

A WINDOW ONTO ISLAMIC SCIENCES

Muzaffar Iqbal

The ocean of knowledge that comprises Islamic sciences flows across eons back to the remote origin of all things—the mysterious *kun* (“Be”), which brought into existence a marvelous cosmos and its inhabitants—some of which the first human being would later discover when he was honored through the teaching of the Names. Created from dust, Ādam, upon him peace, knew that he was but one of the countless creations of God, albeit one God had ennobled and honored.

Viewed from this perspective, a continuum arcs across the entirety of cosmic history, linking human knowledge to Divine teaching in a specific way. This vast realm is explored by Islamic sciences through the prism of revelation (*wahy*)—the prism itself likened to a rope, hanging down from the Unseen World into the human domain where it becomes the fountainhead of mutable civilizations, all of which come into existence, advance, regress, change, decay, and disappear in serial time, whereas the fountainhead remains unchanging, anchored in vertical time and in turn linked to the ultimate beginning of Time (*al-dahr*).

II

Taken together, Islamic sciences are a systematic and organized discourse on the human understanding of the Divine and the human condition. They branch into many disciplines, but ultimately derive from the singular source of revelation: the Qur’ān—a self-referential text revered by one fourth of humanity now living on earth—which is the font from which flow “sciences of the ancients and the moderns,” as al-Ghazālī noted in his *Jawāhīr al-Qur’ān*, a work he wrote after a lifetime of reflection: “Rather, I should say that through clear insight free from doubt, it has become apparent to us that in possibility and potentiality there are sciences which have not yet come into existence,

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Islamic Sciences, Vol. 11 (Summer 2013) No. 1

ISSN 1929-9435 (Print); ISSN 1929-9443 (Online)

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although it is in man's power to grasp them. There are others which once existed, but have now been effaced so that at this time such a man who knows them cannot be found on the surface of the earth. There are still other sciences the understanding and acquisition of which are by no means within human reach, but which are possessed by some of the angels drawn near [to God], because possibility is limited in the case of human beings, while in the case of the angels it is limited to the relatively higher level of perfection, [while], it is limited to a greater degree for animals." Such recognition of a hierarchy of knowledge and creation is integral to the Islamic sciences, which take the Qur'ān to be the ultimate source of all knowledge, the actual Speech of God, Almighty and Majestic.

Since the ultimate goal of the Qur'ān is to call people to God, the highest sciences, in order of nobility according to al-Ghazālī, are, therefore, those concerned with the definition of God; sciences concerned with the Straight Path, "perseverance in which is required for advancing toward Him;" and sciences describing "the condition at the time of attaining to Him". These are followed in rank by three other sciences that "enrich and complete" the former. The first of these describe the conditions of those who respond to and refuse the call of their Creator, the secret and the purpose of these being respectively to inspire and discourage others. The second is the science concerned with the condition of those who deny God: "It reveals their disgrace and their ignorance in disputing and arguing against the Truth...the secret and purpose of this being, on the side of falsity, to make Truth manifest and to inculcate aversion to falsehood; and, on the side of Truth, to inculcate clear apprehension, confirmation, and constraint." The third science concerns the stages of the path to God and the manner of taking provisions and preparing for this Return.

This typology of two tripartite divisions of knowledge is not exclusive to Ghazālī; it can be seen in various other schemas of Islamic sciences, all of which take Allah Most High as the ultimate source of knowledge. He is Alone, unlike everything that exists, and beyond human conception, yet near to the jugular vein of every human; all else is potentially knowable by those who strive. The principles of knowledge inhere in the Qur'ān, for all creation is finally drawn out of one of the seas of knowledge of God, that is, His works (*af'āl*). In an ultimate sense, humans have no access to His Being, only to some of His actions as He alone knows what He creates, maintains, and sustains in innumerable worlds.

