated. This may involve an analysis of the demise of positivist schools and a critical discussion of the contemporary empiricism.

### **\* Modernity and Technology**

The emergence of modern science and technology has generated problems, such as environmental pollution, population growth, etc., which science itself is powerless to solve. It is important to see what contributions Islamic ethics can make towards solving these problems.

### **\*Language, Literature and Modernity**

Language is not simply a means of representation separable from the 'content' of thought. That is why successive models of interpreting the natural world have made such an impact on the language of their time. Religious language has, in turn, been affected by such a change, culminating in the rise of secular mentality. It is therefore necessary to see to what extent the language of Islamic theology has affected (and been affected by) the language of other intellectual practices (e.g.; Greek philosophy, pre-Islamic Persian culture, Western culture, etc'), throughout history and modern times. This is related to the issue of islamization and de-islamization of the Muslim mind.

### **\*Modernity and Values**

Given the fact that there is no value free science, the interface between science and moral accountability is something along which Islamic values can have relevance. Under different value-systems, different priorities are accorded to different subjects of scientific research, and different directions delineated for its practical application. It is therefore, important to consider these problems from the perspective of Islamic values.

### **Guest presenters included:**

Prof. Dr. J.D.J. Waardenburg

(Universite de Lausanne, Switzerland)

Some Repercussions of Modernity on Muslim Thinking About Islam.

Prof. Dr. Alparslan Acikgenc

(ISTAC)

Toward an Islamic Concept of Philosophy: A Response to the Modernists

Prof. Dr. Huston Smith

(Syracuse University, New York)

Post Modernism and the World's Religions

Prof. Dr. Toshio Kuroda

(The Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, Niigata-Ken, Japan)  
Metaphysics and Economics

Prof. Dr. Malik Badri

(ISTAC)

The Aids Dilemma: A Progeny of the-Western Modernity.

Dr. Ahmad Y. Hassan

(International Foundation of Science and Technology in Arabic and Islamic Civilization, Canada)

Some Factors Behind the Decline of Science in Islamic Lands After the Sixteenth Century

Prof. Dr. Aziz al-Azmeh

(St. Anthony's College, Oxford)

Quranic Reinterpretations of Abduh and Rida in the Light of Contemporary Scientific and Historical Knowledge.

Prof. Dr. Mehdi Mohaghegh

(ISTAC)

Revival of Islamic Philosophy in the Safavid Period with Special Reference to Mir Dan-tad.

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Aydin (Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir)

An Islamic Evaluation of the Modern Concept of Rationality

Prof. Dr. H.H. Dabbagh

(Iranian Academy of Philosophy, Tehran) Science as the Privileged Component of Modernity

Prof. Dr. Cemil Akdogan (ISTAC)

Historicism vs. Positivism

Dr. Suha Ozkan

Secretary General

(Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Geneva)

The Loss of Cultural Identity as Reflected in Architecture

Prof. Dr. Sarni Hamarneh (ISTAC)

Curricula and Methodology in Medical Education and Institution

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hassan al-Naggar

(ISTAC)

Speaking with One Voice: The Politics of Language in the Modern Muslim World

Prof. Dr. Nochine Ansari

(Tehran University)

The Influence of Islamic Revolution of Iran on the Value System as Reflected in Children's Books

Prof. Dr. Marcia K. Hermansen

(San Diego State University)

The Challenge of Classical Islamic Religious Thought for Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISTAC**

ISTAC was founded on 1st December 1987 under the able directorship of the world renowned Muslim thinker and scholar, Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-'Attas, who is also its founder. Y.B. Dato'Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Deputy Prime Minister is the Chairman of the Board of Management of ISTAC.

ISTAC, a research and post graduate teaching institution, "Seeks to inculcate knowledge which will be authentically Islamic and at the same time fully aware of the contemporary world and the challenges it poses for the Islamic peoples." Its student body comprises students from different parts of the Muslim World. The professors are selected from scholars who have thorough grounding in their respective sciences. The program at the Institute will emphasize the study of important aspects of Islamic thought and civilization, philosophies and civilizations of major religions of the world as well as those of modern secular civilization.

The design and supervision of the building of the Institute, the Conference Hall and the Mosque; the entire landscape and interior decoration are the work of Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib himself. They reflect a unique synthesis of Islamic, Medieval Western and Malay architectural and artistic philosophies and styles. Its library in the present state consists of more than 60,000 volumes which include encyclopedias of religions, cultures and sciences, multilingual and authoritative dictionaries of major Islamic languages, the languages of the Orient and the Occident; bibliographies of various disciplines; catalogues of rare collections of Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Malay and other Muslim manuscripts kept in various libraries of the world; major works on religion, philosophy, metaphysics, theology, and jurisprudence, science and technology, languages, literatures, poetry, history, art and architecture, fine arts, education, and Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Malay and Urdu manuscripts dealing with diverse subjects and fields of knowledge. It is considered the best of its kind in this part of the world.