

CAN THE ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE BE RECOVERED?

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By “the Islamic intellectual heritage” I mean the ways of thinking about God, the world, and the human being established by the Qur’ān and the Prophet and elaborated upon by generations of practicing Muslims. I use the term “intellectual” to translate the word *‘aqlā*, and by it I want to distinguish this heritage from another, closely related heritage that also has theoretical and intellectual dimensions. This second heritage is the “transmitted” (*naqlā*) heritage.

Transmitted knowledge is learned by “imitation” (*taqlād*), that is, by following the authority of those who possess it. This sort of knowledge includes Qur’ān recitation, Hadith, Arabic grammar, and jurisprudence. It is impossible to be a Muslim without *taqlād*, because one cannot discover the Qur’ān or the practices of the Shariah by oneself. Just as language is learned by imitation, so also the Qur’ān and Islamic practice are learned by imitating those who know them. Those who have assumed the responsibility of preserving this transmitted heritage are known as its “knowers,” that is, its *ulama*.

In transmitted knowledge, it is not proper to ask “why.” If one does ask why, the answer is that the Qur’ān says what it says, or that grammar determines the rules of proper speech. In contrast, the only way to learn intellectual knowledge is to understand it. One cannot learn it by accepting it on the basis of authority. Intellectual knowledge includes mathematics, logic, philosophy, and much of theology. In learning, “why” is the most basic and important of questions. If one does not understand why, then one will be following someone else’s authority. It makes no sense to accept that $2 + 2 = 4$ on the basis of a report, no matter how trust worthy the source may be. Either you understand it, or you do not. The goal here is not *taqlād*, but *ta’Aqāq*, which can be translated as “verification” or “realization.”

In the transmitted sciences, people must follow *mujtabids*, whether the *mujtabids* be alive (as in Shi’ism) or dead (as in Sunnism). In other words, one follows a *mujtabid* because the only way to learn the transmitted sciences is from those who already know them. But one cannot follow a *mujtabid* in matters of faith, because faith pertains to one’s own understanding of God,

the prophets, the scriptures, and the Last Day. A Muslim cannot say, “I have faith in God because my *mujtabid* told me to have faith.” Someone who said this would be saying that if the *mujtabid* told him not to believe in God, he would not. In other words, he would be saying that his faith is empty words.

Although in theory we can distinguish between the transmitted and intellectual sciences, in practice the two have always been closely interrelated, and the transmitted sciences have been the foundation upon which the intellectual sciences are built. One cannot speak properly without grammar, and one cannot understand things Islamically without the Qur’ān and the Hadith. However, the fact that people may have an excellent knowledge of the transmitted sciences does not mean that they know anything at all about the intellectual sciences. Nor does the ability to recite the opinions of the great Muslims on matters of faith prove that the reciter has any ***understanding*** of what he is saying.

Both the transmitted and the intellectual sciences are essential to the survival of any religion—not only Islam—and both are gradually being lost. By and large, however, the transmitted sciences have been preserved better than the intellectual sciences, and the reason is obvious. Anyone can learn Qur’ān and Hadith, but very few people can truly understand what God and the Prophet are talking about. One can only understand in one’s own measure. One cannot understand mathematics (or any of the other intellectual sciences) without both native ability and training. One may have a great aptitude for mathematics, but without long years of study, one will never get very far. And mathematics deals with issues that are relatively near at hand, even in the most sophisticated of its modern forms. What about theology, which deals with the deepest issues of reality, the furthest from our everyday experience?¹

It is important to stress that no religion can survive, much less flourish, without a living intellectual tradition. In order to verify this—because this

¹ Throughout this essay, by “theology” I do not mean Kalām, but rather the whole enterprise of thinking about God as it came to be established in diverse modes throughout Islamic history. From this point of view, there are three broad modalities that theology has taken, and these can be called “philosophy” (*falsafah*), “theoretical Sufism” (*‘irfān*), and “Kalām.” Of these three, Kalām is the least suited for dealing with modern-day intellectual issues. Both philosophy and theoretical Sufism ask more basic questions about the self and reality, and, unlike Kalām, neither finds it necessary to assume a polemical stance.

statement should not be accepted on the basis of *taqlād* —we can ask the questions, What was the intellectual tradition for? What function did it play in Islamic society? What was its goal? To ask these questions is the same as asking, “Why should Muslims think?” The basic answer is that Muslims should think because they must think, because they are thinking beings. They have no choice but to think, because God gave them minds and intelligence when He created them. Not only that, but God has commanded them to think and to employ their intelligence in numerous Qur’ānic verses.

