

Islamization of Knowledge and the Future of the Ummah

Mahathir Muhammad

The last four centuries have done us, the Muslim *ummah*, little credit. We have not reflected the essence of Islam which was once the pacesetter of humanity. Our future must reflect a new approach; we must have clearly crystalized ideas and well-articulated goals. We can carry out orderly and constructive work only when the planning is thorough and we labor toward recognized and acceptable goals. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Muslims, including intellectuals and those involved in the Islamic movements, have overlooked what to most builders is obvious. They know they must go somewhere but they do not know exactly where to go. We must therefore plan for the future and this means we need to analyze the past and take stock of the present.

It is clear that man's survival is dependent on new patterns of mutual partnership and cooperation, interdependence and symbiosis. This will not be possible without long-term planning for the next twenty to forty years. We also need to understand Islam within the context of the contemporary world, with the changed conditions of life. We cannot recreate the world of the early years of Islam. The changes that have occurred in recent decades are fundamentally the biggest changes human society has ever experienced, but in practical and intellectual terms, we Muslims have not been able even to conceive of how to reorganize our political, social and economic lives to take in the changes that have taken place. We should reorganize our political, social and economic lives in a way that fully incorporates the injunctions of Islam to ensure that a socially healthy, politically coherent, and economically efficient and vigorous *ummah* will emerge, able to face all challenges.

Consider, for example, the concept of *shūrā* as applied to economics and politics. These values laid down by the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* tell us how the Prophet formulated them, and how early Muslim society institutionalized them. The question is, how can we realize them in our lives in the new

fifteenth century [A.H.]. What pattern of human relationships would best realize the values of cooperation and lead to the most efficient system of economy? What institutional arrangements would secure a distribution of wealth and income, both during and after its production, consistent with the value of "cooperation for the good"? Obviously it is not enough to ask the Muslims to co-operate. This request has repeatedly been made, and the end product is in front of us. Islamic injunctions must be given practical content and their implications explained in concrete terms before they can become operational in the economic organization of Muslim or any other countries. The large numbers of those involved in the process of production, the many dimensions in which co-operation must be conceived, the complex technicalities involved in production, relevant knowledge of the actual needs of consumers, the priorities of government, the intention as well as the circumstances of the other producers, the circumstances of the workers, and their entrepreneurial participation in the firm or farm where they work, all these factors have turned the simple question of how to co-operate into a highly complex one. What is required now, if anything, is a gigantic intellectual and imaginative effort involving deep insight into the objectives and scope of these injunctions. It is only by solving the problems mentioned above that we can know what co-operation is and how it can be adopted as a way of economic life in the contemporary situation. Then and then only can Islam be said to be a way of life. To retreat and withdraw from modern society is to deny that Islam is for all times.

Examination of other injunctions of Islam convinces us of the same conclusions. One may ask, what significance does all this have? If we are unable to understand these injunctions of Islam with reference to contemporary reality, we have failed to understand Islam itself; we fail to understand the social conduct desired of us by Allah (SWT) if we fail to operationalize the injunctions with reference to contemporary reality, and we will not be able to plan effectively for the future.

This is a painful admission. And this is the root cause of the present predicament of Muslims. Not only have we failed to live up to Islam, but we have also, to a large extent, failed to appreciate its universality. It follows therefore that to understand the underlying dynamic relevance of the injunctions of Islam in contemporary society and to work out the process of their implication in practice is an acute spiritual need of the Muslim *ummah*.

An Islamic Future

Our understanding of Islam will not increase overnight with the beginning of the fifteenth century of the Hijrah. A better future for the Muslim *ummah*

requires much more effort and strength. The Qur'ān promises the eternal survival of Islam but this promise does not extend to Muslims automatically. Allah (SWT) does not change the fate of a society unless they make an effort to change it themselves. History offers no support for the idea that simply by the passage of time Muslims will suddenly undergo a miraculous revival. We, the Muslim *ummah*, have to make a conscious decision whether to remain in a constant state of tension, between living in the past and only superficially coming to terms with the contemporary world, or to opt for an Islamic future, thereby redirecting ourselves to the original path of Islam. Remember always that when Islam came, it was a modernizing force that brought greatness to the early followers of faith; greatness in the fields of economy, industry, the sciences, the arts and military prowess.

For Muslim civilization to achieve its destiny and experience a second upturn, a balanced approach to Islam and a certain amount of self-criticism is prerequisite. We Muslims must learn to be honest with ourselves. We need to apply this balanced approach to this world and to the hereafter. The concept of the hereafter was given to man to broaden his outlook and not to make him blind to his immediate environment. We must seek good, both in this world and the next. Modern scholars must therefore be neither too preoccupied with this world nor exclusively entranced by the next. Both must influence their scholarly efforts and exhortations.

It would appear to me that many Muslims have accepted and to some extent have taken pride in their ignorance with unbelievable satisfaction. We are in acute social, economic and political agony, yet many Muslims have adopted a strangely false sense of security: reading the Qur'ān will bring them *thawāb* or blessings even if they do not understand or practice it; going out on *tabligh* or propagation will secure a piece of paradise; writing pamphlets and propaganda sheets will win support for Islam. But this preoccupation with gaining merit for self is too narrow. Muslims must establish a thriving and dynamic society because there can only be a hereafter for us if we survive as Muslims.

If we really want to establish Islam, we must look for the leading issues of our time and let people know what rights Allah has given them for which they must fight, what security Allah offers them for which they must look, and what promise Allah has for them for which they must work. We must ensure that Islam is responsive to the immediate requirements and concerns of modern man. If we ask people to accept a whole set of beliefs and practices, they may run away because they may not understand what Islam really is. This is perhaps the main problem. Understanding Islam does not mean only the ability to explain a *hadīth*, or outline the mechanics of certain rituals or recite verses of the Qur'ān. Understanding Islam also means the capacity to explain and put into practice its dynamic and vibrant concepts in contem-

porary society.

