

Challenges to Islam and Muslims: What is to be Done?

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Of course this question has been asked before under circumstances no less threatening than those which confront us today and with a similar sense of urgency, if not more. And each time this question has been asked, there was a response which outlined a detailed account of the malaise faced by the community of believers, the *Ummah*, its reasons, and a course of action that would correct the malady. One only needs to think of the heart-wrenching state of the Companions who faced the first *fitnah* (656–661) during which ‘Uthmān, the son-in-law and a close Companion of the Prophet, was murdered in the very city where the echoes of the Prophet’s footsteps were still in the living memory of those who had seen him walking through its *aswāq* and when a civil war was fought between ‘Ā’ishah, the beloved wife of the Prophet, and ‘Alī, his cousin and son-in-law — a war in which close Companions of the Prophet found themselves standing against each other under circumstances which threatened the very existence of the Community. Or one can think of the tragic events of the second *fitnah* (680–692) during which Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī and all but one of his companions were killed with such cruelty that it still produces trembling in the initiated hearts, Makkah was besieged, Khawārij took control of much of Arabia and Ibn al-Zubayr was killed in the sanctified city of Makkah where fighting had been declared unlawful by Allāh Himself (Qur’ān 2: 217). Likewise, one can recall the great deluge of 1258 when Baghdad — the seat of Caliphate, the intellectual heart of the Muslim world and the city of saints and scholars — witnessed the erection of a tower of heads by the victorious Mongol army. With a focused attention to the horrific details of these and similar events in Muslim history, one can imagine the urgency with which the sincere and devoted members of the Muslim community of those times must have reflected on the bleak state of the *Ummah*. Seen in this historical perspective, the challenges faced by the Muslim community today lose some of their despairingly overwhelming impact, but this does not diminish their threat to the survival of Islamic polity.

I

The range and scope of the challenges faced by Islam and Muslims in the twenty-first century is so vast that it is simply impossible to enumerate their myriad forms; suffice it to say that the entire *Ummah* faces the threat of annihilation as a distinct entity which shares certain foundational precepts about God and life of this world and of the Hereafter and the whole range of Islam's belief system — from *'aqā'id* to practices associated with its tenets — face a challenge unlike any encountered before; the present threat aims at nothing less than a total eclipse of the worldview, lifestyles, and cultural, social, and communal aspects of Islam.

These challenges are, of course, not new; they have existed for at least two hundred years, but during the last two decades their scope and nature have crossed a new threshold, primarily because of the technological advances serving the forces which pose these challenges to the Muslim world. The origin of the challenges now faced by Islam and Muslims can be traced back to the emergence of a new political and military order in the world during the closing years of the eighteenth century and to the rapid transformation of the terms of interaction between the Muslim world and the West during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Seen in retrospect, the eighteenth century stands out as the watershed between the classical period of Islamic civilization — a multicultural, multi-racial and pluralistic civilization that came into existence on the basis of Revelation — and the subsequent deluge that rapidly and violently transformed the entire spectrum of social, political, and economic institutions of that civilization in the whole Muslim world.

This transformation is still poorly understood by Muslims as well as by non-Muslims; numerous aspects of this great mutation remain unclear, primarily, due to the lack of enough investigation into the processes through which it occurred but one thing is clear: by destroying the foundational institutions of the Islamic civilization, the colonizers of the Muslim world — France, Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy and Russia — produced a violent fissure in the organic processes that nourished and sustained the Islamic civilization. During the long period of this colonization, numerous naturally grown and integral components of the Islamic civilization were violently severed. For example, the role of Arabic language in the growth of Islamic civilization was disrupted; *awqāf* (endowments) which were primarily the economic arms and mainstay of the extensive educational, health and social welfare systems throughout the Muslim world, were appropriated by the colonizers, thereby cutting the lifeline of these systems; by changing the languages in which Muslim states of that time conducted their business, the colonizers made a large number of experienced and seasoned state workers

unfit for the job and in their stead installed men and in a few cases women who had little sympathy and far less loyalty to the well-being of those who were being ruled through the state organs. These, and numerous other, transforming processes worked during the era of colonization to produce far-reaching changes in the Islamic polity and many ailments of the contemporary Muslim world can be traced back to these brutal disruptions. We will return to some aspects of these transformations in the latter part of this article.

What is of immediate concern to us is a brief survey of this extensive and all-encompassing subjugation of the Muslim world and the accompanying rise of a new material and martial strength in the colonizing states; this will help in understanding the resultant new world order which stands as an immediate backdrop to the present challenges.

Before the Deluge

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, there were three powerful empires in the traditional Muslim lands: the Ottoman (689–1343/1290–1924), the Şafavid (907–1135/1501–1722), and the Indian Tīmūrī Empire (933–1274/1526–1857).¹ Considering the resources as well as the social and economic strength of these empires, their collapse and eventual subjugation by the European powers is rather puzzling. This perplexity has led some historians to deny the fact that these were, indeed, prosperous empires. Historical data, however, makes it abundantly clear that there was no dearth of material wealth in these three empires. Not only that, the preceding three centuries (fifteenth through seventeenth) had also witnessed a continuous growth of their material wealth. During the reign of Shāh ‘Abbās I (1587–1629), for instance, the splendour of Işfahān was literally such that the proverb, *Işfabān nişf jahān* (Işfahān is half the world), was a true reflection of this splendour. Its magnificent public parks, palaces, vast open squares, impressive mosques, hospitals, schools, great

¹ Commonly known as the Mughal Empire, a term which is awkward and imprecise, if not altogether incorrect, as Marshall Hodgson has noted: “The term is awkward when the history of India is considered in a wider Islamicate context. The Chaghatay Turks, under rulers of Timur’s line, were not Mongols; in the Syr-Oxus basin they were sharply distinguished from the Mongols or Mughals of ‘Mughalīstān’, though continuing some relations with them. To use the term ‘Mughal’ rather than ‘Timurī’ is unsuitable, therefore, in describing the greater part of Bābur’s career, much of Humayūn’s, and even later activities in Kābul or Kashmīr, where the actual Mongols, or Mughals, were involved as opponents. The correct name for the dynasty itself is ‘Timurid’, Timur being the recognized founder of their power. The correct term for the original body of their followers is ‘Chaghatay’; but for the very mixed body of families that ultimately served them, only ‘Timurī’ would do — or ‘Indo-Timurī’, [that is, the] Timurī of India...”. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3: 62ff.

irrigation works, and caravanserais made it a showpiece of the artistic flowering of the age. The coloured tiles that decorated public buildings, great noble domes some of which still stand, the resplendent blue that recalls the magnificence and majesty of Samarqand of the Tīmūrī era, and the gem-like style of miniature painting — all testify to a concentration of wealth that had no precedent. In addition to the royal wealth, there were great merchant families who maintained representatives in China and in many European cities to oversee their far-flung trade.² It would take us too far from the main intent of this article to go into the details of the wealth of the Ottoman and the Tīmūrī Indian empires during the period under consideration, but this can easily be inferred from established facts and historical records.