No doubt, this does not mean that God requires all Muslims to enter into the sophisticated sort of study and reflection that went on in the intellectual tradition, because it is obvious that not everyone has the proper sort of talents, capacities, and circumstances to do so. Nevertheless, all Muslims have the moral and religious obligation to use their minds correctly—if they have minds. As the Qur’ān puts it, *lā yukallifū Allāhu nafsan illā wus’ahā*, “God does not burden any soul save to its capacity.” When people’s capacity includes thinking, God has given them the burden of thinking correctly. But He does not tell them *what* to think, because then He would be making *taqlād* incumbent in intellectual matters. If many of the Ulama have forbidden *taqlād* in matters of *uĀĕl*, it is because God Himself forbids it. He has given people minds, and they cannot use their minds correctly if they simply accept dogma or opinions on the basis of authority. To think properly a person must actually think, which is to say that conclusions must be reached through one’s own intellectual struggle, not someone else’s. Any teacher of an intellectual science—like mathematics or philosophy—knows this perfectly well.

It is true that many if not most people are unreflective and would never even ask why they should think about things. They simply go about their daily routine and imagine that they understand their own situation. In any case, they suppose, God wants nothing more from them than observing the Shariah. But this is no argument for those who have the ability to stop and think. Anyone who has the capacity and talent to reflect upon God, the universe, and the human soul must do so. Not to do so is to betray one’s God-given nature and to disobey God’s commandments.

Since some Muslims have no choice but to think, learning how to think correctly must be an important area of Muslim effort. But what defines “correct” thinking? How do we tell the difference between right thinking and wrong thinking? Does the fact that people have no choice but to think

mean that they are free to think anything they want? The Islamic answer to this sort of question has always been that the way people think is far from indifferent. Some modes of thinking are encouraged by the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, some are discouraged. Islamically, it is incumbent upon those who think to employ their minds in ways that coincide with the goals of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. In other words, the goal of the Islamic intellectual tradition must coincide with the goal of Islam, or else it is not **Islamic** intellectuality.

So, what is the goal of Islam? In general terms, Islam's goal is to bring people back to God. However, everyone is going back to God in any case, so the issue is not going back, but **how** one goes back. Through the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, God guides people back to Him in a manner that will ensure their everlasting happiness. If they want to follow a "straight path" (*ĀirāḤ mustaqām*), one that will lead to happiness and not to misery, they need to employ their minds, awareness, and thinking in ways that are harmonious with God Himself, who is the only true Reality. If they follow illusion and unreality, they will be following a crooked path and most likely will not end up in a pleasant place when they go back.

The history of Islamic intellectuality is embodied in the various forms that Muslims have adopted over time in attempting to think rightly and correctly. The intellectual tradition was robust and lively, so disagreements were common. Nevertheless, in all the different schools of thought that have appeared over Islamic history, one principle has been agreed upon by everyone. This principle is the fact that God is one and that He is the only source of truth and reality. He is the origin of all things, and all things return to Him. This principle, as everyone knows, is called *tawĀād*, "asserting the unity of God." To think Islamically is to recognize God's unity and to draw the proper consequences from His unity. Differences of opinion arise concerning the proper consequences, not in the fact that God is one.

