

# THE REHABILITATION OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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It is a great honour for me to be invited to deliver a lecture<sup>21</sup> named for the spiritual father of Pakistan. I thank the organizers, and I hope that my talk will live up to their expectations.

Given Allama Iqbal's laudable efforts to reformulate the basic theoretical teachings of Islam in a manner that would be appropriate for modern times, I took this lecture as an occasion to reflect on thirty-five years of study of traditional Islamic thought. The questions I asked myself went something like this: Is there anything about traditional Islamic thought that makes it more than a historical curiosity? Is it relevant to the very real and concrete problems that all human beings, not just Muslims, face at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Should Muslims continue the common practice, acquired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of ignoring their own tradition of thought in their attempts to reformulate Islamic teachings?

My general answer to these questions is that the tradition of Islamic thought is indeed far more than a mere historical curiosity. It is a valuable repository of profound teachings about the nature of reality and the human predicament. Not only is it relevant to contemporary concerns, it is far more relevant to real human concerns than any of the sciences, technologies and ideologies that occupy the minds of most contemporary intellectuals, Muslim or otherwise. In fact, traditional Islamic thought is so relevant to Muslim attempts to deal with contemporary issues that, if it is not recovered and rehabilitated, authentic Islamic thinking will cease to exist. In other words, there will be no escape from what dominates most of contemporary Islamic

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thought already, which is warmed over Western ideologies disguised by a veneer of Islamic language.

If genuine Islamic thought ceases to exist, the religion of Islam will no longer be able to function as a real alternative to the flood of modernity. The reason for this is simply that modernity is propelled by a certain type of false thinking. The antidote to false thinking is true thinking and any attempt to reconstruct true thinking from false thinking is doomed to failure. When the foundation is corrupt, the building will also be corrupt.

The only way to think in Islamic terms is to join thought with the transcendent truths from which Islam draws sustenance. This needs to be done not only by having recourse to the guidelines set down in the Qur'an and the Hadith, but also by taking guidance from the great Muslim intellectuals of past, those who employed the Qur'an and the Hadith to clarify the proper role of thought in human affairs.

### ***Thought***

I need to preface my remarks by reminding you of the important role that has been given to thought throughout Islamic history. By “thought” I mean the human ability to be aware of things and to articulate this awareness in concepts and language. For those familiar with the Islamic worldview, it is not too difficult to see that thought has always been considered the single most important component of human life and that it must be attended to before all else.

The principle of the primacy of thought is made explicit in the testimony of Islamic faith, the Shahadah. *TawÁád* or the assertion of God's unity—which is voiced in the *kalimat al-tawÁád*—has no direct relationship with the facts and events of the world. *TawÁád* is essentially a thought, a logical and coherent statement about the nature of reality, a statement that needs to inform the understanding of every Muslim. Moreover, in the Qur'anic vision of things, *tawÁád* guides the thinking of all human beings inasmuch as they are true to human nature (*fiÇrah*). Every prophet came with *tawÁád* in order to remind his people of their own true nature. *TawÁád* is the very foundation

of intelligence, so much so that God himself declares it as the principle of his understanding. As the Qur'an puts it, "God bears witness that there is no god but He" (3:18).

In this traditional Islamic view of things, thought is far more real than the bodily realm, which is nothing but the apparition of thought. I do not mean to say that the external world has no objective reality, far from it. I mean to say that the universe is born from the consciousness, awareness, and "thought" of the divine and spiritual realms.

It should be obvious that by real "thought" I do not mean simply the superficial activities of the mind, such as reason, reflective thinking, ideation and cogitation. Rather, I mean the very root of human existence, which is consciousness, awareness and understanding. The Islamic intellectual tradition usually referred to this as *'aql*, or "intelligence." Thought in this sense is a spiritual reality that has being and life by definition. In contrast, the bodily realm is essentially dead and evanescent, despite the momentary appearance of life within it. Intelligence is aware, but things and objects are unaware. Intelligence is active, but things are passive. Intelligence is a living, self-conscious, dynamic reality. In its utmost purity, intelligence is simply the shining light of the living God and that light gives being, life, and consciousness to the universe. Intelligence is the creative command whereby God brought the universe into existence. It is the spirit that God blew into Adam after having moulded his clay, the divine speech that conveys to Adam the names of all things.

In traditional Islamic thinking, it is taken for granted that God is the source of all reality. The universe and all things within it appear from God in stages, just as light appears from the sun by degrees. The spiritual world, which is the realm that the Qur'an calls *ghayb* or "unseen," is the realm of life, awareness and intelligence. The bodily world, which the Qur'an calls *shahādah* or the "witnessed," is the realm of death, unawareness and unintelligence. The closer a creature is situated to God, the more intense is its light and the

more immersed it is in intelligence, consciousness and thought. Thus angels and spirits are vastly more intense in luminosity and intelligence than most inhabitants of the human realm.