Before we look at the collapse of these empires, let us note in passing that these three empires had achieved their specific form which would eventually encounter the West through a grand process of remaking of the Muslim world during the one and a half centuries between the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 and the dawn of the fifteenth century — a period which not only continued to produce first-rate scientific achievements, especially in astronomy,³ but which was also a period during which the traditional Muslim lands recovered from the large-scale destruction that had followed in the wake of the Mongol conquest.⁴ It was also during this period that first the Golden Horde and then

² *Ibid.*, 3: 40–57, *passim*.

³ This astronomical tradition was based in the land of the later Tīmūrī rulers of Transoxania and Iran, such as Tīmūr (772–808/1370–1405), Khalil (r. 808–812/1405–09), Shāh Rukh (808–851/1405–47), and Ulugh Bēg (796–853/1394–1449). More recent research of historians of science has plausibly argued that the “Golden Age of Islamic Astronomy” lies between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries and not in the ninth-tenth centuries, as was previously assumed. For instance, in his 1994 work, *A History of Arabic Astronomy: Planetary Theories during the Golden Age of Islam*, George Saliba has expressly stated that “the subtitle of the book intentionally designates this period [of so-called decline] as the Golden Age of Islam. This may be disturbing to students of Islamic intellectual history who are used to dismissing the works produced during this period as insignificant. What the evidence presented here now suggests is that if we can find such original work in astronomical planetary theories, and such mathematical sophistication and maturity in the presentations of these results, shouldn’t we consider other disciplines as well, and try to find out if such vigorous scientific activity can be substantiated in other fields? In fact, at various points in these articles [of the book] I suggest that such research would promise to be extremely rewarding”. See George Saliba, *A History of Arabic Astronomy* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 15 and *passim*.

⁴ During this period, the three major Mongol realms, which had emerged with distinct spheres of influence, were all absorbed in the religious and cultural milieu of the lands they had conquered. The descendants of Hülegü, the Ī-khāns, who ruled over much of the Iranian mountains and plateaus and in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, with their capital at Marāgha, gradually accepted Islam, just like their cousins, the Chughtā’ī Mongols, who controlled the Syr

the Īl-Khānī state turned to Islam and when Ghazan took the throne in 1295 and became Muslim, most of the other Mongol nobles followed his example.

True, Baghdad never recovered its past glory and its status as the intellectual capital of the Muslim world, but in its stead, new cities arose to attract scholars, saints and scientists. Tabrīz, for instance, became the intellectual centre for Ghazan's empire and when his wise vizier, the physician and scholar Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh (d. 718/1318), built a new town near the capital Tabrīz, it quickly became the most desired destination for scholars and scientists from as far away as Egypt, India and China. Likewise, during the time of the Mamlūks of Egypt, who had defeated the Mongols at 'Ayn Jālūt, south of Damascus in 1260, Cairo became the heart of the Islamic intellectual tradition in that part of the world and it retained its supremacy until the Mamlūks were overwhelmed by the Ottomans in 923/1517. The Delhi Sultanate, the counterpart of the Mamlūks in the Indian subcontinent, also attracted many Muslim scholars fleeing Mongol invasion. Established in the Punjab in the Ganges valley at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Delhi Sultanate had continuously expanded under a series of brilliant rulers, such as 'Alā al-Dīn Khiljī (r. 696–716/1296–1316) and Muḥammad Tughlaq (727–753/1325–51), until Timūr sacked Delhi in 801/1398. These Sultanates were absorbed in the Indian Timūrī empire in the course of the sixteenth century.

Through this great realignment, which produced the three aforementioned empires, of the Muslim world fully recovered, even enhanced, its old power and vigour. This is not a backward reading of historical data; this rearrangement of the Muslim world was understood as such by historians like Ibn Khaldūn, who wrote around 1377 that "the coming of the Mongols was a blessing for the Muslim world because it gave them new strength and vigour at a time of weakness and thus enabled them to meet and overcome the great dangers that threatened them".⁵

and the Oxus basins, the Yedisu steppes and the region surrounding Kabul and eventually the whole of Punjab in the Indian subcontinent. The third Mongol realm of influence, the Golden Horde, which was centered in the Volga basin but extended its sway much further westward, was the first to accept Islam because the population of this region was already Muslim with strong commercial ties with Khwārazm by the Aral Sea. This Muslim population, mostly Turkic Bulghārs, was able to have a Muslim ruler as early as 1290. But even in the Īl-Khanate, as early as during Hülegü's own life, the old administrative structure had been restored. This was administered by experienced Persian administrators. *Ibid.*, 2: 410–17, *passim*.

⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar* (Cairo: n.p., 1857), 371, quoted from P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1: 214.