The consequences that people draw from *tawĀād* depend largely on their understanding of "God." Typically, Muslims have sought to understand God by meditating upon the implications of God's names and attributes as expressed in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The conclusions reached in these meditations have everything to do with how God is understood. If He is understood primarily as a Lawgiver, people will draw conclusions having to do with the proper observance of the *Sharā'ah*. If He is understood primarily as wrathful, they will conclude that they must avoid His wrath. If He is

understood primarily as merciful, they will think that they must seek out His mercy. If He is understood primarily as beautiful, they will know that they must love Him. God, of course, has “ninety-nine names”—at least—and every name throws different light on what exactly God is, what exactly He is not, and how exactly people should understand Him and relate to Him. Naturally, thoughtful Muslims have always understood God in many ways, and they have drawn diverse conclusions on the basis of *each* way of understanding. This diversity of understanding in the midst of *tawâd* is prefigured in the Prophet’s prayer, “O God, I seek refuge in Your mercy from Your wrath, I seek refuge in Your good pleasure from Your displeasure, I seek refuge in You from You.”

Obstacles to Recovery

My title indicates that I think the Islamic intellectual heritage has largely been lost in modern times. This is a vast topic, and I cannot begin to offer proofs for my assertion, but I think it is obvious to most Muslims who have some awareness of their own history. What I can do here is to offer a few suggestions as to the obstacles that stand in the way of recovery. For present purposes, I want to deal with two basic sorts of obstacles, though there are other sorts as well. First are intellectual forces that originally came from outside. They are intimately connected with the types of thinking that grew up in Western Europe and America and have come to dominate in the modern world. However, they have long since become an internal problem, because most Muslims have either actively and eagerly adopted them as their own, or they been molded by them without being aware of the fact. Given that these intellectual forces have now been internalized, they have given rise to a second group of obstacles, which are modern attitudes and social forces within the Islamic community that prevent recovery.

In suggesting the nature of the first category of obstacles, we can begin with a basic question: Is it possible nowadays to think Islamically? Or, Is it possible to be a “Muslim intellectual” in the modern world? By this, I do not mean an intellectual who is by religious affiliation a follower of Islam, but rather an individual who thinks Islamically about the three basic dimensions

of Islam—practice, faith, and sincerity²— while living in the midst of modernity.

I have no doubt that there are tens of thousands of Muslim intellectuals in the ordinary sense of the word—that is, Muslim writers, professors, doctors, lawyers, and scientists who are concerned with intellectual issues. But I have serious doubts as to whether any more than a tiny fraction of such people are “Muslim intellectuals” in the sense in which I mean the term. Yes, there are many thoughtful and intellectually sophisticated people who were born as followers of Islam and who may indeed practice it carefully. But do they think Islamically? Is it possible to be both a scientist in the modern sense and a Muslim who understands the universe and the human soul as the Qur’ān and the Sunnah explain them? Is it possible to be a sociologist and at the same time to think in terms of *tawÁád*?

It appears to me, as an outside observer, that the thinking of most Muslim intellectuals is not determined by Islamic principles and Islamic understanding, but by habits of mind learned unconsciously in grammar school and high school and then confirmed and solidified by university training. Such people may act like Muslims, but they think like doctors, engineers, sociologists, and political scientists.

It is naive to imagine that one can learn how to think Islamically simply by attending lectures once a week or by reading a few books written by contemporary Muslim leaders, or by studying the Qur’ān, or by saying one’s prayers and having “firm faith.” In the traditional Islamic world, the great thinkers and intellectuals spent their whole lives searching for knowledge and deepening their understanding. The Islamic intellectual heritage is extraordinarily rich. Hundreds of thousands of books were written, and in modern times the majority of even the important books are not available, because they have never been printed. Those that have been printed are rarely read by Muslim intellectuals, and those few that have been translated from Arabic and Persian into English and other modern languages have, by and large, been badly translated, so little guidance will be found in the translations.

² For a detailed elaboration of these three dimensions, illustrating their deep rooting in the Qur’ān and the Hadith, see S. Murata and W. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994).

