Missing Dimensions in Contemporary Islamic Movements

Dr. Ẓāhā Ẓābir al ʿAlwānī

Translated from Arabic
by IIIT Department of Translation

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT
Herndon, Virginia
London
CONTENTS

The *Occasional Papers* Series .............................................. v
Foreword .................................................................................. vii
Introduction ............................................................................. 1

I. Contemporary Islamic Discourse: Missing Dimensions ............ 2
   a. Testimony and Responsible Witnessing ........................... 2
   b. Missing Dimensions: A Discovery Procedure .................. 3
   c. Towards a Comprehensive Awareness .............................. 4
   d. Universal Crisis, Universal Solution ................................. 5
   e. The Tendency to Compromise or Reject: Its origins .......... 5
   f. The Need for Methodology ............................................. 7
   g. Acquisition of Power: Is it a Solution? ............................ 7
   h. Constituents of Well-Being in the Past ............................. 8
   i. Wrong Analogy ............................................................. 9

II. The Decline of the Ummah: Underlying Causes .................... 10
    Secularism Versus Reform ............................................... 10

III. Towards a Comprehensive View of the Revelation and the World .......................................................... 13
    a. New Logic ................................................................... 13
    b. Methodological Understanding and the Combined Reading of the Qur'an and the Universe ......................... 14
    c. Impasses of Contemporary Muslim Action ..................... 19
    d. Collective Ijtihad and Collective Action ......................... 20
    e. Going it Alone: The Pitfall of Exclusiveness ................... 21
    f. The Genesis of Exclusive Thought .................................. 24

IV. Summary ............................................................................ 26

V. Towards a Resolution of the Crisis ...................................... 27
   a. Comprehensiveness ...................................................... 28
   b. The General Approach to Man, Time, and Place ............. 28
   c. Purposefulness .......................................................... 29
   d. Universality .............................................................. 30
(1) Obstacles on the Way to Islamic Universality ............ 32
(2) Islamic Universality Versus Western Universalism ... 32
(3) Contemporary Western Civilization
   Background and Distinguishing Features .............. 34
(4) The Logic of Entering into the Peace of Islam ........ 36
(5) Determinants of the Crisis in the Western Mind ...... 39

VI. Course of Action .............................................. 41
    Determinants of the Crisis in the Muslim Mind ....... 43

VII. Concluding Remarks ........................................... 47
THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

The publication program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has already addressed several important issues in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamization of Knowledge. In this respect a number of books have appeared in several languages under fifteen main series: Academic Dissertations; Accessing the Islamic Intellectual Heritage; Concepts and Terminology; Human Development; Indices and Bibliographies; 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 Islāmiyyat 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.

In its original form the ninth paper in this series, Ab'ād Gha'ibah 'an Fikr wa Mumārasāt al Ḥarakāt al Islāmiyyah al Mu'āṣirah, was presented on 22nd September 1994 at the Grand Hall of the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The session was chaired by the Right Honorable Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Malaysia. On this occasion the lecture was translated into English by Professor Mohammed Akram SaAdedine, Director of CELPAD, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). A short summary of the translation was produced by Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo and published in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS), Vol. 12, No. 2. The present edition is a thoroughly revised and edited copy of the original translation.
The use of Islamic terminology in transliteration is a policy of the IIIT. Some of the terms used have no English equivalents, 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. Terms which have not yet been accepted in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries are in italics.

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. When a Gregorian date is mentioned alone, it is followed by AC.

The translation of the meaning of the Qur'an used in this series is that of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (Amana Publications, 1996). However, we used other translations whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning. If a translation other than Yusuf 'Ali's has been used this has been specified. For reasons of conformity with other IIIT publications, American spelling is adopted.

IIIT London Office
1417/1996
FOREWORD

Islam's civilizing role through history and in large parts of the world seems to require no further proof or validation. Its monuments, both actual and spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual, and always salubrious, can be seen and felt far and wide even now. But especially now, there is a need, some people contend, to call attention to its distinguishing features as well as to the doctrinal axioms on which it was based. Such task, it is argued, needs to be undertaken at this particular phase of human history since humankind, in its present stage of material and scientific development, has lapsed on many moral and other commitments and concerns. Mercantile greed, along with pride in race and in mere material progress, has been allowed to go almost unchecked, with only lip service being given to morality and human rights when self-interest demands it or for largely cosmetic reasons.