The Deluge

In spite of this evidence of a new strength and vigour through the great realignment of the Muslim world after the Mongol havoc, the capitulation of the Muslim world remains an enigmatic historical fact. What seems to have become an unavoidable reality by about 1800 was the rise of Europe (along with Russia) as the real arbitrator of international affairs. This European hegemony has been ascribed to the great transformation of its economic, political, scientific and industrial institutions which began in the late sixteenth century and which had produced important changes in its social, economic, political and military power by 1800, so much so that after about that time, not only

all peoples had to adjust their governments to a modern European international political order; but also to adjust their economies — a harder task — to the competition of technically industrialized Europe; and finally to adjust their mental outlook to the challenge of modern science as studied in Europe. The mere presence of the Europeans was enough for their new power to be felt.⁶

What is of utmost importance for understanding the collapse of the institutional structure of the Muslim world and its colonization is a double time lag in the perception of the coming calamity and in adjustments to the new realities of international power structures which had emerged through the transformation of Europe. In geographical regions which were not in direct contact with Europe, even the information about hundreds of new discoveries, techniques and ideas that were sprouting all over Europe was scarce, whereas in Muslim lands which had better access to the European scene, a self-assumed posture of superiority and a fatal devaluation of the new scientific, economic and political developments occurring in Europe prevented any quick response to the coming challenges.⁷ And when the danger was perceived, it was never perceived in its totality, thereby creating the classic case of too little, too late. Even when corrective steps were taken, they were always inadequate because the full range of challenges was never perceived in its totality. This double time lag — with its first element being a delayed realization of the impending threat, and the second, an insufficient response to the threat — was a

⁶ M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3: 177.

⁷ For a hostile account of the Muslim discovery of the West, see Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982, 2001), especially chapter V, “Muslim Scholarship about the West”, 135–170, which primarily focuses on Kâtib Çelebî. For more general accounts, see Halil İnalcik and Donald Quataert McGowan, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2 vols.

significant factor in Europe's ability to establish its hegemony over the entire world and in its success in the colonization of the Muslim world. This is, however, only one aspect of the changed realities for the Muslim world.

The second aspect of this change in the nature of strength and power of European and Muslim states is the emergence of a "catching up" syndrome. In other words, the double time lag produced a recipe for cure which was conceived in terms of a race in which all that the Muslim world needed to do was to catch up with Europe, especially in science and technology, and all would be well. This formula, which became the rallying cry of Muslim reformers of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, is still the predominant view in the Muslim world, especially among the ruling classes which suffer from a deeply entrenched inferiority complex produced by their alignment with the colonizers; this alignment produces a perspective that views the ailments of the Muslim world through the lenses cast in Western moulds and prescribes solutions which have the same taint. They even perceive history and historical change from the perspective of the colonizers; this produces a defeatist attitude and a materialistic view of progress in which science and technology are given a centre-stage position. Thus, this class has been clamouring for more and more science and technology as the solution for myriad ills of their poorly ruled people without ever thinking about the conditions which produce science and technology in a society or without any understanding of the deeper civilizational processes that produced the Scientific Revolution and the subsequent technological developments in Europe; hence their recipe for cure is impractical and unsound. We will return to this subject later.

Another far more damaging aspect of the pre-colonization era was an absence of awareness about the structural inadequacy of the existing institutions. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the rot and weakness of these institutions was a well-known and well-recognized reality in almost the entire Muslim world but there was no realization that it was not merely a matter of weakness of the existing structures but that of their inadequacy in the changed global circumstances. The era of large empires, run by a central authority, had come to an end and the state institutions had to be redesigned for their effective functionality in a changed global order. A new social and economic order was needed; a new level of production and movement of goods had to be achieved. Even if one left politics out of consideration, an economist of average intelligence living around the year 1800 would have known that the sheer pressure of steam engines, ginning factories and mechanized agriculture of European economy was enough to wipe out any pre-industrial economy as soon as the two came into contact. And it was no

secret that European commerce was increasingly putting pressure on the Muslim lands by changing the terms of trade.

It is also important to note that just when Europe was ready to expand its control over other lands, all three Muslim empires had reached a breaking point due to accumulated internal weaknesses that strained their foundations. There were internal disputes in all three empires and, to make matters worse, these three empires remained at odds with each other even when they finally faced the European encroachment; there was no united front against the colonizers. This may have been the greatest single cause of their eventual disappearance.

After the Deluge

It is not the purpose of this article to go into the historical details of the pre-colonization period or that of colonization itself. The intent of this short article is to present a very brief outline of the route through which the Muslim world came to its most devastating era in its long history and to suggest an agenda for change. Hence, what is of utmost importance is a clear understanding of the processes that occurred during the colonization — processes that would wipe out numerous organically grown and nourishing lifelines of the Islamic civilization.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the three dominant colonizing states — France, Britain and Russia — had reached an understanding about their respective spheres of colonization; thereafter colonization proceeded at a much faster speed. By 1904, when the British and French governments came to a renegotiated understanding of their respective spheres of interest, the entire Muslim region of sub-Saharan Africa was assigned to various colonial masters and by the time of Versailles Conference (1919), all that was left of the independent Muslim states was a small area within the shrunken Persian and Ottoman states. But even this “independence” was restricted, both politically and economically.

The most devastating and long-term effect of colonization was, however, not the political and economic subjugation but the large-scale destruction of the institutional base of the Islamic civilization. With the emergence of the new social, economic and political order in the colonies, a new set of institutions came into existence through a rapid elimination of the older institutions and through the implantation of new state-sponsored institutions. This affected all areas of social life — from education to justice system. With time, these winds of change acquired a ferocity that would leave nothing intact in the whole fabric of Islamic civilization, including its tradition of learning. These changes inaugurated an era of transmutation which made a large part of

the Islamic tradition inaccessible to Muslims. Thus, alienated from their own sources and scholarship, Muslims were left with very little resilience to defend themselves against a mental colonization that continues to this day.

This fateful transmutation was achieved through a number of complex, interconnected and diverse processes which operated on the Muslim world between 1700 and 1950. During this period, the civilization that had created a grand infrastructure of legal, administrative and social organizations appears as if it was suspended in vacuum, without any nourishing air flowing through its organs.⁸ As a result of the changes produced during this period, Islamic languages lost their prestige; the continuity of Islamic institutions was destroyed; the specter of nationalism arose to define Muslims on the basis of where they lived, rather than their common bond through religion; a new educational system was implanted which produced men and women whose understanding of Islam was, at best, fragmentary. These and numerous other changes were not merely limited to the period of colonization; they also defined the drive for independence which led to the rather sudden physical departure of the colonizing forces from the Muslim lands after the second World War.