I do not mean to suggest that it would be necessary to read all the great books of the intellectual tradition in their original languages in order to think Islamically. If modern-day Muslims could read *one* of these important books, even in translation, and *understand* it, their thinking would be deeply effected. However, the only way to understand such books is to prepare oneself for understanding, and that demands dedication, study, and training. This cannot be done on the basis of a modern university education, unless, perhaps, one has devoted it to the Islamic tradition (I say “perhaps” because many Muslims and non-Muslims with Ph-D in Islamic Studies cannot read and understand the great books of the intellectual heritage).

Given that modern schooling is rooted in topics and modes of thought that are not harmonious with traditional Islamic learning, it is profoundly difficult today for any thinking and practicing Muslim to harmonize the domain of intellectuality with the domain of faith and practice. One cannot study for many years and then be untouched by what one has studied. There is no escape from picking up mental habits from the types of thinking that one devotes one’s life to. It is most likely, and almost, but not quite inevitable, for modern intellectuals with religious faith to have compartmentalized minds — I will not go so far as to say “split personalities,” but that is common enough. One compartment of the mind will encompass the professional, intellectual domain, and the other the domain of personal piety and practice. Although individuals may *rationalize* the relationship between the two domains, they necessarily do so in terms of the world view that is determined by the *rational* side of the mind, which is the professional, modern side. The world view established by the Qur’ān and passed down by generations of Muslims will be closed to such people, and hence they will draw their rational categories and their ways of thinking from their professional training and the ever-shifting Zeitgeist that is embodied in contemporary intellectual trends and popularized through television and other forms of mass indoctrination.³

Many Muslim scientists tell us that modern science helps them see the wonders of God’s creation, and this is certainly an argument for preferring the natural sciences over the social sciences. But is it necessary to study

³ For a thought-provoking critique of the insidious ways in which television undermines intelligence and human freedom, see Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Quill, 1978).

physics or biochemistry to see the signs of God in all His creatures? The Qur'ān keeps on telling Muslims, “Will you not reflect, will you not ponder, will you not think?” About what? About the “signs” (*āyāt*) of God, which are found, as over two hundred Qur'ānic verses remind us, in everything. In short, one does not need to be a great scientist, or any scientist at all, to understand that the world tells us about the majesty of its Creator. Any fool knows this. This is what the Prophet called the “religion of old women” (*dīn al-'ajā'iz*), and no one needs any intellectual training to understand it. It is simply necessary to look at the world, and it becomes obvious to “those with minds” (*ulu 'l-albāb*).

It is true that a basic understanding of the signs of God may provide sufficient knowledge for salvation. After all, the Prophet said, *aktharu abl al-jannati bulbun*, “Most of the people of paradise are fools.” However, the foolishness that leads to paradise demands foolishness concerning the affairs of this world, and that is very difficult to come by nowadays. It is certainly not found among Muslim intellectuals. They are already far too clever, and this explains why they are such good doctors and engineers. In other words, they have already employed and developed their minds, so they have no choice but to be intellectuals. Inescapably, their intelligence has been shaped and formed by their education, their disciplines, and the media.

The Gods of Modernity

The information and habits of mind that are imparted by modernity are not congruent with Islamic learning. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this concisely is to reflect on the characteristics of modernity—by which I mean the thinking and norms of the “global culture” in which we live today. It should be obvious that whatever characterizes modernity, it is not *tawĀād*, the first principle of Islamic thinking. Rather, it is fair to say that modernity is characterized by the opposite of *tawĀād*. One could call this *shirk* or “associating others with God.” But for most Muslims, the word *shirk* is too emotionally charged to be of much help in the discussion. Moreover, they have lost touch with what it really means, because they are unacquainted with the Islamic intellectual tradition, where *tawĀād* and *shirk* are analyzed and explained. So let me call the characteristic trait of modernity “*takthār*,” which is the literal opposite of *tawĀād*. *TawĀād* means to make things one, and, in the religious context, it means “asserting that God is one.” *Takthār* mean to

make things many, and in this context I understand it to mean “asserting that the gods are many.”