In this way of looking at things, what exactly are human beings, who, in Qur'anic terms, were made God's *kehalâfab* or vicegerent on earth? In brief, people are nothing but their thought. Their awareness and consciousness determine their reality. Their thoughts mould their nature and shape their destiny. The great Persian poet Rēmâ reminds us of thought's primacy in his verses:

*Brother, you are this very thought—  
the rest of you is bones and fibre.  
If roses are your thought, you are a rose garden,  
if thorns, you are fuel for the furnace.  
If rosewater, you will be sprinkled on the neck,  
if urine, you will be dumped in a hole.*<sup>22</sup>

It is human nature to understand that we are nothing but thought and awareness, but we forget it constantly. We are too preoccupied with our daily activities to stop and think. We are too busy to remember God and apply the principle of *taw-Ââd*, which guides all true thought back to the One from which thinking arises. Without the constant reorientation of thought by the remembrance of the One, people can only forget their real nature, which is the intelligence that was taught all the names by God himself.

If thought determines our present situation and our final outcome, what should be the content of thought? Toward what end should thought be

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<sup>22</sup> *Mathnavâ* (Nicholson edition), II 277-9.

directed? The position of the Islamic tradition has always been that thought must be focused on what is real and that there is nothing real in the true sense but God alone. The whole activity of thought must be ordered and arranged so that it begins and ends with God. Moreover, moment by moment, thought must be sustained by the awareness of God. Forgetting God, one needs to recall, is Adam's sin. In Adam's case, the sin was quickly forgiven, because Adam immediately remembered. But most people do not remember, especially in modern times and the consequences have been disastrous. As the Qur'an puts, "They forgot God, so God forgot them" (9:67).

True thought, then, accords with the divine spirit that lies at the heart of human awareness. It is the understanding of things as they are. Things can only be understood *as they are* if one is aware of them in relation to the Creator who sustains them moment by moment. True thought is to see things in relation to God. This is precisely the meaning of *tawÁád*. I would like to think that it is thought in this meaning that Iqbal had in mind when he spoke of "Ego" with a capital E.

Rēmâ tells us repeatedly about the proper object of thought and he often reminds us that true thought is living intelligence or another kind of vision. Take these verses:

*To be human is to see and the rest is only skin.*

*To see is to see the beloved.*

*If your Beloved is not seen, better to be blind.*

*If your Beloved is not the everlasting, better not to have one.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, I 1406-7.

What Rēmâ is telling us is that human beings are governed totally by their awareness of goals and desires. Any thought, any vision, any understanding that is not informed and guided by the awareness of God’s overwhelming and controlling reality loses sight of the nature of things and forgets the purpose of human life. The ultimate outcome of such thought can only be catastrophe for the individual, if not for society as a whole.

### ***The Intellectual Tradition***

In speaking of “traditional Islamic thought” I have in mind that branch of Islamic learning that focused on intelligence, *‘aql*, as the source of the universe and the goal of human life. This tradition was called *‘aqlâ*, “intellectual,” to distinguish it from *naqlâ*, “transmitted.” Intellectual learning includes fields such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, natural science and it also embraces a good deal of Sufism and some Kalâm. Transmitted learning includes Qur’an, Hadith, jurisprudence and language.

There were four main areas of inquiry that dominated the concerns of Muslim intellectuals. First is metaphysics, or knowledge of the ultimate reality. Second is cosmology, or knowledge of the universe, its origins and its ends. Third is psychology or knowledge of the human soul, its beginnings and its destiny and fourth is ethics or knowledge of the traits of human character that allow for a harmonious and healthy development of the soul.

The various branches of intellectual learning that resembled what we nowadays call “science” focused on various peripheral issues pertaining to cosmology. Most Muslim intellectuals were not interested in such issues per se, but only inasmuch as they could throw light on the primary topics.

It is important to understand that *tawâd* is the underlying insight and starting point of the intellectual tradition. It is this that makes it a thoroughgoing Islamic discipline and not simply a continuation of Greek philosophy. Anyone who has read the great texts of this tradition knows that *tawâd* was self-evident to Muslim intellectuals. It was the very root of their perspective. It allowed them to see from the outset that God is the origin of all things

that God is the ultimate destiny of all things and that God is the support and sustenance of all things at every moment.

In this metaphysics of *tawÁád*, all true and proper sciences are applications of *tawÁád*. Cosmology is the application of *tawÁád* to the origin of the universe, psychology is the application of *tawÁád* to the becoming of the human soul and ethics is the application of *tawÁád* to human character traits and activity.