One certainly does not wish to sound despairing or negative. Much good has been brought about into the world as a result of advances in such fields as medicine, education, transport, and communication. However, the arrogant dismissal or, at best, condescending tolerance, of the religious, or "supernatural" dimension has meant that many of these advances were eventually (and are still) exploited to serve unscrupulous, even inhuman, ends. We all know how the late 19th century Utopian dream in the ability of science and socialism to usher in a new dawn for humankind gave way to the nightmarish realities of the First, then Second World Wars, and eventually the atomic bomb. Even after the nuclear dust had settled down beneath the reconstructed streets of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and "peace" had been joyously celebrated in the world's capitals, the onset of the Cold War and the series of local wars (and wars by proxy) which enveloped several regions of the world, along with the policy of frenzied nuclear armament and brinkmanship which, at least on one occasion, brought the world to the edge of all out nuclear holocaust, opened the door to widespread disillusionment and anxiety. The steady erosion of certainties, and, by implication, values, helped bring about such phenomena as absurdism in the theater of the 1960s and deconstructionism in the literary criticism of the same decade, to cite but two examples from the world of letters. More recently, and despite the hype surrounding the "information explosion" and "cyber-
space," people are waking up yet again to certain grim realities surrounding the abuse and misappropriation of such alluring developments in technology.

Even when modernity (in the 1960s and in the throes of the Vietnam War) developed an awareness of the need for spirituality, this was often translated, sadly but at times absurdly, into youthful pilgrimages to the homes of self-seeking gurus and/or excursions into fantastic experiences courtesy of LSD. Hallucinatory drugs have of late reached—literally—deadly sophistication, while religious revivalism has often oscillated between acts of extremism and inept mysticism and world-renunciation.

For Islam, respect of the cosmos along with humankind's civilizing mission within it is essential. This is of course an intrinsic part of Islam's general emphasis on the wholeness of existence and experience. A human is body and soul, an intuitive and intellectual force whose capacity for good is almost limitless. Humans are also very special beings in the cosmic order—a status which the angels (in the Qur'anic account) acknowledged by prostrating themselves before Adam. And humans are seekers after the Truth, in the pursuit of which they are enjoined to use their mental faculties and all the gifts with which a merciful and loving God has continually endowed them and to the best of their ability. The civilization or the "City" (the Madinah) people are urged to build should, however, be founded on equity and fairness, and with no injury to fellow humans or to the benign environment of their local and global home. Their sensitivity to God's cosmic norms has to be acute, for if it were impaired or blurred, they would inflict on others and ultimately on themselves the greatest damage, thus hampering their chances of attaining genuine (ultimately eternal) happiness and wisdom.

Islam has described its philosophy as that of "the middle way," underscoring here too its pivotal and much-loved axioms of modesty, charity, tolerance, and respect for life in all its forms. It is most regrettable that many Muslim movements, in their zeal to reintroduce Islamic values and way of life, fail to see or appreciate the holistic and global approach of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. They err by imitating (sometimes unconsciously) other "revivalist" or "fundamentalist" movements in the world (and those are many) which are doomed to swing between narrow, even ethnic, extremism and woolly otherworldliness. Islam, however, is in the business of guiding the whole of humanity towards a holistic goal accomplished by holistic methods.
This paper, written by a distinguished Islamic scholar and head of an institute almost unique for its emphasis on intellectual and global solutions for the multi-faceted crisis facing the Ummah and the entire world, is a timely reminder for both Muslims and others of Islam's peaceful and civilizing agenda. At a time when Muslim and other religious (and non-religious) ideologies suffer from loss of direction and balance, and as actual and conceptual monuments of cultural and universal memory are being destroyed or swamped by bombs or satellite TV, Dr. al ‘Alwâni is boldly critiquing current Muslim thought and showing some of its failings and shortcomings, but, at the same time, charting a course out of the present impasse in the light of Islam's eternal, but often misunderstood, principles.

The Editors
ON THIS BOOK

Despite the distinct buzz of activity in the area of Islamic action and theory within the Muslim world and elsewhere, many "Islamic" movements and pronouncements fall short of the Islamic ideal. Many of them indeed go against the very spirit of Islam, and do the faith a considerable damage in the sight of Allah and man. This is due to a gross misunderstanding acquired over centuries of Muslim intellectual lethargy and indifference to changing realities. The present paper traces the unfortunate growth of such tendencies in the distant and near past, but emphasizes the contemporary scene, which it examines (and tries to put right) with incisive clarity and candor, along with an unerring commitment to the vibrancy and universality of Islam.