1401-1981

Outlines of
A Cultural
Strategy

Tāhā Jābir al 'Alwānī

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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REPRINT
(1415 - 1994)

www.pathagar.com

Introduction

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 three main series: *The Islamization of Knowledge Series; Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought Series;* and *Islamization of Culture Series.*

The *Occasional Papers Series,* published by the Institute through its London Office, will select a number of research papers, articles, or lectures from the Institute's world-wide program as well as from Muslim scholars willing to make contributions, and present them 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 segments of the world's Muslims alike to generate a fruitful debate on the vital issue of Islamization, to create an awareness of the intellectual crisis in its various shapes and forms, and to encourage an active role in the proposed course of action and solution. This series will also be translated into other languages.

The first paper in the new series, *Outlines of a Cultural Strategy,* was originally a lecture entitled "Towards an Islamic Alternative in Thought and Knowledge" delivered in Rabat, Morocco, in Dhū al Hijja 1408/August 1988, at the invitation of the Islamic, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). The paper not only addresses the intellectual crisis in the Muslim world as manifest in the present state of Muslim thought, knowledge, education, and civilization, which is directly responsible for the Muslim world's social, economic, and political problems, but also presents interesting and thought-provoking ideas for an alternative cultural strategy likely to tackle the Ummah's malaise and benefit humanity at large, inshā' Allah.

IIIT
London
Muḥarram 1410/August 1989

Outlines Of A Cultural Strategy

Current developments and the many acute problems facing the Muslim Ummah, especially at the intellectual level, present a serious challenge to Islam. This is why an attempt to outline any intellectual Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge has never been so urgent and imperative. This will, inshā' Allah, help in formulating a clear and coordinated policy with regard to cultural transformation based on firm principles and sound strategy. It is also hoped that this policy will lead to scientific findings.

By way of introduction, we will give a brief description of the state of thought and knowledge, and of the educational and cultural systems in the contemporary Arab and Muslim world.

The Present State of Thought

When examining the present state of thought among the Muslim peoples three basic approaches can be identified.

The first can be described as the traditionalist approach which, by and large, considers the Ummah's traditional thought to be self-sufficient and capable of being presented as it is or with very little alteration. This approach holds that the Ummah's intellectual life can be formed and organised, and that the structure of its civilization can be built on this basis. This approach is often described as the approach of *authenticity*.

The second trend considers contemporary Western thought and its world-view—its concepts of existence, of life and man—to be universal; without it a modern culture and civilization cannot be built. This tendency maintains that Western thought must be adopted *in toto,* and any consequent negative aspects are the price which must be paid if a modern culture and civilization are to be established. This view is often described as *modernistic.*

The third trend, or the *eclectic* approach, advocates yet another view. It contends that one must select from traditional thought what is most sound, and from 'modern' contemporary thought that which one considers and proves to be correct, and weld the two to form an intellectual structure which will provide a guaranteed basis for achieving what is required.

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However, the traditional approach, in the manner in which it has been presented and applied, did not prevent the Ummah from falling into a state of decline and failure from which it is still suffering. Likewise, Western thought, also as it is presented and applied, cannot protect the Ummah from its inherent adverse, harmful and even disastrous effects. Moreover, the advocates of the eclectic selective approach have not yet presented the details of this proposed blend, let alone tried to put it into effect. All this leads us to ask the wide-ranging question: is the Ummah going through a serious intellectual crisis, and, if so, what is the way out of it?

The Present State of Knowledge

To answer the above question, a brief look at the contemporary state of knowledge is necessary. There are at present two types of knowledge imparted to our students. Firstly, there are the contemporary social sciences and humanities as well as the technical and applied sciences. These branches of knowledge all exercise a dominant control over the organisation and functioning of all aspects of life. They comprise—regardless of Muslim contributions to the bases of many of these branches—a body of knowledge whose principles, rules, objectives and methods were formed by the Western mentality through its religious and intellectual framework, philosophy and background. Every aspect of this knowledge is closely bound up with the Western form of civilization.

Secondly, there is the knowledge which is described variously by the Muslims as Shar'ī[1] or aṣlī[2]. This knowledge is itself of two types: the knowlege of objectives and the knowledge of means. Experts on classification and cataloging include both under the heading of al 'ulūm al naqliyyah ('transmitted knowledge').