The primary characteristic of Islamic intellectuality was its unitary vision of things. The various sciences were not understood as separate and independent realms of inquiry, but rather as complementary domains. This meant that the more one investigated the outer world, which is the domain of cosmology, the more light was thrown on the inner world, which is the domain of psychology. In fact, the names that I have employed—“metaphysics, cosmology, psychology and ethics”—do not have exact parallels in the classical Islamic texts and the investigations of these domains tended to be interrelated and intertwined. In all cases, metaphysics was the foundation.

The interrelationship among the domains of intellectual inquiry can be seen clearly in the two realms that I have labelled “cosmology” and “psychology.” It is sometimes thought that the Sufis focused on psychology and the soul’s perfection, but the philosophers were more interested in cosmology and the origins of the universe. In fact, both philosophers and Sufis were deeply interested in both domains. On the philosophical side, this is already apparent in the expression *mabda’ wa ma‘ád*, “The Origin and the Return.” Both Ibn Sâ« and Mulla Áadr«, arguably the two greatest representatives of the philosophical tradition, wrote books by this title.

As Islamic philosophy developed, *ma‘ád*, or the soul’s return to God became more and more the centre of attention. Those who discussed *ma‘ád* were not primarily concerned with death after life and the Resurrection. Rather, they wanted to understand and explicate the nature of the human

ascent toward God in this world. Moreover, even though metaphysics and cosmology focus on God and the cosmos, both were studied with the aim of understanding the true nature of the human soul. The simple reason for this is that we cannot understand ourselves without understanding God and the universe. Only in terms of a true comprehension of the nature of things can people orient themselves in relation to their ultimate concerns. Only on the basis of a correct orientation can they set out to achieve the goal of human life, which is to be completely human.

In short, the purpose of all the intellectual studies was to prepare the ground for achieving human perfection. Perfection can only be reached by “returning” to God that is, by traversing the route of the *ma‘ūd*. Traversing the route of the *ma‘ūd* meant going back where one had come from without waiting for this to happen after death. Both philosophers and Sufis were striving to become what it is possible to become in light of our human status as vicegerents of God. To use the expression that was made famous by Ibn ‘Arabâ, the goal of human life was to become an *insān i kâmil*, “a perfect human being.”

### ***Taqlād and TaĀqâq***

In his attempts to reconstruct Islamic thought, Allama Iqbal was much concerned with overcoming *taqlād* or “imitation” and with reviving *ijtihād*, the independent judgment that allows a person to make sound legal decisions on the basis of the Qur’an and the Hadīth. But, as Iqbal well knew, the word *taqlād* has two opposites in the Islamic sciences. If we are discussing *fiqh* and the Sharā‘ah, then the opposite of *taqlād* is *ijtihād*. Muslim believers have the duty either to follow someone else’s *ijtihād* or to be *mujtahids* themselves. Given the qualifications needed to become a *mujtahid*, most Muslims over the past few hundred years have held that the gate of *ijtihād* is closed. Nonetheless, this was not a universal idea and it has certainly been questioned in modern times.



Here, however, I do not want to talk about transmitted learning, but rather intellectual learning. In the intellectual sphere, the opposite of *taqlād* is not *ijtib«d* but rather *taÁqâq*. *TaÁqâq* has the basic sense of finding out the *Áaqq* of things. The word *Áaqq* means truth, reality, appropriateness and rightness. It also means responsibility and duty and thus it implies the proper human response to truth and right. Hence, *taÁqâq* means to understand the truth and the right of something and to put that understanding into practice.

By its very nature, “understanding” is an intensely personal experience, because it is to actualise correct knowledge of something in oneself. As a methodology, *taÁqâq* was always understood as finding the *Áaqq* for oneself and in oneself. No one can truly understand anything by way of *taqlād*. A *muÁaqiq* is someone who knows things directly and then acts in the appropriate manner on the basis of this direct knowledge. A *muÁaqiq* fulfils his responsibility toward God, creation and society on the basis of a verified and realized knowledge, not on the basis of imitating the opinions and activities of others.

In order to understand the difference between the goals of Muslim “intellectuals” properly so called and the goals of those who were experts only in the transmitted learning, we need to keep in mind the difference between *ijtib«d* and *taÁqâq*. We also need to remember that in matters of transmitted learning, *taqlād* was considered the proper path for almost everyone. By contrast, in matters of intellectual learning, *taqlād* can at best be the first stage of learning. In intellectual affairs, the goal is always *taÁqâq*, not *taqlād*. In transmitted affairs, it is necessary to accept the Qur’an and the Hadith on faith and it is perfectly legitimate to follow the opinions of the great *ulama*’. In intellectual learning, seekers could not simply imitate the great intellectuals. Rather, they had to find out for themselves. You can be an ‘*dim* on the basis of *taqlād*, but not an ‘*qil*.