Islamic sciences explore dimensions of the three realms accessible to humanity (the natural world, history, and the human self) through various paths. As an entity utterly subservient to its Creator, the sciences studying nature see it as also in a perpetual state of glorifying Him. Nature responds

to whatever is done to it by Man, who has been given a certain dominion over it in order to benefit from its bounties. The sciences of nature cultivated in Islamic civilization take nature as a trust (*amāna*), a vast and living entity made up of numerous sub-systems in dynamic interaction with each other and all aware of their Creator in their own way: the mighty mountains and deep seas, the vast deserts and lush green valleys, large parcels of plain land and rocky terrains are all studied through interconnected branches of natural sciences, which explore, study, and attempt to beneficially use the resources present in the bosom of nature for sustainable living. In reality, these sciences have now all but disappeared from the world. They are no longer practiced. All that is left of the Islamic scientific tradition is raw data about the natural world, now incorporated into modern science with the various necessary modifications. The integral relationship between Man and the world of nature has suffered such blows that there now exists no place on earth where sciences of nature are being practiced in a way that links them to Revelation. This replacement of a theocentric way of studying and exploring the world of nature with a profane and homocentric science has produced an irreversible crisis marked by destruction and disequilibrium of the interconnected systems of nature. There is now no escape from the consequences of this disaster.

Those branches of Islamic sciences which study the second realm accessible to humanity (history) are informed by the several cosmic dimensions of Time simultaneously operating in different realms of existence. Human time is perceived as the serial unfolding of history since the remote origin of all humanity, at the creation of the first human being from whom was created his partner and from the two of them their offspring. The human story begins with this first creation and proliferates into nations and tribes, each with its own characteristic traits. God established a covenant with specific nations just as He did with every single human being through the Primordial encounter of *Am I not Your Lord (alastu bi-Rabbikum)* (Q 7:172). Sacred history treats all events through the prism of this covenant and explores and explains all historical events in the light of the Divine Promise and Threat (*al-waʿd wal-waʿid*). Islamic sciences dealing with history branch off into subdomains—some study sociological phenomenon, others economic activity, still others deal with conflicts and wars, but these remain informed by a revelation-based understanding of the covenant and the consequences of fulfilling it (or not).

Lastly, those branches of Islamic sciences which explore the third realm accessible to humanity, the inner self, are marked by a profound understanding that the Creator has given each human being the unique gift to articulate his or her hopes and desires, joys and sorrows, feelings and thoughts—all of which every human being actually experiences alone, through the inner recesses of his or her being, as a unique entity, a small cosmos, a universe as dazzling

as the one constructed with brilliant stars and constellations. This universe is born within the confines of a perishable body; it goes through periods of infancy, youth, and old age before passing on to another life at the moment when it is released from its narrow and ephemeral frame of flesh and bone. Seen in this perspective, poetry, literature, and various forms of expression such as the fine arts are a means through which an individual attempts to reach out to the broader human family. These works serve as an invisible force capable of lifting the human heart from the depths of grief, by reminding the person of the courage and compassion, pride and honor, pity and sacrifice inherent in the spirit. In Islamic civilization, the most important form of such expressions has been poetry, although others—including calligraphy, mosaics, and tapestry—abound.

Until the modern era, there used to be a strong inner connection between various branches of Islamic sciences. This is evident from the fact that someone such as al-Bīrūnī could write books on history, produce exacting works in the field of geography, chemistry, and botany, and write a treatise on stones and gems, in all of them quoting verses of the Qurʾān as and when needed. Meanwhile, a figure such as Ibn Sīnā was at home in medicine, philosophy, and various religious sciences; and a timekeeper at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus was one of the luminaries of astronomy in his time. This organic link between various branches of Islamic sciences is no longer the operating norm; like all civilizations, Islamic civilization has suffered a significant blow in recent centuries and this has shattered some of its internal structure.

III

This is not unique to Islamic civilization: all civilizations go through periods of growth, charged activity, and decay. Some disappear altogether. What is remarkable in the case of Islamic civilization is the resilience by which it perpetually returns to the revealed text. It is this link with the Qurʾān that made it possible for Islamic civilization to endure catastrophic upheavals and regain strength, leading to reinvigorated intellectual activity and again the flourishing of the Islamic sciences. These periodic ebbs and flows can be charted and studied from various aspects, but Muslim scholars generally agree that the three centuries prior to the beginning of the fifteenth Islamic century (1799) witnessed steady stagnation. During this period, Islamic civilization not only lost much of its political and economic strength, it also suffered dormancy in the intellectual realm. This internal weakness was only attenuated by its encounter with a vigorous and aggressive civilization distinctively firmly rooted in a homocentric worldview. It is through this titanic encounter, its fault-lines spanning a vast geography, that the contemporary Muslim world took shape.