Modern times and modern thought lack a single center, a single orientation, a single goal, any single purpose at all. Modernity has no common principle or guideline. In other words, there is no single “god”—since a god is what gives meaning and orientation to life. A god is what you serve.⁴ The modern world serves many, many gods. Through an ever-intensifying process of *takthâr*, the gods have been multiplied beyond count, and people worship whatever god appeals to them, usually several at once.

The truth of my assertion becomes obvious if we compare the intellectual history of the West and Islamic civilization. Up until recent times, Islamic thought was characterized by a tendency toward unity, harmony, integration, and synthesis. The great Muslim thinkers were masters of many disciplines, but they looked upon all of them as branches of a single tree, the tree of *tam'Áád*. There was never any contradiction between studying astronomy and zoology, or physics and ethics, or mathematics and law, or mysticism and logic. Everything was governed by the same principles, because everything fell under God's all-encompassing reality.

The history of Western thought is characterized by the opposite tendency. Although there was a great deal of unitarian thinking in the medieval period, from the Middle Ages onward there has been constantly increasing dispersion and multiplicity. “Renaissance men” could know a great deal about all the sciences and at the same time have a unifying vision. But nowadays, everyone is an expert in some tiny field of specialization, and “information” increases exponentially. The result is mutual incomprehension and universal disharmony. It is impossible to establish any unity of knowledge, and no real communication takes place among the specialists in different disciplines, or even among specialists in different subfields of the same discipline. In short, people in the modern world have no unifying principles, and the result is an ever-increasing multiplicity of goals and desires, an ever-intensifying chaos.

Despite the chaos, everyone has gods that he or she worships. No one can survive in an absolute vacuum, with no goal, no significance, no

⁴ The Qur'ân often uses the word “god” (*ilâh*, plural *alîha*) in this sense. Take for example the verse, “Have you seen him who takes his own caprice to be his god?” (25:43). See Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, pp. 47ff.

meaning, no orientation. The gods people worship are those points of reference that give meaning and context to their lives. The difference between traditional objects of worship and modern objects of worship is that in modernity, it is almost impossible to subordinate all the minor gods to a supreme god, and when this is done, the supreme god is generally one that has been manufactured by ideologies. It is certainly not the God of *tawÁád*, who negates the reality of all other gods. However, it may well be a blatant imitation of the God of *tawÁád*, especially when religion enters into the domain of politics.

The gods in the world of *takthár* are legion. To mention the more important ones would be to list the defining myths and ideologies of modern times—evolution, progress, science, medicine, nationalism, socialism, democracy, Marxism, freedom, equality. But perhaps the most dangerous of the gods are those that are the most difficult to recognize for what they are, because we in the modern world take them for granted and look upon them much as we look upon the air that we breathe. Let me list the most common of these gods by their seemingly innocuous names: basic need, care, communication, consumption, development, education, energy, exchange, factor, future, growth, identity, information, living standard, management, model, modernization, planning, production, progress, project, raw material, relationship, resource, role, service, sexuality, solution, system, welfare, work. These are some, but not all, of the ninety-nine most beautiful gods of modernity, and reciting their names is the *dhikr* of modern man.

Anyone who wants an analysis and explanation of the nature of these gods should refer to the book *Plastic Words*⁵ by the German linguist, Uwe Poerksen. The subtitle is more instructive as to what the book is all about: *The Tyranny of a Modular Language*. Poerksen explains how the modern use of language—a use that achieved dominance after the Second World War—has resulted in the production of a group of words that have turned into the most destructive tyrants the world has ever seen. He does not call them “gods,” because he is linguist and has no apparent interest in theology. Nevertheless, he does give them the label “tyrant,” and this is a good translation for the Qur’ānic divine name, *al-jabbār*. When this name is applied to God, it means that God has absolute controlling power over creation.

⁵Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996

“Tyranny” becomes a bad thing when it is ascribed to creatures, because it indicates that they have usurped God’s power and authority. In the case of the plastic words, the usurpation has taken place at the hands of certain words that are used to shape discussion of societal goals.