When great Muslims of the past, such as Rēmâ or Ghazzâ, criticized *taqlâd*, they were not criticizing *taqlâd* in matters of the Sharâ'ah.<sup>24</sup> Rather, they were attacking *taqlâd* in questions of understanding. You cannot understand God or your own self by quoting the opinions of others, not even if the others be the Qur'an and the Prophet. The only way to understand things is to find out for yourself in yourself—though you certainly need the help of those who already know. In other words, the goal of the intellectual tradition was to allow people to actualise proper thought for themselves, not to follow someone else's thinking. On the basis of proper thought, people can reach a correct understanding of the objects that pertain strictly to intelligence. The first and most important object of intelligence is *tawâ'îd*, the one truth that underlies every truth. This means that the goal of the intellectual tradition was to understand and actualise *tawâ'îd* first hand, for oneself, not on the basis of *taqlâd*.

Today, the real disaster that looms over Islamic civilization has little to do with *ijtibâd* and everything to do with *ta'âqâq*. A society without *mujtabids* can function adequately on the basis of *taqlâd*, but a society without *mu'âqqiqs* has surrendered the ground of intelligence. Such a society cannot hope to remain true to its own principles, because it can no longer *understand* its own principles. What I am saying is that *tawâ'îd* can only be understood through *ta'âqâq*, not through *taqlâd* and certainly not through *ijtibâd*. Once Muslims lose sight of their own intellectual tradition, they have lost the ability to see with the eye of *tawâ'îd*.

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<sup>24</sup> In *Kâmiyyi sa'adat*, Ghazzâ calls teachings learned by way of *taqlâd* "the mold of truth," and contrasts this with understanding the truth in itself: "The cause of the veil is that someone will learn the creed of the Sunnis and he will learn the proofs for that as they are uttered in dialectics and debate, then he will give his whole heart over to this and believe that there is no knowledge whatsoever beyond it. If something else enters his heart, he will say, 'This disagrees with what I have heard, and whatever disagrees with it is false.' It is impossible for someone like this ever to know the truth of affairs, for the belief learned by the common people is the mold of truth, not the truth itself. Complete knowledge is for the realities to be unveiled from the mold, like a kernel from the shell." *Kâmiyyi sa'adat*, edited by H. Khadiw-jam (Tehran: Jibi, 1354/1975), pp. 36-37.

To lose the ability to see with the eye of *tawÁád* means to fall into seeing with the eye of *shirk*. *Shirk*, as you all know, is the one unforgivable sin, because it is an utter distortion of human perception and understanding a complete corruption of the human *fiÇrah*, a total obscuration of the intelligence that is innate to every human being. Given that *tawÁád* is the primary duty of every Muslim and given that *tawÁád* can be defined negatively as “the avoidance of *shirk*,” it follows that avoiding *shirk* is the primary duty of every Muslim. And, just as *tawÁád* is the first principle of right thinking, so also *shirk* is the first principle of wrong thinking. In other words, *shirk* is an intellectual issue, just as *tawÁád* is an intellectual issue. Any form of thinking that is not rooted in *tawÁád* necessarily participates in *shirk*.

### ***Scientism***

In my title, I mention the “rehabilitation” of Islamic thought. I mean to say that I look upon the authentic intellectual tradition of Islam as suffering from a grave illness. Although a great deal of thinking goes on among contemporary Muslims, most of this thinking—with a few honorable exceptions—is deracinated, which is to say that it has few if any roots in the Islamic tradition itself. Although it frequently calls upon the Qur’an and the Hadith as witness, it is rooted in habits of mind that were developed in the West during the modern period. These habits of mind, if judged by the principles of Islamic thinking, are misguided and wrong-headed. In other words, they are rooted in *shirk*, not in *tawÁád*.

If we accept that traditional Islamic thought is gravely ill, it will be obvious that recovery from the illness demands intensive care. Among other things, recovery will involve a thorough re-evaluation of the nature of intellectual health. It will necessitate careful scrutiny of the great texts of Islamic philosophy and theoretical Sufism and a serious attempt to understand Islamic principles by way of *taÁqâq*, not *taqlâd*.

However, before rehabilitation can begin in any real way, the illness must be correctly diagnosed. The diagnosis of an intellectual illness depends upon recognizing error for what it is. The problem here is that the illness is omnipresent, not only in the Islamic world, but also elsewhere. It is so much a part of the way that most people think today that they imagine it to be

natural and normal. Like someone suffering from a debilitating disease from childhood, people have lost any sense of what health might involve.

In order to understand the nature of the disease, we need to remember that practically all of us suffer from it, whether or not we are aware of it. The reason for this is that it is a characteristic of modernity (and of “post-modernity” as well). The disease is co-extensive with the worldview that informs modern thought.