Most of this knowledge was produced to deal with the issues of the period following that in which the Islamic sciences had been established in the third century Hijrah, and in response to the historical reality of the Ummah at that time. The books and the reference works current among the students of this kind of knowledge were prepared after ijtihād[3] had ceased and taqlid[4] had become widespread. The authors of these works used to prepare them with the utmost care, paying great attention to linguistic details and artistic style in order to display the depth of their knowledge to their

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students, colleagues and rivals. They are more like monologues than teaching books. The methods and content of such material supported the concept of *taqlīd* and encouraged people to adhere to it. The intention was to turn people away from any form of ijtihad other than that needed to understand the books themselves, and, in the process, to make people despise ijtihad. This type of knowledge could not equip anyone to face the realities of life. Rather, it strenuously encouraged and promoted blind following and imitation and brought an end to intellectual activity and creativity. A person seeking knowledge was thus caught between following alien contemporary thought or sticking to old traditional ways of thinking. Neither type of knowledge enable him to achieve operative ijtihad which could be instrumental in helping him face current problems in a sound and appropriate way.

The Present State of Muslim Education

Turning now to the educational systems throughout the Muslim world, we discover the prevalence of a dual system of education. First is the traditional 'Islamic system' which offers the student a program including the Sharī'ah sciences[5]. This system is confined to preparing and enabling graduates to deal with personal affairs, meet some educational needs, and lead *salāh*[6] in mosques. This sector, for the most part, remains a private affair that has a limited access to public funds. The money needed for this sector comes from the residue of charitable endowments. Where public funds are made available, demands of secularization are imposed in the name of 'modernism'.

The second—and most widespread—is the secular or non-religious system which imparts all kinds of contemporary knowledge and sciences in the various stages of education. It advocates an un-Islamic orientation and has assumed tremendous proportions, elbowing out the Islamic system from the field. Because the graduates of the Islamic system are kept out of touch with the reality of contemporary life and its challenges, they usually present no competition to the trainees of the secular system. Consequently, it is the un-Islamic secular system that produces the Ummah's intellectual, political and social leaders, the managers of its services and means of production.

As a result of this dichotomy, the system of education became a

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means of dividing the Ummah and draining its energy. In reality, education should be a means of bringing Muslims together and providing them with a unified cultural perspective, directing them towards progress and construction. It should create harmony and provide a common purpose, thus directing all efforts towards developing the righteous Muslim whose mind and soul, behavior and powers of individual initiative and reasoning are strong and productive.

Many of the manifestations of division and fragmentation—even tragic conflicts—which afflict several parts of the Arab and Muslim world today bear the traces of the negative aspects of this dichotomy. In addition, there are the negative effects of other 'particular' branches of education such as military, private and foreign, which are reflected in the attitudes of the graduates and their cultural vision.

The Present Civilizational State of the Ummah

The territories of the Ummah today are among the most strategically important and rich areas of the world. They contain the most important raw materials needed by Western industry and house tremendous human resources. Muslims have a magnificent legacy and possess the best sources of guidance, namely the Divine Revelation (*Waḥy*) with its two parts: the inimitable Qur'an, including its interpretation and application, as well as the Sunnah of the Prophet (ṢAAS)[7]. In spite of this, however, the Muslim world today is plagued with inner strife and division, turbulence and self-contradictions, wars and threats to world peace, extravagant wealth and excessive poverty, famine and epidemics.

The Ummah is divided against itself, torn up and fragmented into some fifty or more nation-states, separated by artificial boundaries designed to create and ensure the continuation of friction, tension and confrontation, especially between neighboring states. None of these states has had the chance to attain outright freedom and stability, or the integration of its citizens, which would enable it to concentrate its energies on construction and development. The factors of disharmony, such as sectarianism, factionalism and nationalism, have been so much dominant that they have led to a continuous state of instability and uneasiness which could be easily manipulated by foreign powers at any time, thus leading to turmoil

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and anarchy. The lack of individual freedom does not allow intellectual and cultural growth and the natural psychological development of the people. The Muslim continues to live under the shadow of poverty, oppression and terror, either from those who were specially prepared to impose Western forms of thought and culture on the Ummah, or from military dictators who seize power and impose by force, torture and intimidation the frivolous, arbitrary and whimsical policies of one individual. In such dictatorships the role of political and administrative bodies and institutions is completely abolished which destroys all the qualities and cultural potential of man.

The overwhelming majority of the Ummah is illiterate. Their needs far outweigh the goods, materials and services they can provide. Even in the important and vital necessities of life, none of these Muslim states is self-sufficient. This deficiency is usually made up by imports which increase dependency on foreign powers. What makes the situation even more intolerable is the fact that raw materials are bought from Muslim states at the lowest price, or even taken for nothing, and are returned to them as manufactured goods at the highest prices. Many of these states live at the level of starvation, whilst the rest could be reduced to such a level, almost immediately, if the exporters and alien powers so wished.

