The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today

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THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

The publication program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has already addressed important issues in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamization of Knowledge. In this respect a number of books have already appeared in several languages under fifteen main series: Academic Dissertations; Accessing the Islamic Intellectual Heritage; Concepts and Terminology; Human Development; Indices; Islamic Methodology; Islamization of Culture; Islamization of Knowledge; Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought; Lectures; Occasional Papers; Perspectives on Islamic Thought; Reform Movements and Methodologies of Change; Research Monographs and Rasā’il Islamiyat al Ma’rifah [Studies in the Islamization of Knowledge].

The Occasional Papers series, published by the Institute’s London Office, covers a number of research papers, articles and lectures from the Institute’s worldwide program as well as from Muslim scholars willing to make contributions. These are presented individually in the form of booklets that can be easily read or referred to. It is hoped that the booklets will reach students, scholars, and specialists as well as major sections of the world’s Muslims alike in order to generate a fruitful debate on the vital issue of Islamization, and to create an awareness of the intellectual crisis in its various shapes and forms, while encouraging an active role in the proposed course of action and solution. This series is also translated into other languages.

The eighth paper in this series, The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today, was first published in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS), Vol. 12, No. 1.

The use of Islamic terminology in transliteration is a policy of the IIIT. Some of the terms used are untranslatable, while others are so important that the Institute feels that familiarity with them is necessary for a better understanding of Islamic issues. These terms have been footnoted once or sometimes explained briefly between brackets. All those which have not yet been accepted in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries are in italic. As many of these occur
more than once, readers are advised to refer to the relevant footnotes whenever necessary.

When mentioning dates the Islamic one comes first, separated from the Gregorian one by a slash. When an Islamic date is mentioned alone, it is followed by AH.

The translation of the Qur'an used in this series is that of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (Amana Corporation, revised, 1989). However, we made changes to verses quoted from it whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning.

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Editors' Note

In the welter of today's philosophies, claims and counterclaims, Muslims, indeed people worldwide, are confused and disoriented. Unable to discern a clear or convincing truth about the ultimate questions that trouble their souls, many have allowed their intellectual and spiritual integrity to be swept along by the daily rush of the consumeristic traffic. Others have surrendered long-guarded psyches to the fantasies and delusions of otherworldliness and extremism. The "balance" (and the "middle course") preached by Islam is lost, except to a few.

However, being an egalitarian faith and a holistic way of life, Islam would not give the "few" the satisfaction of individual salvation in the midst of general despair or misplaced euphoria. Indeed, a mark of an "enlightened" person (and a conscientious Muslim) is the sense of empathy, even oneness and mutual dependence, a believer should have or develop within the fraternity of faith—a fraternity that should not be hermetically sealed against the larger world community with all its possibilities and challenges, as well as duty due to it.

So it is both a "religious" obligation and a free act of will to reach out for one's fellow believers and fellow human beings with whatever insight or learning one has attained or accumulated. This is to be done in a spirit of humility and with a readiness to accept other views and perspectives if proven valid and conducive to the realization of the envisaged goals and a further discernment of truth.

With this perspective in mind, the present paper marks a watershed. It has its own point of departure in the seminal and epoch-making book, The Islamization of Knowledge, 1982. In its time, that book was offered as a "timely" gift to an Ummah beset by calamities from within and without, an Ummah that was nevertheless aspiring to regain its balance and resume its world role. Momentous events have since taken place in the world, but the condition of the Ummah remains unchanged, in both the severity of its plight and the pressing need to rise to its destiny.
Indeed, the gravity of the Ummah's decline and the enormity of the task of salvaging its future were prime movers behind the formulation of the 1982 declaration, which, while taking a hard, cold look at the causes and manifestations of the malaise, still spiritedly urged the Ummah to rise to its destiny and reap the harvest promised for the diligent and conscientious. The note of optimism was certainly not out of place. Muslims are enjoined not to allow their psyches to be consumed by despair, however implacable the malady might be. Besides being inimical to the very spirit of faith, despondency is likely to sap the energy needed for continual struggle and creativity, which are essential to humankind's civilizing role on earth.

Nor was that dose of optimism proven fatuous by later developments. The response to the 1982 statement and Work Plan was truly phenomenal. Many have been the seminars, conferences, studies, and publications devoted since then to the issue of the Islamization of Knowledge. The movement, constantly acquiring more insights, breadth and refinement with the passage of time and the contribution of many men and women, has now become a central issue of debate among Muslim scholars worldwide. The idiom itself has evolved from being a strange coinage to be defended, frowned upon or overhauled, to becoming a byword. By design or not, it has served as a fulcrum for a robust exchange of views, and seems destined to continue to do so.

Nevertheless, the need for a further clarification and updating of the original "manifesto" has been felt for some time. This paper sets out to do that, among other things. It shares with the 1982 formulation of principles a rational examination of the Ummah's malaise, however pervasive, and the possible solutions, however demanding in terms of effort and time. It partakes of the original declaration's belief in the immense, though largely untapped, potential of the Ummah in its fourteenth Hijra century, but it departs from the inevitable simplicities, rigidities, and polarities (East vs. West, etc.) of the original manifesto and its somewhat austere Work Plan. Trekking a path of its own, this paper offers a number of valuable insights. These are insights gained from a long engagement with Islamic as well as global issues, with
traditional as well as contemporary concerns, with work from within the social sciences and outside of them. It not only surveys the field along with the powers and challenges at work, but also charts a way out of the present impasse. More immediately, it offers an updated review of the progress of the Islamization of Knowledge project and a timely clarification of the very concept itself. Clearly, that concept, though responsible for generating a worldwide debate, even action at times, has been so often misinterpreted and/or inflated since its inception in 1982 that a need for such elucidation has been called for, and is now met.

This does not, however, mean that the task of the Islamization of Knowledge will henceforth be made crystal-clear and effortless. Rather, and as the concept of the Islamization of Knowledge advocates (and requires), there will always be new and different interpretations.

As matters now stand, the Ummah has still to make up its collective mind about which direction it ought to take. Arguments rage as to whether it should reinvoke (or clone) the past with all its pristine purity and glory or allow the tide of modernity to rush into and bail out the partly stagnant waters which have generally characterized the Muslim intellectual endeavor for the past few centuries. Obviously, the argument put forward by this paper is concerned to see the Ummah in tune with its past but working for its present and future with skill and clarity of vision. The fervent, but reasoned, appeal for the "two readings"—of both God's Book and His Cosmos—seems destined to provoke as much debate as the original slogan of the Islamization of Knowledge. Such debate must be anticipated with joy—though more is required.

The gradational nature of the Islamizing project is all too obvious, and was never far from the minds of the authors of the 1982 declaration. It would certainly have been juvenile to think otherwise. And yet there is a need now to stress, as the present paper does, the ambitious (but also imperative) nature of the enterprise. For, despite the highly commendable effort invested in further elaboration and, in some brave instances, attempted implementation of the concept, the Islamization of Knowledge
remains at an initial, some might even say, prenatal stage. Much work needs to be done, many talents galvanized and resources pooled, institutions set up or reorganized, etc., before a truly genuine and sustainable realization of the concept can be said to have begun. Such a realistic vision needs to accompany and inform every stage of the way. To be lulled into a false or premature sense of achievement is a costly setback at a time when standing idly by for a day may have serious consequences for decades to come.
ON THIS BOOK

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