It is very difficult to characterize the modern worldview with a single label. One word that has often been suggested is “scientism.” I understand this word to designate the notion that the scientific method and scientific findings are the sole criterion for truth.<sup>25</sup>

Scientism so defined is a belief-system. Like most belief-systems, it has become second nature to its believers. They do not recognize it as a belief-system, because they think it is self-evident truth. Scientism is a basic characteristic of the modern worldview and the contemporary zeitgeist. People see the world and their own psyches in terms of what they have learned in schools, universities and television documentaries. It is taken for granted that the universe as described by science is the real universe. As for religious teachings, these are understood to pertain to ritual and morality, but not to the “real world,” since we have been taught to see the world only with scientific eyes.

One of the many implications of the scientific worldview is the common belief that the cosmology and natural sciences discussed in the Islamic intellectual tradition were early stages of the development of what we nowadays call science and that the findings of those early stages of human thought have now been proven to be false. People imagine that modern science has progressed far beyond medieval ideas.

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<sup>25</sup> For a good discussion of the errors of scientism, see Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1976, Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000).

However, there is a basic fallacy in this view of pre-modern science. It is the assumption that the aims and goals of pre-modern science were the same as those of contemporary science. If this were true, then indeed the pre-modern ideas would be incorrect. However, the fact is that the medieval scientists were occupied with a totally different task than that which has occupied modern scientists. In order to understand the Islamic intellectual tradition, it might be better to avoid altogether the use of the word *science* to designate what they were doing. This word has been pre-empted by the empirical methodologies that characterize the modern period. Instead, we need to recover a term that represents fairly the real goal of Muslim intellectuals.<sup>26</sup>

One possible name for both the methodology and the goal of the intellectual tradition, a name that was commonly used, is *Áikmah* or “wisdom.” This word has the advantage of not implying a “scientific” and empirical approach to things and it also has the advantage of being a divine attribute. In English, it makes perfect sense to say that God is “Wise,” but to say that God is a “Scientist” would sound absurd. The English word *wisdom* and the Arabic word *Áikmah* have preserved enough of their ancient meaning to imply both right thought and right activity, both intellectual perfection and moral perfection.

In contrast, modern scientists long ago abandoned any claim that science can help people find the road to right activity, not to speak of moral perfection. The role of science is simply to provide more power over God’s

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<sup>26</sup> As is well known, the word *science* is commonly translated into Islamic languages as *‘ilm*, and this would be perfectly legitimate if “science” were understood in its etymological sense, that is, as “knowledge” in the broadest sense of the term. However, strict attention to what is meant by science in the modern world and what was meant by *‘ilm* in classical Islamic texts would, I think, lead us to grasp that what goes by the name science today would have been recognized by Muslim intellectuals as systematic ignorance. This is because science ignores, in a careful and methodical fashion, everything that was considered necessary for the true understanding of the nature of things. Instead, it focuses on superficial appearances and outward phenomena.

creation. Science does not and cannot address the issue of understanding the true nature of the universe, because the true nature of the universe cannot be understood without reference to the Creator of the universe. Nor can science address the issue of how we are to find the wisdom to use correctly the power that we gain over creation. Using power incorrectly is one definition of *iūlm*—wrongdoing, injustice, iniquity, tyranny.

Another name that fairly describes the goal of Islamic thought is the already mentioned *taĀqāq*. The Muslim intellectuals were not trying to contribute to the so-called “progress of science.” Rather, they were trying to develop their own understanding of things. The focus of their attention was not on the practical affairs of this world, but rather on the full actualisation of human intelligence. This demanded not only discovering the *Āqq* of things, but also acting in accordance with the *Āqq* of things, a *Āqq* that can only be determined with reference to the Absolute *Āqq*, which is God himself. *TaĀqāq* demands both right thought and right activity, both intellectual perfection and moral perfection.

The Islamic quest for wisdom was always a quest to achieve unity with the divine light or the divine spirit, a light and spirit that was called “intelligence” or “heart.” By the nature of this quest, Muslim intellectuals knew from the outset that everything had come from the One Principle and will return to the One Principle. In other words, *tanĀād* informed their vision from beginning to end. Their quest was not to “believe” that God is One, because they already knew that God is one. God’s unity is too self-evident to be called into question, unless someone’s intelligence has become atrophied or stunted. The quest was to understand the implications of God’s unity thoroughly and completely.

In brief, the purpose of searching for wisdom was what we can call “the *taĀqāq* of *tanĀād*.” In other words, it was to verify and realize the truth of *tanĀād* for oneself and then to put *tanĀād* into practice in all one’s thoughts and activities. The goal was spiritual transformation. This transformation was

understood to involve a total conformity with the divine attributes (*Ājfi*) and character traits (*akhlq*). It was often called *ta'allub*, “deiformity” or “being like unto God,” or *takballuq bi akhlq Allah*, “assuming the character traits of God.”