For the most part, movements of independence in the Muslim lands were led by those who had become thoroughly Westernized through their education, social, political and economic affiliations. Although these movements of independence have produced many fathers of nations, their ideological foundation was not based on Islam for the most part, even when Islam was used as a rallying slogan. This means that the goal of these independence movements was merely to achieve freedom from the colonizing state and although stray ideas about the nature of post-independence state and its institutions exist, there is very little concrete evidence to suggest that this generation was able to work out any clear and solid plan of the post-independence era as far as Islam and its worldview are concerned. In many cases, the leaders of the independence movement were thoroughly secularized men who differed from the colonizers only in the colour of their skin.⁹

⁸ This is not to belittle the heroic efforts of resistance against the colonizers at military, intellectual, social and political levels. This resistance took various forms and was a widespread phenomenon in the entire Muslim world. It is thanks to this resistance movement that a new consciousness exists among Muslims today and it is, primarily, due to the efforts of this minority that Muslim lands are now experiencing a stronger commitment to Islam and its worldview. What is being said is no more than this: the resistance was unable to save the Islamic tradition from receiving a deep wound which continues to bleed and produce powerful disruptive currents.

⁹ The main intent of this article does not allow us to go into details of this most important aspect of colonization. Suffice it to say that many perceptive minds have understood the long

As a result, the departure of colonizers from the Muslim lands did little for Muslims in terms of their regaining the lost spiritual, cultural, social and economic orientation or even to reverse the flow of forces that were shaping their societies. The diverse currents that shape and mould societies continued to come from the West. Fragmented from within and often pitted against each other, all that these newly emerged states could do was to quickly raise their flags at the international economic and political institutions, such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, and join the bottom end of the new world order that was being orchestrated as a means of recolonization of the old colonies through a vastly different mechanism than that which had been used during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Thus, for all practical purposes, the independence of the Muslim world from the colonial yoke has been like a fish jumping out of a pond only to fall into a torrential current that carries it along wherever it wishes. This new current, institutionalized through international institutions especially tailored to carry out the agenda of recolonization,¹⁰ now rushes in a torrent to the farthest corners of the Muslim world. European colonizers have found a new ally in the form of the United States of America and together, they are making rapid advances in implanting their agenda against a divided, underdeveloped and emaciated Muslim *Ummah* being ruled by unrepresentative governments which owe their existence to their allegiance to the neo-colonizers. What is at stake now is not only the oil and other physical resources of the traditional Muslim lands, but the entire range of a community's cultural, moral, and spiritual life.

Thus, for Muslims who understand these challenges, the predicament is rather clear in the form of two contemporary realities: The first is the fact that

term impact of colonization to be exactly this inner transformation. "The independence movements in the colonies and protectorates", writes Gai Eaton, "came into being, not through a return to the indigenous values on the part of those concerned, but through the absorption of occidental ideas and ideologies, liberal or revolutionary as the case might be. the process of modernization — a euphemism for Westernization — far from being halted by this withdrawal, was in fact accelerated. The enthusiasm of the new rulers for everything 'modern' was not restrained, as had been the enthusiasm of their former masters, by any element of self-doubt". Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Cambridge: Allen and Unwin in association with the Islamic Text Society, 1985), 21-22.

¹⁰ It is easy to see this "tailoring" of various international bodies. There is, for instance, no moral justification for the right of veto granted to certain members of the Security Council of the United Nations; likewise, no justification can be found for the "permanent" status of these states in that Council which imposes sanctions when it suits these states, orders the establishment of new states, or division of existing states — all for the sake of providing support to the agenda of a new imperial world order in which the West dominates. Now the World Bank is attaching social, political and cultural strings to its aid packages.

since the beginning of the colonization of their lands in the eighteenth century, there has been no real independence;¹¹ only the form and name of colonization has changed. This was most apparent in the so-called independence of the six Central Asian Republics whose “independence” from the Soviet Union was celebrated with a great deal of fanfare and which quickly fell back in the same institutional fist and tyranny from which they sought freedom; in their situation, even faces did not change; in most cases, those who had been the members of the Communist Party until the day of “independence” just changed their clothes and remained in control in the post-Soviet era.

The second reality is equally straightforward: from the time of the great deluge that swallowed the traditional Muslim lands through colonization, Islam and Muslims have been under attack at all levels. This onslaught targets Islam and Muslims with the purpose of (i) eliminating Islam as a complete way of life as it has been understood ever since its revelation; and (ii) to transform Muslim men and women so that their adherence to their faith becomes a compartmentalized private affair while they live in a secularized world ordered on the basis of reigning orthodoxies of the Western civilization which have come into existence through its two transforming revolutions, one in science and the second in its worldview.

These two threats to Islam and Muslims need further explanation because it is important to see their various facets through a correct formulation. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, it has become fashionable to construct the contemporary global realities in terms of a clash of civilizations.¹² This formulation, however, owes its existence to a flawed, if not dishonest,

¹¹ The reigning orthodoxies in the Muslim countries do not allow this historical fact to be openly stated because it endangers the myth of independence; only poetry takes the license, at times, to express this cruel reality.

¹² The term was first used by the Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington in his lecture given to a small gathering at the American Enterprise Institute in October 1992; this talk was later set forth in an Occasional Paper prepared for the Olin Institute’s project on “The Changing Security Environment and American National Interests”. Huntington then published this idea in his now famous article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in the summer 1993 issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*. This background tell us a great deal about the links and affiliations of the author with the American rightwing institutions; it also provides clues to the institutional support behind this otherwise flawed description of the present global situation which made it a sensational idea projected with full force around the world. The invisible hands behind its global projection are not so invisible, after all. The article has since been expanded and documented, the resulting book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in 1996, has drawn attention from every continent and translated into almost all major languages. The book exists in many editions in various parts of the world. The edition used here is Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

conceptual understanding of the historical currents that have given birth to the present global situation. As far as Muslims are concerned, the way in which the present situation is understood is not merely a question of semantics; it is of fundamental importance for their survival; hence we need to examine the real contours of the contemporary world for a better understanding of the aforementioned two threats.

The Fallacy of Clash of Civilizations Doctrine

At the most apparent level, a clash of any kind, especially of civilizations, has to be a confrontation wherein there are comparable aggressive intentions in the two opposing civilizations, along with comparable material resources available to carry out the aggression. No such condition exists today. Thus, one cannot really speak of a clash of civilizations; only of the aggression of one civilization bent upon wiping out all other ways of living. This is not merely a play on words, nor a differentiation based merely on semantics; it is a logical consequence of historical reality.

