

The Islamization of Knowledge: A Ten Year Projection

The purpose of this presentation is to take a general look at earlier accomplishments and a critical evaluation of how far the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has gone towards achieving its objectives, in as far as these objectives serve IIIT's strategy of thought reform as the only means to reconstructing an Islamic civilization.

A brief recollection of the launching years is in order. It all began with the arrival in the West, in North America to be more precise, of dedicated Islamists for purposes of gaining higher education. These Islamists were charged, activated, and excited on one hand, but on the other hand they were incensed, frustrated, and confused. What made them excited and enthusiastic was their young age and their fond memories of the past glories of Islam. But then what made them lukewarm was their feelings of the ummah's status quo: divisions, acrimony, regression, and apathy. The ummah's attempts throughout three centuries at revival and renaissance were, more or less, disappointing. What characterized the ummah's

culture and decision makers throughout these centuries of attempted revival was a dichotomy. On one side the ummah was drifting towards a practical foreign and secular civic order but then on the other side it was attached to a theoretical historical and religious reality. These two currents were ripping the Muslim ummah apart. It seemed like failure was coming at the ummah from both these directions. And there was nothing anybody could do to arrest this coming apart of the ummah.

During the latter half of the 20th century (as European colonialism was receding and a new generation of Muslims was growing up) there began a process of critical evaluation as to why the ummah has been unable to reinvigorate itself and pull out of its predicament. And out of thousands of students who trekked to western universities there were those who could see and identify how important it was to concentrate on Islamic solidarity, identity, and allegiance to the ummah. Out of this emerged the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) in the US and Canada. The idea of the MSA was to educate, refine, and cultivate Islamic ideas as a way to the ummah's salvation. In this sense, the MSA served as the precursor to the Islamization of knowledge. But in a historical sense the Islamization of knowledge can be traced all the way back to Abu Hamed al-Ghazzali in his *Ihya' 'ulum al-Din*. Centuries have been punctuated with revivalist movements such as that of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the Sanusi movement in Libya, the

Mahdi movement in Sudan but all these movements were less than successful because they were regurgitating the glories of the past while unable to be “creative” about the future. Eventually, during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century secular movements made headway in the ummah in as far as governance and the public mind is concerned. Secularists were throwing out traditions along with religion (Islam) and then trying to build without any historical or civilizational depth. As the dust began to settle in the latter half of the 20th century all the political movements: liberal, socialist, nationalist, and religious traditionalists were unable to put the ummah back together again. Ready made western “solutions” and automatically cited references to the “glorious past” fell far short of addressing the central problem.

It was within these atmospherics that the “Islamization of knowledge” was born as the effective remedy to all the cultural, political, economic, social, educational, and existential mess the ummah was in. And it took a cadre of students and academics with deep thoughts and intense feelings to launch the Islamization of knowledge as a project in, of all places, the United States of America.

What the “Islamization of knowledge” does is that it says to the Muslims that their problems are not due to a lack of wealth, manpower, or resources. Muslims are not in a crisis because they lack values and principles. The Islamization of knowledge

states that the ummah's decay is attributable to its lack of development of intellectual capacity and its function at the civilizational level. And all revivalist movements failed because they intellectually were lagging behind their times and their contemporaries. Those who could see this deficiency in the Muslim mind were convinced that the only way out was to rid this mind of the inherent and institutionalized tension between "revelation" and "reason." The sad fact of the matter is that the intellectual potential of the ummah was sequestered by a legacy of centuries that left no room for lively mental interaction with both reality and revelation simultaneously.

The Islamization of knowledge as a social expression is meant to reconsider thinking peoples' approach to things "cultural," "traditional," and "conformist."

The Muslim mind has to be free of fear and threats, it also has to surmount inferiority, superstitions, and subjugation. The Muslim mind has to be free and confident of its ability and success, and there is no other way.

In the aftermath of the 1967 debacle when nationalism lost its glitter, the trend for the Islamization of knowledge from within the old guard MSA gained a very highly qualified academic to its side; i.e., the late Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi. The task now was on in earnest: the Islamic mind has to be recast and no secular perversions or mossgrown notions about religion will be henceforth tolerated.

Obviously, this refashioning of the Muslim mind found fertile grounds in the Islamic student bodies around the world. It was not long before another very steeped intellectual of a *fiqh* and *shari'ah* background joined this effort, and he is Dr. Taha Jaber al-'Alwani.