During these centuries, Islamic sciences shrunk in scope until they became limited to the explicitly religious sciences. And these, too, were pursued only by the dispossessed in their modest dwellings and *madrassas*.

Yet this contraction and downward spiral has started to shift once more. Despite all outward signs to the contrary, Islamic civilization has once again started to recover from its three centuries of dormancy and a new vigor has started to infuse Islamic sciences. The early signs of this vigorous intellectual activity are already visible, even though they remain a small stream springing from a subterranean source. One remarkable feature of the new scene is the dissolution of old geographical boundaries: the pursuit of Islamic sciences is no longer limited to the traditional lands of Islam; *dār al-Islām* has expanded to encompass the entire globe. It is now a truism that the dynamics of human history have brought all civilizations into close contact; whatever happens in one corner of the world affects the entire world in myriad forms.

In this changed global scene, Islamic sciences offer the world what it needs the most: a path to sacred knowledge umbilically connected to Revelation. This is not to say that at this early stage, Islamic sciences can produce fully articulated solutions to the myriad problems faced by the modern world, many of which result from the two most devastating blows modern Western civilization has served all humanity: the destruction of the world of nature through unbridled technological exploitation and the rampant greed that informs modern economic systems. Rather, the awakening consciousness among a small number of concerned and thinking human beings has started to produce a body of literature that pinpoints, with intellectual vigor and honesty, the fundamental problems faced by the modern world, both in what used to be the abode of Islam and what was outside that traditional geographical zone. These scholars realize, with extreme realism, that Muslims and non-Muslims cannot now live apart from each other; all humanity has been bound together through the combined forces of modern technology and global economics, and there are no local solutions possible for a suffering humanity locked in a vicious and belittling circle, controlled by no one in particular but driven by an enormous global system of greed. The greed for power and wealth has brought the entire humanity to a point of no return and the space in which to maneuver otherwise is increasingly tightening. Through decades of suffering, deceptions, lies, and mistreatment, the human masses transformed into brute labor-forces have reached a point of exhaustion. They can no longer tolerate the unbearable weight of unjust governance and corruption.

The combined impact of the severance of humanity from its spiritual fountainhead and the centripetal forces of greed and powerlust have far intensified. It is now imperative for those who understand the crisis of the modern world to break the very core of its demonic structure and offer

humanity something other than bandages which no longer serve. It is in this changed and charged scenario that Islamic sciences are regaining relevance and vigor. Naturally, the first to resurface are those sciences (as in al-Ghazālī's schema above) that explore the human relationship with the Divine. These so-called religious sciences ("so-called" because in reality all sciences are religious in their true nature) are becoming a scholarly focus because they offer immediate hope through remembrance of the One only Whose remembrance can yield tranquility in the suffering heart. The nurturing of these sciences, as al-Ghazālī pointed out several centuries ago, leads to the fulfillment of the highest purpose of human life. It is also through these primary sciences that other branches of knowledge receive their sustenance and come to fruition.

The quest for sacred knowledge is now no longer limited to young men and women going to the traditional lands of Islam—not only because there remains but only a small portion of the traditional *dār al-Islām* that is not in constant turmoil, but also because these seekers of knowledge are increasingly gravitating to new centers of knowledge in the West—places where such knowledge was previously not available. These new centers are still in their infancy, but in time, they will become the equivalent of traditional *madrasas*, although in a completely new setting. While, the inevitable disruptions in the flow of spiritual energy caused by the ever-present modern technology will be hard to avoid in a wired world, real seekers will find ways to negotiate their passage through the complex patterns that now inform one's daily life both in the West and in the traditional lands of Islam.

The greatest hope on the horizon is the widespread quest for realized knowledge. More and more human beings are discovering the spiritual benefits of such knowledge offered by Islamic sciences. This renewal is both a unique privilege and a responsibility. Those who acquire such knowledge are conscious of both.

Wa-Ilāh al-Mustaʿān, wa mā tawfīqī illā bi-Ilāh.

Wuddistān
Ramadan 9, 1434/July 18, 2013