Second, and more importantly, to perceive the present conflict in terms of civilizations is a flawed methodology, because a civilization is not a primary entity; it is a product of another primary entity: a set of beliefs. What gives birth to civilizations is a belief system according to which specific ways of life appear in a given polity. These specific ways of life of a large social group, then, produce specific ways of organizing social, political and economic activities of that polity and this, in turn, necessitates the establishment of institutions to carry out the various tasks which fulfil the commandments, customs and rites originating from the set of beliefs held sacred by that polity.

Thus seen, the “Clash of Civilizations” is a facile doctrine because it constructs the fault lines of the present global conflict on the basis of an outward expression of a much deeper and fundamental entity: the belief system that gives rise to civilizations. By making a secondary entity — civilization — the basis of his thesis, Huntington has failed to see anything deeper than a collection of cultural characteristics and phenomena or in the terms used by Spengler, the most external and artificial states of a given people.

Once the focus is shifted to the belief systems, rather than civilizations, we gain a vertical dimension to present global realities which remains inaccessible if the conflict is viewed only as a civilizational phenomenon. This gain is not a superficial accretion; rather, this provides us the necessary tools to identify the real fault lines and hence a proper understanding of the global situation. In other words, in order to understand the flow of events now taking place, we need to understand their source; the source of all action is

belief. Thus, to understand the flow of events, we need to explore the following questions: How do belief systems originate? How do they become sacred for a given populace? We know civilizations evolve, decay and disintegrate, but does a belief system also suffer the same stages? What is the belief system upon which contemporary Western civilization is based? Where did it come from? And what is the belief system of the other civilizations with which the Western civilization is said to be clashing? Where did that come from? It is through these questions that we can begin to understand major flaws in Huntington's formulation and also develop an alternative view.

To begin with, let us note that the belief system that begat the contemporary Western civilization first emerged in Europe around 1500 CE and since then has gone through numerous internal transformations. Its geographical expansion took it to North America, Australia and New Zealand. It is also to be noted that there are, indeed, various shades and hues of values, customs and beliefs in the societies and cultures which make up the fabric of the contemporary Western civilization, but the broad concerns and values common to people who live in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and North America — the geographical region of Western civilization — have foundational similarities which make these societies a civilizational unit, based on a specific belief system. The diversity in the contemporary West, then, is a diversity that is *within* the broad framework defined by the belief system.

Let us, next, look at the formation of this belief system. It arose through two revolutions: one in the natural sciences; the other through a reconstruction of Christianity. The former sought to achieve control over the physical world, the latter redefined values, ethics and worldview in order to establish a Kingdom of Man on Earth. These two revolutions are intertwined. The Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and the accompanying "religious reformation" movements that sought to replace the older manifestations of Christianity with new constructions, both originated in Europe, crossed the Atlantic and begat the contemporary West. This is the basis of a deeply felt and frequently expressed alliance between the peoples of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. This view does not discount their mutual differences, nor does it take away anything from the specifics of regional cultures; it merely restates their foundational basis and their common pedigree.

It is not our intention to go into the details of the stages through which the belief system now operative in the West has passed since its emergence in Europe, but it needs to be noted that it is a product of a series of revolts and revolutions. The revolt against the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation and Counter Reformation, the French and the American

Revolutions, the rise of humanism, the Scientific and the Industrial Revolutions and a host of other minor movements have all contributed to the making of these beliefs. In addition, an amalgamation of other ideologies and “isms”, such as liberalism, humanism, and feminism, have contributed to the rise of this belief system.

At the most basic level, this system is anchored in the belief that human Reason is the ultimate arbitrator of all affairs. Thus it gives to human Reason the authority to define good and evil, enact laws and establish the criteria for values and goals. In a revolt against centuries-old sacred beliefs, the West wrestled with all manifestations of Divine authority, succeeding in giving to Man a degree of freedom, power and autonomy that made him the measure of all things. This newly empowered human volition, then, became the arbitrator and measure of all social change. This change removed God from the central position He held as the Giver of Law and as the focal point of all human activity. This same process of revolt then empowered institutions such as Parliaments to redefine societal structures, the nature of relationship between individuals (for example the definition of marriage), as well as that between an individual and state. Through this process, many practices that used to be considered despicable, sinful, and prohibited, gained “legality”, acceptance and permissibility. This recasting made it possible for numerous Christian sects and churches to accept various moral aberrations as religiously lawful, morally valid, and socially acceptable. In order to remain in tune with the times, the custodians of these Churches had to change their doctrines and beliefs accordingly.

The Real Nature of “Clash”

This transformed belief system now operative in the West and the civilization that is based on it have claims to universality. This claim to universality asserts that the cultures, values, and ideals which have come into existence on the basis of this belief system are the most advanced form of human achievement. Furthermore, it claims that its political, economic and social systems, and institutions are the destiny of mankind. This claim is neither a localized phenomenon, nor a tacit or passive self-understanding; it is an aggressive contention that is expressed at various levels, through innumerable means by the ideologues, politicians, and intellectuals of this civilization. Seen from their perspective, the Western civilization presents to humanity the most advanced, most progressive and the most desirable way of life. They contend that it is only the tyrannical rule of certain individuals or groups that is preventing the spread of the “fruits” of their civilization to the poor, underdeveloped and

uneducated people and if these regimes could be removed, the oppressed people of these countries would welcome this civilization with open arms.

This self-assessment, and the ingrained self-righteousness are accompanied by a multi-billion dollar effort aimed at spreading the “fruits” of the Western civilization to the rest of the world through domination, control and occupation. This, the most massive onslaught of any civilization human history has ever witnessed, is also viewed as the most natural outcome, as if by means of natural selection, the self-proclaimed fittest civilization has a birthright to extinguish all other civilizations. This extrapolation of the survival of the fittest doctrine into the domain of civilizations is based on the assumed superiority of three basic doctrines held sacrosanct by the West: democracy, individual liberty, free-market economy. It is these three components of the Western civilization which are now being exported to the rest of the world because they are considered to be the universal aspiration of the entire human race.¹³

Out of all nations which fall within the sphere of the Western civilization, the United States of America has achieved a unique role with its technological and economic power. It now stands as the embodiment of this civilization, and thus its self-assumed right to rule the world is reflected in various spheres of contemporary life — from its military adventures to its insatiable desire to export the American way of life to the rest of the world.¹⁴

While he was in office, Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives (1995–1999) wrote a poignantly entitled

¹³ Democracy, individual freedom and free-market economy — the three reigning orthodoxies of the Western civilization — did, in fact, work well for the West throughout the nineteenth century. They provided a solid foundation upon which common man was able to construct a viable structure of beliefs. While the “super powers” of that century focused their attention on the exploitation of resources belonging to the people of the colonized nations, at home they built railroads, electrical grids, communication networks, laboratories equipped with the latest instruments, health and education systems and a vast range of social services. Their economies flourished and they achieved a degree of social and political cohesion that galvanized their societies to such an extent that even those members of these societies who held “extreme” views could live in peace with their neighbors because their “extremism” was still within a narrow range of commonly held beliefs. This degree of social cohesion has been, indeed, a major achievement of the West during the last three hundred years. For more details on these three orthodoxies of the West, see section II below.