Financial considerations were factored in and the founding members of IIIT realized that they needed a budget to sustain the ambitious idea of Islamisizing knowledge. A convocation of leading Islamic intellectuals and scholars followed in Logano, Italy with resolutions and recommendations. In 1981, IIIT was registered as an intellectual and educational institute in the USA. What expedited this process was the internecine political and partisan fallout from the different Islamic associations in North America. In 1984, the staff and administration of IIIT was finally in order and ready to actualize their enterprising idea of Islamization of knowledge. To this end, subsidiaries of IIIT were set up in Islamabad (1982), Kuala Lumpur (1984), and Khartum (1987). IIIT published its first book *Islamiyyat al-Ma'rif* (The Islamization of Knowledge) edited by Dr. Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi and Dr. 'Abd al-Hamid Abu Suleyman. Next the International Islamic University was established in Malaysia to become the first academic university in which the Islamization of knowledge would be given an academic setting. That was followed by the University of Islamic and Social Sciences in Virginia, USA. Henceforth, the Islamization of knowledge became a

mainstream consideration in the ummah, rather than an idea supported by some Islamic academics. There are now syllabi and curricula extracted from the concept of Islamization of knowledge. Therefore, a new Islamic character is within reach after being molded by this new and stimulating experience.

Where Are We Now?

After twenty years of a systemic approach to the Islamization of knowledge the concept has gained popularity and has become a force to be reckoned with. IIIT now fields 16 offices, sponsors international conferences, regional symposia, and local confabs. To its credit IIIT has published over 250 books dealing with profound intellectual themes. Add to that its journal: *The American Journal of Islamic and Social Sciences*, and its Arabic journal *Islamiyyat al-Ma'rifah*.

The question remains: has the project of Islamization of knowledge been successful so far, and how far has it gone? The answer is that the project itself will never end because it is a continuous response and an on-going effort to adapt human thought to the complexities around and the essential continuous effort at filtering this mind from the residuals of traditional history. Since its inception, IIIT anticipated fundamental ventures and in-depth assignments. To keep up with these anticipations a secretariat was envisioned with all the scholarly and

academic personnel to sustain the cognitive reconfiguration of social sciences in particular. The whole range of this ambition, alas, did not come to fruition.

Budgetary constraints were a consideration. Muslim social scientists were not participating at anticipated capacity. Much of the work dwindled to collecting and publishing academic research and theses by Muslim scholars or students which were deemed contributory to the Islamization of knowledge. Pressure, intrigue, and schemes were all at work to try to thwart this whole project. But should we surrender to these circumstances, or should we redouble our efforts and surmount the obstacles?

Wither IIIT?

IIIT has been able to weather many storms. The civilizational task of IIIT has been acknowledged by sensible and honorable quarters. But there are still some dogmatic and ideologically zealous individuals who cannot reconcile themselves and their political agendas that have no room for pluralism and independent think tanks with IIIT . These may conceal their sponsors who happen to be enemies of the ummah and its civilizational undertaking. IIIT's transparency and its coordination with the selfless advocates of clear thought shall, in the end, carry the day. Another spring of hope is the return of senior Islamists to IIIT along with young cadres who have recharged the whole effort with momentum. This promises

to open up new horizons for strategizing along with more intense and intimate contact with the intellectual community.

What Do We Want to Accomplish in the Next Ten Years?

There are two main considerations that should be the focus of the next decade. The first one is the intellectual and rational issues of essence. The second is the ways and means by which strategies can be thought out and implemented. This takes into consideration manpower and finances as they may be at the institutes disposal.

1) Intellectual Priorities:

New ground has to be broken by drawing up a plan for future intellectual pursuits, the ideas keep on generating and the institute has to not only stay in touch but also anticipate and pre-empt evolving theories and rational speculations in the fields of social sciences. Studies, research, discussions, and interactions should be regulated and systemic. Much has been done along these lines but more has to be done in the future. Independent Islamic thought and theorization has to have its