The few Muslim states which have followed the path of industrialization have been unable to attain complete self-sufficiency simply because they depend on foreign sources for most of the equipment needed to develop their industry. Such sources are, therefore, able to control the local industry and direct it according to their own political and economic interests.

In most cases, 'Muslim industry' was not designed to meet the desperate, immediate and vital needs of the Muslims, but to meet only tangential and secondary needs which would satisfy and cater for consumeristic desires and habits planted in the Muslims for the benefit of others. The Muslim world has unfortunately developed the habit of consuming the products of a contemporary alien civilization, and has adopted many of its outward aspects. It has built 'modern' roads, buildings and places of entertainment in its capitals after the Western style. It has also established some political and economic institutions based on the Western model. But all this has failed to bring about the desired transformation, and has not even

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set the Ummah on the road which would lead it towards that transformation. How can this be rectified?

Towards an Islamic Alternative in Thought

In order to present the Islamic alternative thought to the Ummah today, we must revise Muslim thought as a whole and re-assess its methods. We must also understand the position of 'regional' and 'nationalistic' thought, as well as Western thought, both in its Marxist and liberal facets. Furthermore, we must realize the extent of the influence of alien thought in the Muslim world in order to become aware of the enormous challenge we are facing and the pressure which both history and the present are exerting on the Muslim mind.

There are several important conditions for such a reformation of thought. It should be comprehensive and free from all psychological pressures, whether historical or contemporary; it should be carried out with the purpose of correction, self-criticism and serious quest for scientific alternatives which are governed by theoretical and intellectual principles.

Such a revision should examine controversial issues which have occupied the Muslim mind and prevented it from being positive, effective and influential. Such issues include causality, the alleged conflict between transmitted knowledge and reason, the blind imitation of previous scholars with its crippling effects, and the dignity of man. It should re-interpret these issues in a sound and objective fashion, and seek to free the Muslim mind from the negative effects and shackles which these issues have had on its psychology, mentality, education and way of life.

We must revise and correct the inherited historical cultural structure of the Ummah and rid it of the weakness, dichotomy and lack of reality which hamper its efficiency and effectiveness. We must also re-examine all the prevalent concepts and work to achieve correct perspectives on life, the universe and man, as well as on all other related issues. In addition, we must also agree on the sources for these perspectives and work to design Islamic systems and institutions, and define a role for each of them, so that they may be able to attain the aims of Islam, even if they do not exactly match the historical reality in form and structure. This should lead towards an Islamic concept of civilization which will enable the Muslim to str-

ive strenuously towards the building of the Ummah and the achievement of its goals and objectives. We should strive for the transformation of all the above—according to a defined method—into a coordinated cultural system which will acculturate and educate the entire Ummah and change it into a thriving, operational system.

In our opinion, the sound intellectual basis which is the prerequisite for building a civilizational system must have three characteristics:

It must have infallible sources and be free from error and destructive deviation so that thinking will not degenerate into imagination and meandering meditation; it should be rationally and logically acceptable so that if ideas are presented to the Muslim mind they will be correctly dealt with; it should also be realistic so that it will be able to interact with reality and change and influence it positively.

Towards a Strategy for Knowledge

Nowadays, scientific knowledge is defined according to the following maxim: *"Every piece of knowledge is subject to tangible experiment."* This definition has been prevalent for centuries and has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It has been used as a means of deciding which knowledge is scientific and which is not. Through the adoption of this concept, and widespread reliance on it, Revelation was rejected as a source of knowledge, culture and civilization, and all the branches of knowledge which are based on Revelation were excluded from the field of scientific knowledge regardless of whether they dealt with the tangible world or that which is beyond perception. All these fields were considered to be 'fables' or 'unscientific' knowledge of no benefit whatsoever.

As a result, the empirical method was considered to be the only means of gaining scientific knowledge. Man was regarded only as a mass of biological substances. The social sciences and the humanities were subjected to the laws of the natural sciences. Experiments were carried out on animals in an attempt to define laws which could be applied to man as well in the areas of behavior, response, reaction, influence, obedience, rejection and ways of meeting material and other needs.

The Muslims also accepted this approach. As a result the con-

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temporary social sciences and humanities, with these methods and such a philosophy, became the basic sources for the Muslim's education, the formation of his mentality and the definition of his attitudes towards the values of truth and goodness. Likewise, the arts based on this philosophy became the source which formed his psychology and defined his tastes and attitudes towards aesthetic values. The teaching methods and curricula in universities, institutes and schools were subjected to this approach, and Westernization and alienation from Islam deepened leading to the equation of Revelation with myth. A strong link was established between the power, productivity and ability of the West on the one hand, and Western thought, beliefs and concepts of God, the universe, man, religion, life, nature, time, history, matter, woman, the soul, science, knowledge, and various other matters on the other.