¹⁴ For a succinct history of the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, see, “Muhammad Arif Zakaullah, “The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States and the Challenge to Understand the New America” in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2003), 437–486. Zakaullah’s article cites numerous other works on the subject; of especial interest are Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the new Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America 1978–1988* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and William C. Berman, *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

article, “America’s right to world leadership”, in which he claimed that “only America can lead the world. America remains the only global, universal civilization in the history of mankind. In the space of less than 300 years, our system of representative democracy, individual liberties, personal freedoms and free enterprise has provided the foundation for the greatest economic boom in history. Our value system is emulated around the world. Our technology has revolutionized mankind’s way of living and has been the primary force for globalization”.¹⁵

This declaration should not be taken lightly; it is not the statement of an upstart politician. It was the belief of the author of *Contract with America*, the ten point agenda signed by Gingrich, together with 367 Republicans at the doorsteps of the Capitol on September 27, 1994, that has contributed a great deal to the empowerment of the Republican Party in the midterm Congressional elections of November 1994.¹⁶ Gingrich had the distinction of being the Speaker of a House in which the Republicans gained majority for the first time in forty years. This pronouncement by Gingrich is also important because he represents a new brand of American activism.

Before attempting to formulate the real contours of the “clash”, let us note in passing that despite its unilateralism in certain recent military invasions, America is not alone in asserting the universality of the Western civilization; this self-assessment is shared by all nations which now exist within the broad spectrum of the Western civilization. Their mutual differences exist only in the realm of tactics. Thus, no one should be deluded by these superficial differences pertaining to the mechanism of the propagation of the Western civilization. The fact that all Western nations share a common belief system and the fact that their self-assessment is also a shared phenomenon can be gleaned from the policies of Germany and France during the recent invasion of Iraq. Despite their vocal opposition to the unilateral actions of the United States, these nations did nothing to stop the aggression; rather, they backed off from their public stands at crucial junctures in the

¹⁵ The idea that America has some kind of Divine right to rule over the world is a permanent feature of Gingrich’s thought. He has expressed this in numerous articles and speeches. This particular formulation was published in the Pakistani newspaper, *The News International*, September 20, 1996. A quick search on the worldwide web brings numerous links to Gingrich’s rightwing associations. For instance see his speech about investing in science, delivered in 1999 and published in *The American Institute of Physics Bulletin of Science Policy News*, Number 154, October 22, 1999, at <http://www.aip.org/enews/fyi/1999/fyi99.154.htm>, accessed December 19, 2003.

¹⁶ William C. Berman, *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 164 and passim.

buildup to the invasion, and their current posture of opposition to US occupation of Iraq is merely a bargaining tool for “reconstruction” contracts.

The root of the real “clash” that is a current global reality lies in two claims to universality. We have already seen how the belief system, which sired the modern Western civilization, claims to be universal; another belief system with a similar claim is that of Islam. Islam’s claim to universality is simply expressed in the Qur’ānic statement that it is a message for all people.¹⁷ It should also be noted here that the Qur’ān claims to be the continuation of, and completion of, earlier Divine Revelations and it places itself in the grand tradition of other Revealed Books, though with the important distinction that it was revealed to complete all earlier manifestations of a single Divinely ordained religion, al-Islām, and that it corrects the erroneous beliefs and practices that have crept into earlier belief systems through the corruption of the revealed messages or through their eclipse.

The civilization that came into existence on the basis of the message of the Qur’ān — the Islamic Civilization — now does not possess military and economic strength comparable to the West, but it still holds that its belief system is the only valid belief system that is extant and that is for humanity. At present, this claim is not asserted through any material prosperity and strength, but simply on the basis of the Qur’ānic claim that it is a protected message, eternally safe in the “well-guarded tablet”, accessible to all through the “uncorrupted and incorruptible Book”, the actual Words of God, addressed to all human beings. This belief is simply unshakable. Hence, a materially superior West finds itself face to face with a civilization that had had its golden days of strength and power but that now lies prostrate, yet refuses to accept the universalist claim of a civilization stronger in military and economic terms by several orders of magnitude. Not only that. This exhausted polity, which now stands in the way of a universal expansion of the Western civilization, itself believes to achieve a similar universal expansion because of a Divine promise that in the end, it is the Truth that prevails. This, then, is the dialectic foundation of the contemporary conflict, erroneously called a “Clash of Civilizations”.

The Advantages of the Alternative Construction

A word must be said about the advantages of this construction as opposed to the view that posits the current global realities in terms of a “clash of civilizations”. There are several important gains in this construction:

¹⁷ Qur’ān 9: 158; 6: 90; 12: 104; 25: 1.

(i) Thus viewed, the present situation needs no historical discontinuity. In other words, it does not necessitate any breach of the flow of history through an artificial use of doctrine of survival of the fittest. The clash between the Revealed Message and Man-made beliefs is as old as human history. This continuity also allows us to draw parallels between its present and past manifestations, such as the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh and the clash that once occurred in Makkah between the leaders of the Quraysh and the final Messenger of God who brought a clear Book which sets out this conflict in the most lucid ways.

(ii) Because the present conflict thus viewed is, in fact, a conflict of two sets of beliefs, both claiming to be universally valid, one can situate numerous unfolding events in broad categories where they resonate with the previous events to which the Qur'ān has drawn attention.