In the Islamic wisdom tradition, *tawĀād* was the guide of all efforts. It was both the seed and the fruit of human possibility. It was the seed that was planted in human awareness in order to yield the fruit of perfect understanding and perfect activity. In such a view of things, it was impossible to separate the realms of learning into independent domains. *TaĀqāq* was a holistic enterprise that yielded a unified vision of things. This unified vision demanded the unity of the human subject with the cosmic object that is, the conformity of the full human soul with the world in all its grandeur. Soul and world were always seen as complementary manifestations of the One, Single Principle, which is God. When God created Adam in His own image, he also created the universe in His own image. Perfect understanding means the ability to see all things in their proper places, which means to see them as divine images and in their relationship to God.

### ***The Reign of Takthār***

I said earlier that a certain type of false thinking governs the modern worldview. I suggested that one name for that thinking is “scientism,” and it is false because it makes unwarranted claims. But there is a much deeper reason why the modern worldview is essentially false. In order to explain this, I need to develop a few more implications of *tawĀād*.

I said that the loss of *tawĀād* is called *shirk*. I want to suggest now why sciences in its modern sense demands *shirk*. This is perhaps a startling claim and it will offend many practicing Muslim scientists, not to mention all those Muslims who believe that modern science can be justified by reference to the Prophet’s commands to seek knowledge. Nonetheless, my point needs to be made as starkly as possible. If it is not grasped, there will be no hope for the rehabilitation of the intellectual tradition. The evidence for the claim becomes completely obvious as soon as one understands what the Islamic intellectual tradition was trying to do.

I reminded you that the guiding principle of the Islamic wisdom tradition has been *tawÁád*. If this is true, it is not too difficult to see that the guiding principle of modern science and learning is the abandonment of *tawÁád*. We can call this abandonment *shirk*, but I do not want to deny a certain positive content to science. In its common usage, the word *shirk* is too heavily loaded with negative connotations to have any positive sense. Moreover, I do not want to make a moral or even a religious case against science. Rather, I want to make an intellectual case, in keeping with the tradition from which I am drawing.

So, let me suggest that the guiding principle of modern science and learning can be designated by the word *takthár*. *Takthár* is the literal opposite of *tawÁád*. *TawÁád* means “to make one,” and *takthár* means “to make many.” *TawÁád* means “asserting unity,” and *takthár* means “asserting multiplicity.” *TawÁád* is to recognize the primacy and ultimacy of the One Reality. It is to acknowledge that everything comes from God, everything returns to God and everything is sustained by God. *Takthár* is to declare the primacy and ultimacy of many realities. It is to assert that things have many origins and many destinies and that they are sustained by many different things.

By no means is *takthár* inherently false. Rather, it is inherently short-sighted and incomplete. It misses the important points, because it denies implicitly, if not explicitly, the ultimacy of the One Reality that stands beyond all other realities. Once we understand things in terms of *tawÁád*, we can understand the origin and destiny of the universe and the human soul and we can also grasp the present status of the world in which we live. *TawÁád* answers the ultimate questions and allows people to orient themselves in terms of the beginning and end of all things. If *takthár* is to have any legitimacy, it must be oriented and governed by *tawÁád*. *Takthár* without *tawÁád* can only tell us how things are related to other things, but there can be no unifying vision. A perspective based on *takthár* denies implicitly that there is a purpose to existence. It rejects the idea that human aspirations to achieve moral and ethical betterment and to become intellectually and spiritually perfect have any grounding in objective reality.

The Muslim cosmologists were very interested in the issue of *takthár*. But, for them, *takthár* was a divine attribute. It is God’s activity in bringing the



universe into existence. When Muslim intellectuals investigated the *mabda'*, the Origin of all things, they were explicating the nature of *takthir*. In effect, they saw God as *al-mukatthir*, “the One who brings the many into existence.” In contrast, when they discussed psychology, which is the *ma'ad* or the return of the soul to God, *taw'Áád* was the primary issue. Here the question is simply this: How can we, as beings who dwell in multiplicity, unify our vision and activity and thereby return happily and freely to the One Origin, who is the Place of Return?

In short, within the Islamic intellectual tradition, we can understand *takthâr* as the divine principle that makes multiplicity appear from the One. *Taw'Áád* is then the complement of *takthâr*. It designates the divine and human principle that reintegrates the many into the One. One philosopher, for example, tells us that the Universal Intellect is *khalifatullah* in the Origin, which is to say that multiplicity appears from unity on the basis of the radiance of the divine omniscience. In contrast, human beings are *khalifatullah* in the Return, which is to say that the human role in the cosmos is to take multiplicity back to the unity from which it arose.<sup>27</sup> This explains why God selected Adam among all creatures to be taught the names. Only by knowing the names of all things can human beings take everything back to God. In other words, human intelligence has the potential to act directly on behalf of God because in its purest form, it is nothing but the living light and spirit of God that was breathed into Adam at his creation.