As Poerksen points out, these tyrannical words have at least thirty common characteristics. The most important of these is that they have no definition, though they do have an aura of goodness and beneficence about them. In linguistic terms, this is to say that such words have no “denotation,” but they do have many “connotations.” There is no such thing as “care” or “welfare” or “standard of living,” but these words suggest many good things to most people. They are abstract terms that seem to be scientific, so they carry an aura of authority in a world in which science is one of the most important of the supreme gods.

Each of these words turns something indefinable into a limitless ideal. By making the ideal limitless, the word awakens unlimited needs in people, and once these needs are awakened, they appear to be self-evident. The Qur’ān says that God is the rich, and that people are the poor toward God. In other words, people have no real need except toward God. But nowadays, people feel need toward meaningless concepts, and they think that they must have them. These empty idols have become the objects of people’s devotion and worship.

The plastic words give great power to those who speak on their behalf. Anyone who uses these words—care, communication, consumption, information, development—gains prestige, because he speaks for god and truth, and this forces other people to keep silent. After all, we think, only a complete idiot would object to care and development. Everyone must follow those whose only concern is to care for us and to help us develop.

The *mujtabids* who speak for these mini-gods are, of course, the “experts.” Each of the plastic words sets up an ideal and encourages us to think that only the experts can achieve it, so we must entrust our lives to them. We must follow the authority of the scientific *mujtabids*, who lay down shariahs for our health, our welfare, and our education. People treat the pronouncements of the experts as *fatwās*. If the experts reach consensus (*ijmāʿ*) that we must destroy a village as a sacrificial offering to the god “development,” we have no choice but to follow their authority. The *mujtabids* know best.

Each of the plastic words makes other words appear backwards and out-of-date. We can be proud of worshipping these gods, and all of our friends and colleagues will consider us quite enlightened for reciting the proper *dhikrs* and *du'ā's*. Those who still take the old God seriously can cover up this embarrassing fact by worshipping the new gods along with Him. And obviously, many people who continue to claim to worship the old-fashioned God twist His teachings so that He also seems to be telling us to serve “care, communication, consumption, identity, information, living standard, management, resource . . .” — the *dhikr* is well enough known.

Because the plastic gods have no denotations, all those who believe in them are able to understand them in terms of the connotations that appeal to them and then convince themselves that they are serving the basic need that is stated in the very name of the god, because, after all, it is a self-evident need. We are poor toward it and we *must* serve it. It is obvious to everyone that these gods are worthy of devotion. Religious people will have no trouble giving a religious color to these tyrants. In the name of the plastic gods, people of good will join together to transform the world, with no understanding that they are serving man-made idols, idols that, as the Qur'ān puts it, “your own hands have wrought.”

The topic of false gods is vast, especially nowadays, when more false gods exist than were ever found in the past. The Qur'ān tells us that every prophet came with the message of *tam'Āād*, and that God sent a prophet to every community. Every community of the past had its own version of *tam'Āād*, even if people sometimes fell into *shirk* because of ignorance and forgetfulness. But in modern society, there are nothing but the gods of *takthār*, and these gods, by definition, leave no room for *tam'Āād*.

Understanding the nature of false gods has always been central to the intellectual sciences, but this cannot be the concern of the transmitted sciences. One cannot accept that “There is no god but God” simply on the basis of *taqlād*. The statement must be understood for people to have true faith in it, even if their understanding is far from perfect. Hence most of the Islamic intellectual tradition has been concerned with clarifying and explaining the objects of faith. What is it that Muslims have faith in? How are they to understand these objects? Why should they have faith in them?

The first of the Islamic objects of faith is God, then angels, prophets, the Last Day, and the “measuring out, the good of it and the evil of it” (*al-qadri kbayribā wa sharribā*). In discussing God and the other objects of faith, it

is important to explain not only they are, but also what they are not. When people do not know what God is and when they do not know that it is easy to fall into the habit of worshipping false gods, then they will have no protection against the *takthâr* of the modern world, the multiplicity of gods that modern ways of thinking demand that they serve.