(iii) The most important benefit of situating the present conflict in the general flow of human history and of viewing it through this particular construction is to be found in gaining a model for success against the onslaught of the Western civilization through the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be on him). This is a sure path to success, as the Prophetic model is not a Man-made ad hoc model; it was moulded by the One Who revealed the universal message of the Qur'ān and it proved its veracity in a similar conflict between a Revealed belief system and a Man-made construct.

(iv) As far as Muslims are concerned, they cannot afford to view the present conflict as a “clash of civilizations” as this construction already posits heavy odds against them because the Islamic civilization is at present weaker as compared to the Western civilization. It is precisely due to this false construction that many Muslims today feel hopeless and helpless against the onslaught by the West; an attitude that breeds defeatism. Those who fall prey to these emotions forget that civilizations are not primary entities and therefore, they change, decay and regain strength as long as they remain attached to the unchanging Divinely revealed beliefs.

(v) This alternate construction also provides a globally applicable framework to view various aspects of the current realities. Thus, when applied to the resistance against occupation, this construction allows us to see the situation in Iraq from the same perspective from which we can view the situation in Palestine and other Muslim lands. When applied to the cultural aggression, myriad forms of aberrations being promoted in the Muslim world by Western civilization achieve a universal context. When this framework is applied to the economic subjugation of the Muslim world, the strategies used by various international monetary institutions as well as those being used to promote “globalization” can be examined from a unified Islamic perspective

that draws its tools of investigation from the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, and similar treatment can be applied to other realms.

II

The West's claim to superiority rests on its belief that its political, economic, and social systems are the most advanced form of human achievement in these realms. Thus in the realm of politics, democracy, as defined by the Western civilization, has achieved sanctity. In the social realm, individual freedom, conceived in its particular Westernized form, achieved the same status and in the realm of economics, free-market economy is considered the destiny of humanity. These three "ideals" are now being imposed on the rest of the world. Therefore, it would serve the purpose of this article to briefly examine these three.

Three Reigning Orthodoxies of the West

Democracy

The Western democracy has attained a salvific aspect; it is held sacred by most Western intellectuals and the common man shares this belief, though without knowing what it really means. Seen in its own historical context, there is no doubt that in its ideal form, Western democracy promised dignity to the average citizen of Western states that he or she did not enjoy before. But through the rise of Western capitalism, the fruits of democracy have turned sour because the three basic pre-requisites for the smooth functioning of Western democracy have been rendered invalid.¹⁸ These are (i) the involvement of the greatest number of citizens in the political process; (ii) easy access to uncontrolled information; and (iii) the right to freely cast one's vote. Note that all these pre-requisites are interconnected to such an extent that one cannot be fulfilled without the other two.

The first of these three pre-requisites is the involvement of citizens in the political process. In recent decades, the declining voter turn out in elections in most Western countries suggests that in stipulating this condition for its functioning, the Western democracy has put a burden on the common citizen

¹⁸ This is now widely recognized by many perceptive minds in the West. See, for instance, Tage Lindbom, *The Myth of Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996). In addition to this academic discourse, there is a large-scale mass movement which seeks to correct the ailments of Western democracy which is rapidly spreading throughout the West. The intensity and popularity of this movement can be gauged from the fact that whenever the leaders of G8 meet, they have to barricade themselves against this popular uprising. Their summit was held in 2003 in Kananaskis, a cordoned-off mountain resort in the Canadian Rockies and the Canadian government spent more than fifty million dollars for security arrangements.

which is too much for the self-indulgent consumers who now populate most Western democracies. According to figures compiled by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), an intergovernmental organization, most Western democracies have seen a continuous decline in percentage of voters who cast their votes in elections. For Canada, this number has fallen from 70% in 1945 to 54% in 2000. Only 49.2% American voters cast their votes in the 2000 Presidential elections in the United States.¹⁹ This means half the population had no interest or confidence or both in the electoral process! The record for other Western democracies is similar. In England, voter turnout dropped from 70% in 1945 to 57% in 2001; in France, it dropped from 73% in 1945 to 59% in 1997, in Switzerland, this drop was from 66% (1947) to 35% (1999); in Portugal, the voter turnout was 89.7% in 1975 and 69% in 1999. There are a few exceptions to this general trend; Germany, Sweden and Denmark, for instance, continue to have around 80% voter turnout.

But the lack of participation is only one aspect. A more devastating blow has been struck to the representative democracy by the wedding of the corporate world with politics. Elections have become a huge business and no ordinary mortal can hope to make it to the high office without the support of the corporate world which demands a high price of candidates. This has meant that the governments which were supposed to represent ordinary citizens and work for their interests are bound to work for the interest of corporate world.

The third important blow to democracy has come from “information control”. This is the most important factor in the demise of real democracy in North America; elsewhere in the Western world, there is still room for “alternate journalism” to flourish side by side with mainstream media but in North America, the information control has reached an all time high through corporate mergers and state intervention. The geographical location of North America has always been a barrier of sorts for its inhabitants, but easy and free access to information has now been systematically blocked. The first Gulf War was a watershed in this arena but since then, control on media has become a general rule to the extent that during the invasion of Iraq, almost all coverage of events was through the eyes of embedded journalists and even their dispatches were first scrutinized by the military.

These three factors have now rendered democracy dysfunctional, at least in North America. In Europe, these factors have not yet played a decisive role but European ability to exercise a policy not dictated by the United States is severely limited because of various historical, economic and political reasons.

¹⁹ See, for instance, data at http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm, accessed December 9, 2003.

This became evident during the invasion of Iraq when France and Germany backed down from their “principled” stand at the crucial hour. The continuous occupation of Iraq by the United States and Britain is another proof of Europe’s inability to chart an independent course in the international policies. In addition, Europe still suffers from its Eurocentricity that controls general perceptions and public opinion. In the case of non-Western civilizations, this self-centered perception produces myopic judgments that show no respect and grant no honor to those civilizations which do not share the European heritage.

Western intellectuals as well governments claim that their democracy is now a universal aspiration of all humanity but the bounties bestowed by it to the people who live at the place of its origin are highly doubtful. This is so because the requirements for its proper functioning have become impossible to be met by a populace whose concerns have become increasingly self-centred.

A word must be said about alternatives. When the myth of democracy is exposed, one is generally left with the rhetorical question: So, what is the alternative? And in the absence of any alternative, the answer becomes an apology: it may not be the best system humanity can think of but it is the best we have.