At this point in time, disaster is threatening us, the very future of mankind is at risk, and the existence of the Muslims as a viable force in the world is in the balance. The problems we face are complex and varying. They are not getting any simpler. The two great challenges facing Muslims are to recreate a living civilization of Islam which was once dynamic and thriving, and to make a positive contribution to the predicament facing mankind. In fact, these two tasks are the same, because Muslim civilization is the only civilization that still preserves in tact its basic teaching and has the potential to provide an alternative to what is called the 'modern' world. It is also the only civilization that can provide the much-needed value structure and spiritual needs that can lead mankind to happiness on this earth. But before Muslims can do this, there is much work to be done.

The first thing Muslims have to do is to plan the kind of future they envisage for themselves. They can have an aimless future or a planned future. Current trends show that Muslim society is heading toward an aimless future. Unless something is done now, this trend is likely to continue, putting the Muslims in grave danger of being separated from their faith.

The Muslim *ummah* cannot continue lying inactive like a stagnant lake—full of potential resources yet polluted. The *ummah* must think about and plan for its future. Muslims have longed for freedom since they were invaded by the colonial powers and lost their independence. In some regions the struggle still continues. Although the Muslims finally achieved victory over their foreign enemies, their neglect of planning for the post-victory period robbed them of the fruits of their struggles. They sacrificed their lives for the sake of Islam, but their sacrifice was made almost in vain because the Islamic order they envisaged did not emerge. This is due to neglect by those who failed to plan for the implementation of Islamic systems. The Muslims have spent much of their time after independence pursuing the various "isms" left behind by the colonialists.

Planning for the Future

There is no escape from planning for the future. If Muslims really want an Islamic social order, then they must examine every aspect of modern life from the perspective of Islam and make necessary corrections. The comprehensive relevance of Islam to everything has to be established on a concrete level and many questions must be researched and examined. A practical blueprint for the implementation of Islamic systems needs to be worked out taking into account the practical realities of today's world.

Planning in the Muslim countries, however, must be more than a projec-

tion into the future of today's dominant trends. It is by no means enough just to produce five-year development plans, as generally these plans are responses to current situations; they remain dominated by current events. This is why most developmental planning in the Muslim countries has not been very successful. Although our real problems exist on the macro level, we have concentrated our efforts on cosmetic changes for the sake of appearance. Therefore we need to make a careful cross-impact analysis among various priorities, policies and planning and various parameters of Muslim thoughts and criteria. Possible greatness in the years ahead will depend on the greatness of our vision of the future. While we may fall short of our goals, we must not allow any deficiency in the clarity and articulation of our vision.

Ibn Khaldun uses the word *'umrān* for a dynamic, thriving, operational civilization. The Muslim world today needs such a viable plan as an alternative and to present to the Muslim *ummah* convincing visions of the Muslim civilization of the future.

This Third International Conference on Islamic Thought, should plan for reforming and moving Islamic thought forward in specific areas with a proper scale of priorities as a step toward achieving this planned future. The work plan of the International Institute of Islamic Thought in making critical examination of the modern disciplines in the light of the vision of Islam is an ambitious one, but is essential for the future of the *ummah*. It is indeed true to say, as does the book *Islamization of Knowledge* published by the Institute, that today non-Muslims are the undisputed masters of all the disciplines. Muslim academicians should master all the modern disciplines, understand them completely and achieve an absolute command of all that they have to offer. This is, however, only the first prerequisite. Then they should integrate the new knowledge into the corpus of the Islamic legacy by eliminating, amending, reinterpreting and adapting its components according to the world view of Islam and its values. The exact relevance of Islam to the philosophy of the disciplines should be determined. A new way in which the reformed disciplines can serve the ideas of Islam should be adopted. Finally, by their example as pioneers, they should teach the new generation of Muslims and non-Muslims how to follow in their footsteps, push the frontiers of human knowledge even further forward, discover new layers of the patterns created by Allah and a new ordering of thought in Islamic disciplines deriving from *tawhīd*, and establish new paths for making His will and commandments realized in history.

In developing such a fresh understanding of Islam, in adjusting to change, we need a number of intellectual tools. We need to develop a tradition of Muslim scholarship that incorporates modern methods of study and research into the best techniques of traditional scholarship. We need to analyze what changes are desirable in Muslim society. The confusion of some Muslim in-

tellectuals is understandable. They have not seen the injunctions of Islam in an operational form and hence they become confused when translating these injunctions to meet the demands of modern society. Furthermore, they are trapped in the conceptual framework of the West. Fundamental questions need to be asked, but unless the young Muslim intellectual is provided with a university textbook in each discipline that allows him to question present approaches, he will not be able to ask these questions. The aim of the Institute to produce textbooks in all the disciplines should be supported.

We must aim to develop an awareness of the future and an Islamic perception that can relate the teachings of Islam to current problems and meet the coming challenges of the future. Once we have become sensitized to this perception, we are equipped to analyze modern problems in the light of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*. What is important is the problems we face and how to formulate practical Islamic solutions to these problems. The policies needed to solve these problems require Muslims to go against contemporary fashions to a great extent, as well as to reexamine some traditions that are seen as Islamic but are not really so. They also require a bold effort to make an Islamic stand, as well as intellectual courage and a firm understanding of Muslim societies and the true culture of Islam. The future of Muslim societies is with Islam, for without Islam, they have no future.