

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Some people, out of ignorance, think that Islamization of knowledge is a new undertaking and therefore an innovation (bid'ah); they do not know that Islam came and met people, the Arabs initially, with customs, beliefs, skills, knowledge and mythologies. Based upon the various forms of revelation received by Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), some of these phenomena were found to be in line with the revelation and were therefore adopted. Others were found to be antagonistic to the Islamic faith and were either discarded completely or modified. In a Hadith reported by Bukhari and Muslim, Ibn Abbas related that when the Messenger of Allah (S.A.W.) came to Madinah, they were paying, one and two years in advance, for fruits, but he (the Prophet) then said:

those who pay for anything in advance must do so for a specified measure and weight, with the fixing of a specified time.

This modification removed uncertainty and misunderstanding from such forward businesses.

The Prophets and Messengers of Allah that came before Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) also practised and preached Islam. They had also introduced changes to the lives, knowledge and beliefs of their people.

Even with the passing away of the companions of the Prophet, the Islamization process continued. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali had tried to islamize Philosophy and Sufism. For instance, he rejected the Sufi claim that in the mystical experience, one reaches God through fusion in the divine Being. He made *tasawwuf* respectable and agreeable to the Shari'ah. But despite Al-Ghazali's effort, *tasawwuf* acquired certain symptoms which ruin the Muslim society as observed by Al-Faruqi and Al-Faruqi (1986); for instance, *kashf*, gnostic illumination was substituted for knowledge and the Muslim, in the words of Al-Faruqi and Al-Faruqi (1986:304),

had become apolitical, asocial, amilitary, anethical, and hence non-productive, unconcerned for the *Ummah* (the world brotherhood under the moral law), an individualist, and in the last resort, an egotist whose prime objective was to be saved, himself, to be absorbed into the consuming majesty of the divine being.

A significant effort was made during the reign of Al-Mamun, the seventh Abbasid Caliph which heralded the golden era of Islamic civilization. As Maiwada (1999:10) recounts,

the stage for harmonizing the Qur'anic knowledge with other knowledge such as the legacy of Greek and Persian literature was set by Al-Mamun, the seventh Abbasid Caliph (813-873 AD), who established a research centre, Bait Al-Hikmah. Scholars from far and near converged on this centre studying, translating works into Arabic and compiling treatises.

Subsequent to this effort a number of Muslim scholars made contributions to knowledge; for instance, Yakub Al-Kindi composed 265 treatises on Music, Astronomy and Medicine while Abu Ali Al-Hussain Ibn Sina (Avicenna) wrote a book which became a guide for medical study even in European universities until 1650 AD. The knowledge of optics was developed by Hassan Ibn Al-Haitham of Basrah, (Maiwada 1999).

Unfortunately, at a later stage, Muslims became lazy and unconcerned with the pursuit of knowledge in all fields of human endeavour. Muslim nations were colonized and with this an alien educational system was imposed on them. The nations are now faced with an educational crisis which Sulaiman (1999:30) conceives as the:

problems of thought and commitment that jointly inhibit the acquisition, spread and application of knowledge by Muslims for the purpose of meeting challenges facing them, and for serving Allah and functioning as His vicegerents on Earth.

The dimensions of the crisis include backwardness and intellectual stagnation of Muslims in relation to educational pursuits, error and confusion in knowledge (epistemological confusion), inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence. Poor funding of education by parents and governments, resistance to useful changes, and blind imitation (*taqlid*) by a number of Muslim scholars are also manifestations of this crisis.

In 1977 some concerned Muslim intellectuals organized the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Sequel to this, other similar conferences were

organized and institutions were established to implement policies articulated during the conferences. Some of these institutions are the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) established in 1983 and the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) established and registered in the United States of America in 1401 A.H (1981 A.D).

Writing about the pioneers of the contemporary Islamization of Knowledge undertaking, Sardar (1989) related that Ja'afar Sheikh Idris was the first scholar to attack the cultural bias of Western Social Sciences in a paper entitled "The Process of Islamization" which was presented in 1975. However, the notion of Islamization of knowledge was developed before that time by Syed Naquib Al-Attas in his work entitled "Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago" published in 1969. Sardar (1989:31) had also stated that "

it was late Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi who synthesised the works of Al-Attas and Idris and shaped the theory of Islamization as we know it today.

Some people become suspicious of the current Islamization of knowledge being supported by the IIIT simply because the organisation is located in USA. They think that nothing good can come from there. It is not the geographical location of an institution that matters but the people who run it, the nature of its activities and the kind of messages it sends to people.

The IIIT headquarters in Herndon, Virginia is run by Muslims who are not necessarily Americans by origin while the branch offices are run by the citizens of the countries in which they are located. The contents of IIIT publications are purely academic like any other scholarly publications coming from similar international, regional or national institutes. They contain

contributions from people all over the world. A look at these publications, which are openly sold in several centres around the world, will show all these facts.

It suffices to say that the Islamization of knowledge undertaking is not the preserve of the IIIT as other organisations and individuals also contribute in this regard. It is compulsory upon all Muslim academics in all fields of knowledge to give their contributions according to their abilities, resources and the opportunities opened to them. One can contribute to the Islamization of knowledge programme by supporting or liaising with the IIIT or any other Islamic organisation with similar goals. Muslim academics can also form organisations or forums for the sake of the Islamization of knowledge undertaking if they do not want to join any existing organisation. What is required most is the contribution. It can come from any organisation or individual and from Muslims and even non-Muslims. It is common to find non-Muslim scholars writing papers for the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences being published by the IIIT. This promotes understanding between Muslim academics and their non-Muslim counterparts and is a mark of religious tolerance and academic maturity.