What is striking about contemporary Islam's encounter with modernity is that Muslims lack the intellectual preparation to deal with the situation. Muslim intellectuals—with a few honorable exceptions—do not question the legitimacy of the modern gods. Rather, they debate about the best way to serve the new tyrants. In other words, they think that Islamic society must be modified and adapted to follow the standards set by modernity, standards that are built on the basis of *takthâr*. This is to say that innumerable modern-day Muslims are forever looking for the best ways to adapt Islam to *shirk*.

Many Muslims today recognize that the West has paid too high a price for modernization and secularization. They see that various social crises have arisen in all modernized societies, and they understand that these crises are somehow connected with the loss of the religious traditions and the devaluation of ethical and moral guidelines. But many of these same people tell us that Islam is different. Islam can adopt the technology and the know-how—the “progress,” the “development,” the “expertise”—while preserving Islam's moral and spiritual strength and thereby avoiding the social disintegration of the West.⁶ In other words, they think, Muslims can forget *taw'Âád*, embark on a course of *takthâr*, and suffer no negative consequences.

The fact that so many people think this way and do not recognize the absurdity of their position shows that they have lost the vision of *taw'Âád* that used to give life to Islamic thinking. They cannot see that *everything* is interrelated, and they fail to understand that the worship of false gods necessarily entails the dissolution of every sort of order—the corruption not only of individuals and society, but also of the natural world. In other words,

⁶ I do not wish to give the impression that I am opposed to technology in principle. Rather, I am opposed to the worship of any god that turns people away from understanding who they are. For profound and wide-ranging critiques of various modes in which modernity's *takthâr*, especially as embodied in technology, gives rise to ignorance of the human situation, see the writings of Ivan Illich and, in a Christian theological perspective, those of Jacques Ellul.

when people refuse to serve God as He has asked them to serve Him, they cannot fulfill the functions for which He has created them. The net result is that our world becomes ever more chaotic. A significant Qur'ānic verse here is this: "Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea because of what the hands of people have earned" (30: 41). When people follow the gods of *takthār*, corruption can only increase, and it will end up by destroying the natural world just as it is destroying society. "Corruption" (*fasād*), after all, is defined as the lack of "wholesomeness" (*ĀlāĀ*), and wholesomeness is wholeness, health, balance, harmony, coherence, order, integration, and unity, all of which are established through *tawĀād* or "making things one."

Attitudinal Obstacles

The second sort of obstacle preventing the recovery of the intellectual heritage can be discerned on the societal level in the attitudes and habits of mind that have been adopted by modern-day Muslims. These result from the loss of intellectual independence and have become embodied in the institutions and structures of contemporary society. I will not attempt to go into details. Instead let me suggest that these obstacles become manifest in various currents that are not difficult to see, such as the politicization of the community, monolithic interpretations of Islamic teachings, and blind acceptance of the teachings of contemporary Muslim leaders (in other words *taqlād* where there should be *taĀqāq*). Perhaps the broadest and most pernicious of these obstacles, however, is the general attitude that one might call "anti-traditionalism."

Although Islam, like other religions, is built on tradition—the sum total of the transmitted and intellectual heritages—many Muslims see no contradiction between believing in the gods of modernity and accepting the authority of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. In order to do this, however, they need to ignore thirteen hundred years of Islamic intellectual history and pretend that no one needs the help of the great thinkers of the past to understand and interpret the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

We need to keep in mind that if there is any universally accepted dogma in the modern world, it is the rejection of tradition. The great prophets of modernity—Descartes, Rousseau, Marx, Freud—followed a variety of gods, but they all agreed that the old gods were no longer of any use. In the Islamic view, God's prophets share *tawĀād*. In contrast, the modern

prophets share the rejection of *tawĀād* and the assertion of *takthār*. One can only reject God's unity by inventing other gods to replace Him.

In traditional Islamic terms, God is *qadām*, "ancient" or "eternal." God has always been and always will be. In modernity, the gods are new. To stay new, they have to be changed or modified frequently. The new is always to be preferred over the old, which is "outmoded" and "backwards." Science is always making new discoveries, and technology is constantly offering new inventions that all of us quickly think we need. Anything that is not in the process of renewal is thought to be dead.