distinguished epistemology. The crisis is clearly an intellectual one which means that the ummah and the concepts therein are malformed and unclear. In the final analysis what is needed is practical results of vital consequences traceable all the way to the rational motivations in the ummah. The public mind and mass psychology should be remolded by the ensuing intellectual development in progress. There should be blueprints of methods that make it possible for the convergence of civilizational visions with the input of empirical science. Coupled with that is the tributary of history and heritage that gives impulse and extension to a continuum of Islamic efforts and generations. Coinciding with that, there has to be a movement that springs from the present and finds a resonance in the facts and the flow of history. This will, undoubtedly, propel *ijtihad* to new levels of practical utility. As this is done from the perspective of "self" it should also be as accommodating as to define the "other" in terms that are inclusive, progressive, and utilitarian. As such, the resultant will be positive and challenging. **This multi-approach spawns mutual maturation and a clear vision provided that the objective and the method are analogous. This integrative (eclectic) process becomes a guarantee for sound reasoning and reciprocal achievements.** The time has come to go beyond what is "theoretical" and to arrive at what is "practical" in as far as the Islamization of knowledge is concerned. We have to move from what is hypothetical to what can become educational programs, social institutions, and state policy.

From this point on, our order of business should be to pinpoint the nature of challenges facing our ummah, the potential it has, and the practical issues and ranges that have to be studied, researched, discussed, and then follow through on. All this has to be cast within the dimensions of space and time that makes it accessible to the ummah at large.

At no time should the ummah be severed from its history and heritage, but at the same time the ummah should not be held hostage to its traditions and past. Most of what has been done so far has not dealt decisively and conclusively with the underlying reasons that are responsible for the lack of solidarity, cooperation, and the individual Muslim's alienation therein.

The cumulative effort that has been done throughout the past years of the institution has not addressed satisfactorily the causes of negativism, indifference, and despondence that permeate the width and length of the ummah. We have lost the spirit of adventure; we have lost the initiative, and we have lost our grip on our own affairs! We have been reduced to the sheer level of survival. Poverty, ignorance, and backwardness run rampant in our ummah. There are mounting debts; enemies are calling the shots. And still our minds are stagnant! Tyranny, corruption, consumerism, and injustice are the order of the day. With all these problems, we are barely able to debunk the mentality of illusions,

superstitions, and hocus-pocus traditions! We still haven't been able to purge our public mind from the spell of a self-important history. Any perspective which is incapable of motivating the ummah with the impulse of knowledge and the courage of initiative and the force of solidarity amounts to pure philosophical jargon that disguises daydreams and fantasies while the enemies are ripping its flesh and breaking its bones!

Another important aspect we should take into consideration is that we do not get bogged down into petty day-to-day "procedural" disputes and partisan politics. WE have to concentrate and not lose sight of the larger picture: what goes into molding thought patterns, what goes into shaping the public psychological terrain... Sometimes we tend to expect immediate results but a word of caution: this task is a marathon and we need not give up on the process half way through it.

Practices that are handed down from the past by tradition (heritage) has to be understood with both its positives and negatives. There has to be a critical study of these issues to make it possible to weed out what is valid from what is not. And still there has not been much done along these lines.

Islamic social concepts remain an off-shoot of restricted and phobic *fiqhi* endowment. Most of this is still defined by inhibitions, judgmental opinions,

and disciplinary restrictions that have tumbled down to us from throughout the ages with a clear disregard for social realities (mega-social realities.)

The arrangement of traditional Islamic life and its institutions have to be reconsidered in a way that synthesizes what is ideological with what is social. Philosophical allegories and political expediencies should give way to a *ghaybi* (meta-physical) positive integration with the conscience; a process that will produce a constructive effort in all walks of material life.

Moreover, the pristine Sunnah remains a fertile ground for every type of trouble-maker who finds devious and disingenuous ways to subvert the essentials of Islam. In some cases the Sunnah has become the common denominator among orientalist, westoxicated Muslims, and atavistic "scholars." Regrettably, this Sunnah has become a quandary which is encountered in every Muslim generation. A methodical effort has to be exerted to find a way out of a partial understanding of things to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of things. Time and place have to be factored into understanding statements when they are made and then drawing correct conclusions and making pertinent references to acts and relationships, instead of the "everything goes" mentality and the "blank-judgment" statements that are heard and quoted so often.

Nowadays there is enough information, classifications, research, and studies that will make it possible for thinking Muslims to come of age. Muslims in their showdown with their "mental crisis" will be able to avoid the pitfalls of a history that has developed a cleavage between "religion" and "politics."

The ummah and its intellegentsia's central issue today is how to utilize whatever there is to launch a civilization on the indisputable substructures and how to do this in a calculated and methodical way that will revitalize and reinvigorate it's belief as well as its life.