In brief, the perspective of the Islamic intellectual tradition recognizes both *takthâr* and *taw'Áád*. However, *takthâr* is kept totally subordinate to *taw'Áád*, which is to say that the many is always and forever governed by the One. The world and all things within it stay in God's hands and can never leave. The role of *takthâr* can only be understood in terms of *taw'Áád*. Once we understand that God created human beings to act as His vicegerent and unify the whole of creation through their spiritual and moral perfection, then we can understand why God brought multiplicity into existence in the first place. Real understanding and real knowledge depend upon grasping the ultimate end of human existence, which corresponds with the ultimate end of

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<sup>27</sup> See Chittick, “Afial al-Dân K«sh«nâ's Philosopher-King” in *Knowledge is Light: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Zailan Moris (Chicago: ABC International, 1999), p. 149.

creation itself. Moreover, human completion and perfection depend upon acting in conformity with real knowledge.

If the Islamic worldview can be characterized as *tawÁád*, the scientific worldview can be characterized as “*takthâr* without *tawÁád*.”<sup>28</sup> I do not have time to present any detailed arguments to support this claim, so let me look simply at the fruit of modern learning, where *takthâr* is obvious. Take, for example, the ever more specialized nature of the scientific, social and humanistic domains of learning; the disintegration of any coherent vision of human nature in the modern university; the unintelligibility of the individual sciences to any but the experts; and the total incomprehensibility of the edifice of science and learning as a whole. When *takthâr* rules over human thought, the result can only be analysis, differentiation, distinction, disunity, disharmony, disequilibrium and dissolution. Given that modern science and learning are rooted in the world’s multiplicity, not in God’s unity, their fruit is division and dispersion, not unification and harmony. One of Iqbal’s great insights, which, however, he did not follow up as he might have, is his understanding that modern science yields disunity and dissonance by definition. I quote: <sup>29</sup>

We must not forget that what is called science is . . . a mass of sectional views of Reality. . . . [T]he various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature and each running away with a piece of its flesh. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precision.

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<sup>28</sup> Even if a “unified field theory” were to be achieved, it would simply show that the “physical” world—that is, the world, not as it is, but rather as it is understood and conceptualized by “physicists”—is governed by unified laws, which no one doubts in any case. But that leaves all the other modern sciences, such as biology, which do not follow “physical” laws, not to mention the social and human sciences. No, *takthâr* is the guiding principle of modern thought and the only possible way to overcome it is to root oneself in *tawÁád*.

<sup>29</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1986), pp. 33-34.

The reason, modern science wants “precision” is to separate things out from their overall context, a context that can only be properly understood in the light of *tawÁád*. Only after a “highly artificial” view of reality has been manufactured can we ignore the objectivity of moral and ethic principles and justify the view that human beings have the right to control God’s creation as they see fit, without the guidance of wisdom. To use power without wisdom is to work *iilm*, and *iilm* indeed is a key characteristic of modern society. It is this power without wisdom that Lord Acton must have had in mind in his famous dictum, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

It is perhaps in the realm of ethics and morality that the power of *takthâr* becomes most obvious to observers of the modern scene. For the Islamic intellectual perspective, adherence to right activity and actualization of “praiseworthy character traits” (*akhlâq-i Áamâda*) is demanded by the objective nature of things. After all, the world is actually and truly a display of the divine attributes and the human soul is actually and in fact made in God’s image. Any human soul that does not actualize the divine character traits—such as wisdom, justice, mercy, compassion, love and forgiveness—has failed in the task of living up to human status. Any methodology that yields an unbridgeable gulf between truth and ethics is ignorance, not knowledge. Such knowledge ignores the *Áaqq* of things, the moral demands that the truth of things makes upon us, and so it is occupied with *b«Çil*, the untrue, the vain, the wrong. Under the reign of *takthâr*, intelligence and virtue are torn from their roots in God. The net result can only be the dispersal of human excellence in a vast diversity of unrelated realms of endeavor, with no connections to be made between knowing and being, or between science and ethics. The raw power that is accumulated through acquiring instrumental and manipulative knowledge can only result in the downfall of human goodness.

I repeat that the remedy for *takthâr* is *tawÁád*. God made *tawÁád* a human imperative because without it, the world can only fall into corruption and ruin. *TawÁád* alone can reverse the natural flow of existence and awareness away from the divine unity into the dispersion and incoherence of multiplicity. Only the free will of human beings, harnessed by divine guidance, can reintegrate the many back into the One.