In the light of the above, the first step towards formulating an Islamic cultural strategy consists in re-defining knowledge in terms of an Islamic epistemology and in a way that will be acceptable to Muslims everywhere.

The contemporary theory of knowledge affirms that the only possible source of scientific knowledge is the tangible universe. The Islamic theory of scientific knowledge, on the other hand, stresses that knowledge has two sources: Revelation and the tangible universe. Revelation is the source of absolute facts and truth about which there is no doubt whatsoever and is not subjected to relativity. Revelation is contained in the Qur'an which is the word of Allah revealed to the Prophet (ṢAAS). Allah (SWT)[8] has challenged mankind to produce a Surah to match even the shortest one of the Qur'an:

> And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a surah like thereunto (2: 23).

The second source of Revelation are the legally binding elaborations of the Qur'an, contained in the Sunnah of the Prophet (ṢAAS), which consists of his authentic aḥādīth and decisions i.e. all that he said, did, approved of, or condemned.

Furthermore the Islamic theory of knowledge considers the means of gaining knowledge to be reason, perception and experiment. The Qur'an says:

> And Allah has brought you forth from your mother's wombs

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knowing nothing—but He has endowed you with hearing and sight and minds so that you might have cause to be grateful [to Him] (16: 78).

According to Islam, no information can be considered true knowledge or worthy of acceptance without evidence from Revelation or from the tangible universe. Knowledge from the latter would have to be derived via one of the three means mentioned above: reason, perception, or experiment. The Qur'an challenges people to

produce your proof if you are truthful (2: 111).

About people affirming unsubstantiated beliefs, it asks:

Have you any [certain] knowledge which you could proffer to us? You follow only conjectures and you yourselves do nothing but guess (6: 148).

And it categorically affirms:

Never can surmise take the place of truth (53: 28).

The two fields of which man should have some knowledge and understanding are: the 'Unseen' world ('ālam al-ghayb), i.e. all that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception; and the 'Seen' world ('ālam al-shahādah) which is all that can be witnessed by a creature's senses or mind. The primary source about the 'Unseen' world is Revelation. The basic source about the 'Seen' world is the tangible universe. Experiments and perception, which may support one another, provide evidence about the 'Seen' world through a variety of means. If we lay a firm foundation for the theory of Islamic knowledge and present it as an alternative to the contemporary Western theory of knowledge, we will have established the second basis of the proposed cultural strategy.

This strategy must stem from the realization that every nation has a main issue of concern, a belief or a basic aim which provides it with motivation, inspiration and impetus in all the fields of knowledge and labor. Usually, each nation seeks to plant this belief or aim in the consciousness of its youth, using all methods available, especially in the stages of childhood. It continues to nurture and strengthen this belief in all other stages of the individual's development.

The current system of education in the Muslim world has failed to instill any such belief, sound vision, standards or motives in the Muslim. As a result of this failure, the aim of education for the Muslim, at various levels, is to obtain decent employment with a

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decent income. Materialism has become widespread among the educated who have lost any sense of a clear purpose in life. Academic syllabi have failed to establish a sound purpose in the Muslim conscience. The only way to achieve this is to establish a sound Islamic belief ('aqīdah) and to instill a sound Islamic vision in the hearts and minds of Muslim youth. We must use all available means and resources to nurture and develop this belief and vision in order to achieve a sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah. We must make this belief the motivation and the inspiration for our thoughts and feelings.

Secondary schools in the West, despite the West's secularism, teach students about Western heritage, cultural history and traditions in an integrated and comprehensive manner. This gives the students a sense of belonging and instills in them the basic aims and strategy of their nation. They grow up with this feeling and carry with them the vision of their nation and its concepts of life, the universe, man, other cultures, as well as other aspects of its world view.

Our proposed cultural strategy must firmly establish Islam and its vision, not through limited classes on 'religion', but throughout the entire education system. Every syllabus and program must aim at forming and establishing this belief; we must clear every syllabus of anything which contradicts or opposes this belief. This should be done by re-organizing the education system in all Muslim countries and by removing the negative influences of the disparity between religious, secular, civil and military education. Such a distinction has created and continues to perpetuate divisions amongst our people, so much so that graduates of 'religious' schools and universities have ideas, opinions and concepts which sharply differ from those of the graduates of secular or military schools and universities. We do not want to abolish variety and specialization in learning; what we want is to end the segmentation of knowledge.