The Sunnah has to be re-studied and reconsidered in light of all the information we have available to us at the present time. Along with that the Sunnah has to be placed in the reference of the Quran. There are some Sunnah material that breed an incompatibility with the Quran. This material has to be re-evaluated.

The Holy Quran has to regain its inspirational and implementational feature as the center of the Muslims' conviction and the source of their legal status.

Shura (inter-active decision making) as an educational and organizational standard has to become a permanent feature of life to unleash the potential of

“creativity,” *ijtihad*, and the natural flow of affairs in the ummah. The institute (IIIT) has no choice but to be concerned with a methodical approach to the institutionalization of *shura* within the challenges and the potentials of the times.

Systematized and adept studies of the Quran and the Sunnah as the primary basis of perceptual experience and the Islamic world order is still at a rudimentary stage.

The revamping of educational systems and the reorientation of researchers is one of the most fundamental requisites pertaining to the references of Islamic knowledge and its integrity. Revelation, cognitive reasoning, reality, and the universe are the essential constituents for an Islamic schema. It is, therefore, paramount for the institute to not only boost religious and cultural studies, but also to promote the social science complementary component in the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and education. This is a practical way for the reconstruction task ahead of us. Curricula and syllabi especially at the university level have to be discussed, critiqued, and analyzed. Until eventually we are able integrate the information available to us in these fields of social sciences into the schemata of Islamic knowledge. The institute may also want to consider producing university textbooks in the pertinent fields of social sciences. Special attention and research is still needed to define and delineate occidental thought and its intrusion and undermining of the

Islamic perspective.

Education is another area that has to be on top of the institute's priority list. In this respect, there may be an opportunity to cooperate with the "Institute for Child Development." Children and youth have been neglected in the overall scheme of things, and it is high time to move in and make a difference in the acculturation of our children. Along these lines family structure and family values along with the role of the parents have to be recast to meet the nurturing principles and the loving care that come from sources of scripture and revelation rather than from the crass and brutal materialism of the west. If the rational and emotional sources of knowledge are provided to parents and children then we may begin to expect a qualitative difference in our coming generation. Obviously, there is a need for textbooks along these lines.

From time to time we are exposed to significant and meaningful issues that steal the attention of people of thought, such as pluralism, *shura*, freedom, violence, globalization, movements for change, and policymaking philosophies, as well as other such attention grabbing issues. These issues of course have to be addressed but within the general framework of the Islamization of knowledge.

The most important thing though is not to lose sight of the fact that a

consciousness of "cutting edge" ideas has to remain at the center of the institute's concerns. There should always be a two-way avenue between the institute and all those who are breaking new grounds in the fields of social sciences. And as far as it is possible, social scientists who are breaking new grounds should be contacted and solicited in the strict scientific sense of the word. The institute's field offices should have the operational freedom to establish their own liaison with these bright scientists.

Next comes the daunting effort of publication and distribution. Needless to say: the market has to be scanned and evaluated with all follow-up requirements. In this regard all procedural and administrative efforts should be professional and masterful. In this regard, there should be periodical evaluations and scrutiny of this process.

One of the most critical components of this whole process is to have highly qualified and extremely competent individuals who are tasked with these responsibilities. More important than that, these certified individuals have to be motivated. In the majority of cases these are to be found in those who are in the prime of their life (usually with open minds and higher education). These types have to be drawn into the institutes lectures and conferences.

The institute has to take the initiative in presenting its bold and critical ideas

and thoughts, and it must be able to defend and expand its position. The institute may decide to have an honorary panel of participants or discussants who share the institutes general orientation and who can be called upon on occasions to participate in this general task. On the other hand, the institute may tap on resourceful intellectuals and assist them in their research or studies, provided that the overall effort contributes to the Islamization of knowledge.

Communication and publicity is another area that has to be finessed.

Other tactical and procedural considerations: convening one or two regional conferences a year to stimulate the public about highly developed social sciences; convening several international conferences for the same purpose in different parts of the world to get a network of intellectual activity or centers moving. The institute's publications have to make it into the intellectual mainstream.

The institute set out to change the world; and now we are going to have to change some aspects of the institute to be able to do what we originally set out to do.

Allah will help us if we work together; and He alone is the source of all success.

Dr. 'Abd al-Hamid Ahmad Abu Suleiman

Muharram 1421 / April 2000