*Takthâr* by itself, then, is the process of bringing about multiplicity and disunity. It can only lead to disintegration. It is the direct opposite of *tawÁád*. *Takthâr* is the animating principle of science as we know it today. Let

scientists deny this as much as they want. The tree is known by its fruit, not by the claims of the gardener.

### ***The Goal of Thought***

I said that there is a fundamental difference between the Islamic intellectual tradition and modern science and learning. One way to understand this is to see that Muslim intellectuals were striving to achieve a unitary and unified vision of all things by actualising the divine spirit latent in the human soul, a spirit that they often called *'aql*.

In contrast, modern scientists want to achieve an ever more exact and precise understanding of things, one that allows for increased control over the environment, the human body and society. This control, however, is not given over to the fully actualised intelligence of God's vicegerent on earth—an intelligence that by definition entails the fullness of ethical and moral perfection. Rather, control is surrendered to the passions of the ignorant and forgetful selfhood—what was called *nafs* or “ego” in the Islamic texts. This is blatantly obvious in the various forms of totalitarian government that have appeared in the modern world, all of which take full advantage of scientific and technological power to beat their subjects into submission. But even “democratic” government, as Plato recognized long ago, can only be the rule of ignorant human passions. It can never be the rule of intelligence.

I want to point out still another characteristic of the Islamic intellectual tradition that places it in stark contrast with modern learning. This has to do with the implications of *ta'Áqâq*, some of which have already been discussed. *Ta'Áqâq* means to verify and realize things or to give things their *Áaqq* in view of the Absolute *Áaqq* that is God himself. In modern Islamic languages, *ta'Áqâq* is sometimes used to translate scientific “research.” However, traditional Muslim intellectuals would not have recognized *ta'Áqâq* in any forms of modern research. The basic reason for this is that modern research is based essentially upon *taqlâd*, not upon *ta'Áqâq*, which is to say that it always depends wholly on the findings of earlier scientists. In contrast,

*taʿĀqāq* as understood by the Muslim intellectuals did not accept any intellectual issue on the basis of *taqlād*. It was an intensely personal activity that aimed at the discovery of the *ʿĀqq* within the seeker’s own intelligence. That intelligence was understood and indeed experienced, as the supra-individual, transpersonal, universal breath of awareness that was blown into Adam at his creation.

From the point of view of modern science, which is rooted in *taqlād*, every seeker of wisdom in the Islamic intellectual tradition was trying to “reinvent the wheel.” But it is precisely the technological application of knowledge, implied in this expression that was *not* the goal of the quest. Rather, the goal was wisdom and wisdom can only be discovered where it resides. Wisdom resides in living intelligence and ethical activity, nowhere else.

It is a common misinterpretation of Islamic intellectual history to say that Muslim scholars made scientific discoveries, but then they failed to follow up on them, so the torch of learning was passed to the West. But this is to read the empirical methodology and practical goals of modern science back into the intellectual methods and spiritual goals of the wisdom tradition. No, the goal was not to establish a fund of information upon which other scientists could build and from which technologists could draw for practical ends. Rather, the goal was *taʿĀqāq*, which is to discover the truth for oneself in oneself. Practical, worldly applications were of relatively little interest. Excessive attention paid to physical welfare and material benefit was considered a sure sign of a failed intellectual. In short, the true seeker of knowledge had another goal, which was to see for himself. The true seeker of knowledge knew that, as Rēmâ puts it, “To be human is to see, the rest is skin.” Seeing for oneself is called *taʿĀqāq*, and it is to grasp the *ʿĀqq* of things—their truth and reality—and then to put all things in their proper places according to their *ʿĀqq*s.

Rēmâ sums up the difference between a *muʿĀqqiq* and a *muqallid* — between someone who knows for himself and someone who imitates other

people in his thinking—in the following verses. He would surely include in the category of childlike *muqallids* most if not all of those who are called “scientists” in modern times.

*A child on the path does not have the thought of Men.  
His imagination cannot be compared with true taÁqâq.  
The thought of children is of nurses and milk,  
raisins and walnuts, crying and weeping.  
The muqallid is like a sick child,  
even if he offers subtle arguments and proofs.  
His profundity in proofs and objections  
drives him away from true insight.  
He takes the collyrium of his secret heart  
and uses it to offer rejoinders.<sup>30</sup>*

Rëmâ, then, speaks for the whole Islamic intellectual tradition when he says that no one can achieve true and real understanding until he throws away the imitation of others and finds out the truth for himself through *taÁqâq*.

My conclusion then is simply this: There will be no rehabilitation and revival of Islamic thought until Muslim thinkers put the *taÁqâq* of *tawÁâd* back at the centre of their concerns.

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<sup>30</sup> *Mathnawâ*, V 1289-93.