This could be achieved by integrating all existing systems and creating one single system based on the teachings, spirit and vision of Islam. The new education system, its syllabi and methods, and those responsible for it, should all be infused with the principles and aims of Islam. They should abandon the alien educational programs—both in content and methods—which were adopted without taking into consideration the particular needs and aspirations of our Ummah. Such a unified education system should

generate a sense of mission, whereby professional achievements and material success may be regarded as inessential benefits, not the purpose and objective of education. The proposed education system must unify our ideas, concepts and feelings regarding all major issues. If there is then a diversification into various specializations, the students and scholars would still feel no sense of isolation or alienation.

If this unification of the education system is carried out in a sound way, it will provide all the educated members of the Ummah with a good share of Islamic knowledge embracing Islamic beliefs, the values and aims of Islam, the morals and behavior of the Muslim, familiarity with Islamic legislation and history and civilization, along with what is necessary and essential of contemporary knowledge.

In developing an Islamic alternative in thought and knowledge special attention must be given to the study of Islamic civilization. The study of Islamic civilization, according to a proper, methodical syllabus, to which a number of selected Islamic thinkers, educationalists and psychologists have contributed, is considered to be one of the most important means of creating and crystallizing the individual's feeling of belonging to the Ummah, and enabling him to understand the spirit which motivated our forefathers to make their great achievements in the fields of art and science, as well as in political, social and economic thought. At the same time, he will also be aware of their pains and suffering, so that he will develop self-awareness and be able to compare himself with other peoples and civilizations. The study of Islamic civilization will help create and develop an awareness of its legacy, the spirit which produced and animated it, and what distinguishes it from other civilizations. It will also help to develop the ability to plan for the future and look forward to it. The study of Islamic civilization will help to protect the Muslim from being swept away by the conflicting currents of modernism which are seeking to dominate him. It is certain that no-one can escape unscathed from the whirlwind of modernism unless he belongs firmly to one of the contending civilizations which will qualify one day to be an alternative when the other civilizations will have declined and faded away.

Our new educational strategy must include the planning of a course of study explaining the bases, values, sources and aims of Islam as a

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source of thought, culture and civilization. This course should be studied for four years in the first stages of university education by all students, irrespective of their specialization. It would deal with the history of Islam, the historical achievements of Islamic civilization, and the basic characteristics of Islamic culture.

Following on from the above, we need to present the humanities, social sciences and arts from an Islamic perspective. We must appreciate that the methods and theories of the modern humanities, social sciences and arts were formed in a way that reflects Western thought, beliefs and strategies in accordance with Western aims and goals in life. The issues they deal with stem from Western theories of knowledge. But with regard to all these sciences, the Western man himself has begun to sense their shortcomings and inability to meet even his own needs. These sciences are now encountering many serious problems in their methods, theories and application, and the Western man is trying to find ways to correct them.

The Muslims desperately need to have their own humanities, social sciences and arts, based on their beliefs and the theory of knowledge which is derived from the sources of those beliefs. If this is achieved, it will not be the Muslim alone who attains his goal of gaining knowledge of the Islamic humanities and social sciences which are connected to moral values. Such values will indeed contribute to the general welfare of the human race.

This objective could be achieved through studying the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah concerning all social and human matters, and classifying them according to the issues of the humanities and the social sciences, so that they may provide guidelines and principles for our societies. This work should be carried out by groups of researchers composed of specialists in the humanities, social sciences, Arabic language and the sciences of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In addition, the Islamic legacy and its related material available in print or in manuscript form must be studied and classified according to the issues of the above-mentioned sciences. This classification should be carried out accurately so that the knowledge contained in the Islamic legacy may be readily available to researchers and specialists in a convenient and authentic form. Computers and information technology could provide invaluable service in this

area. A critical study of contemporary thought must be undertaken so as to select the best of it according to strictly-defined standards. Finally, plans need to be drawn up to make use of and benefit from all this material. Text-books used in colleges, institutes and schools need to be re-written so that they reflect the Islamic vision of contemporary reality and needs. They need to be written and designed in such a way as to make them attractive and convenient to use.

All Arab and Muslim world universities must co-operate to achieve these goals. The International Institute of Islamic Thought has dealt extensively with all these matters, and is willing and eager to share its expertise with anyone who seriously wishes to tackle these issues.

Notes

1. Relating to the Sharī'ah or Islamic Law.
2. Relating to the basis of Islam.
3. Creative self-exertion to derive laws from the legitimate sources.
4. Imitation of the works of previous scholars.
5. Sciences pertaining to Islamic law.
6. The act of worship in Islam.
7. *Şalla Allāhu 'Alayhi Wa Sallam*. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him: said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.
8. *Subhānahu wa Ta'āla*. May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed: said on all occasions.

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