One name for this god of newness is "originality." He rules by ordaining new styles and models, and his priests are found everywhere, especially in the domains of advertising and mass indoctrination. Thus we have the fashion *mujtabids* who tell women what to wear and who change their *fatwās* every year. Originality's priests also exercise authority in the world of art. Or take the modern university, where many professors adopt the latest intellectual styles as soon as they arrive on the scene. In much of the modern university, as in women's fashion, Paris rules.

The greatest danger of anti-traditionalism for modern Muslims is that they have accepted this god—like so many others—without giving any thought to what they are doing. Hence they think that for thirteen hundred years, Muslims had nothing to say. They want to retain their Muslim identity, but they imagine that in order to do this, it is sufficient to keep their allegiance to the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, blithely ignoring the great interpreters of the tradition over the centuries.

If people think they no longer need the grand interpreters, this seems to be because they believe in the gods of progress, science, and development. They tell us that today we know so much more about the world than those people of olden times, because we have science. People who think this way usually know nothing about science except what they are taught by the media, and they certainly know nothing about the Islamic intellectual tradition. They are blind obedientists on the intellectual level, even though *taqlād* is absurd in such matters. What is worse, this is a selective *taqlād*. They will only accept the intellectual authority of the "scientists" and the "experts," not that of the great Muslim thinkers of the past. If Einstein said it, it must be true, but if *Ghazālā* or *Mullā Āadrā* said it, it is "unscientific"—which is to say that it is false.

If such people really knew something about the intellectual roots and bases of science and theology, they would know that science has nothing to say to theology, but theology has plenty to say to science. The reason for this is that theology is rooted in *tamĀād*, and hence it can look down from above and discern the interconnectedness of all things. But science is rooted in *takthār*, so it is stuck to the level of multiplicity—the lowest domain of reality—and it can only dissect this multiplicity and rearrange it endlessly. Even when it is able to gain a certain overview of interconnections, it does this without being able to explain how it can do so or what the ultimate significance of these interconnections may be. By its own premises, science is banned from the invisible domains—what the Qur’ān calls *ghayb*. If it has nothing to say about angels and spirits, which are sometimes called the “relative *ghayb*,” it has even less to say about God, the “absolute *ghayb*.” In contrast, the Islamic intellectual tradition is rooted in knowledge of God, and thereby it also acquires various modalities of knowing His creation. These are rooted in absolute truth and in certainty, unlike modern disciplines, which are cut off from the Absolute. Only this sort of traditional knowledge can reestablish human connections with the divine.

Finally, let me suggest that the most basic problem of modern Islam is that Muslims suffer from what has traditionally been called “compound ignorance,” *jahl murakkab*. “Ignorance” is not to know. “Compound ignorance” is not to know that you do not know. Too many Muslims do not know what the Islamic tradition is, they do not know how to think Islamically, and they do not know that they do not know. The first step in curing ignorance is to recognize that one does not know. Once people recognize their own ignorance, they can go off in “search of knowledge” (*Ḥalab al-ilm*)—which, as everyone knows, “is incumbent on every Muslim,” and indeed, one would think, on every human being. No recovery of the intellectual tradition is possible until individuals take this step for themselves. The tradition will never be recovered through *taqlād* or by community action, only by the dedication of individuals, through their own, personal *taĀqāq*. Governments and committees cannot begin to solve the problem, because they start from the wrong end. Understanding cannot be imposed or legislated, it can only grow up from the heart.

The Prophet said, “Wisdom is the believer’s lost camel. Wherever he finds it, he recognizes it.” People today do not know what wisdom is, and still less do they know that it belongs to them by right. Until they recognize

this, they will never know that their camel has been lost. They will think that in any case, camels are no longer of any use, since cars, airplanes, and computers will take them wherever they want to go. It is a tragedy when people have no idea that the only way to cross the desert of modernity without danger is by the camel of wisdom.