This facile response ignores certain basic and fundamental aspects of the question itself. Democracy is a component of a political system and a political system is, in itself, a component of a larger framework of values, goals and aspirations of a social group. Thus the question is not limited to democracy or dictatorship, rather, the proper question to be asked has to be related to the goals, values and worldview of that civilization; political systems are merely one aspect of civilizations and they must mesh with the other social, economic and cultural aspects. Each civilization is a complete package and any incongruent addition to it would always remain dysfunctional. Hence to universalize Western democracy is to make this cow sacred for the whole humanity — an action that is far from the spirit of democracy.

Personal Freedom

The second universalist claim of the Western civilization is its insistence that its own barometer of personal freedom must be adopted by all other civilizations. This concept of personal freedom is anchored in the Western civilization in its revolt against Divinely revealed Law. Through its own historical development, the West has succeed in replacing the authority of God by that of Man. Thus, it has successfully eliminated the concept of

boundaries of God, *ḥudūd Allāh*, and instead has given human beings the right to define the boundaries of personal behaviour.²⁰

Working behind this radical change is a belief held sacred by the Western civilization: the notion of personal freedom. Individual freedom, considered to be one of the most fundamental values of the contemporary Western civilization, is usually defined to include all expressions of personal behaviour that do not harm others. During the course of transmutation of the West, the limits of individual freedom have gone through several redefinitions and continue to change. At the root of this process of change is the absence of any absolute criteria of right and wrong. This lacuna in the moral fabric of the contemporary Western civilization makes individual behaviour the sole criteria of acceptable morality as well as the standard by which to measure morality in the absolute sense; anything accepted by the majority becomes an acceptable norm for the whole society. Thus many forms of individual behaviour once considered taboo have slowly gained acceptability and are now viewed as “normal” modes of personal behaviour. This has meant a spiraling descent into lower and lower modes of existence. This descent has been possible because built into the legislative and social institutions of the Western civilization are processes that are constantly institutionalizing this descent, thereby providing a cover for moral aberration. One can clearly see these processes of legislation that “sanctify” the ever-expanding limits of moral conduct in various societies as playing a decisive role in “legalizing” this descent. They range from the previously mentioned definition of marriage to what constitutes proper dress codes and to what is considered to be “normal” for members of the two sexes in their public behaviour. There are, of course, some differences in the extent of these sanctions in different Western societies, but the criteria used in various Western societies is remarkably consistent. This criteria is based on a human construct that emerged in post-Renaissance Europe and passed through the phase of “Enlightenment” and a series of mini-revolutions in moral philosophy. The series of historical shifts which have

²⁰ This pertains to social customs, rites of marriage and divorce, as well as to what is considered lawful or permissible and what is considered illicit or illegal. A case in point is the definition of marriage. On July 17, 2003, the Government of Canada referred a draft bill to the Supreme Court of Canada for its view on the constitutionality of the bill which changed the definition of marriage in Canada to include same-sex “marriages”. The bill had come into existence following a landmark decision by the Ontario Court of Appeals which had ruled that the opposite-sex requirement for marriage is unconstitutional and directed that marriage in the province of Ontario be defined as “the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others”. Hailed as a great victory, hundreds of men and women rejoiced; their “marriages” were now legal. The Ontario decision followed on a similar decision of the British Columbia Court of Appeal on May 1, 2003. The Quebec Superior Court had also ruled that same-sex marriages will become legal effective September 2004. Many states in America are following this pattern.

produced the contemporary concept of personal freedom in the West also rest on a self-assessment of the Western civilization of its own Middle Ages, viewed as a dark period characterized by a general lack of personal freedom, exploitation of masses by a clergy, superstition and ignorance. Out of all the diverse characterizations which are now given as distinctive features of the modern Western civilization, the lack of personal freedom in the Middle Ages stands out as the most representative dimension. This lack of freedom is then defined, to a large extent, as the lack of freedom to move — from one class to another, from one profession to another, even from one city to another. In many cases, one remained where one was born. Guild membership, farmers' markets and artisans' collectives defined the circle of one's economic and social activity.

When viewed through this perspective, individual freedom becomes a personal issue, as long as it does not impinge upon the personal freedom of other members of society. But even this caveat is of little help in providing any barrier, because it is generally the lowest common denominator that governs the process of change in a market-driven society. And the lowest common denominator in personal freedom is the lowest form of human passions aroused by a constant appeal to raw passions through technological advances that project these urges on a twenty-four hour basis, seven days a week.

Thus, personal freedom, one of the most important values of the Western civilization, has been institutionalized, made "sacred", and is now taken for granted to the extent that any probe into the very idea may be considered an attack. With this large-scale acceptance of the notion of an unchecked freedom, the Western society has also acquired a self-righteous attitude that looks down at upon the rest of the world where similar concepts of personal freedom are absent. Not only is there a widespread belief that this kind of personal freedom is a virtue, there is also a desire to export, even impose, this value system on the rest of the world.

This concept of personal freedom arose in the West when it broke away from its Christian roots through a series of revolts that had numerous economic, political and religious dimensions. These points of rupture were not isolated incidents in social, economic, political and religious history of the West; rather, they went hand in hand in "liberating" the Western man and woman from the tradition against which they revolted. For instance, what Protestantism did in the realm of religion went hand in hand with what capitalism did in that of economy and what the peculiar form of Western democracy did politically. The end result of these revolts was the establishment of a "Kingdom of Man" in which Man became the measure of his own behaviour. This revolution removed all higher powers from the scene

and made Man the centre and purpose of his own life. This change, from a God-oriented civilization to a “Man-oriented” civilization was accompanied by numerous other changes in the worldview of the Western man and woman, and it, in turn, produced fundamental shifts in the criteria used for values and moral behaviour. This process bred a desire for constant, incessant change and, in time, this ever-changing, ever-shifting process itself became a “norm” and continues to this day.

Thus, one of the products of this fundamental shift in worldview was the very notion of change which now governs large segments of Western civilization — from modes of living to macro-economies, society continues to change at an ever-increasing pace. It would not be an exaggeration to say that change has become an obsessive trait of this civilization which cannot find solace in any state because its foundations have been shaken. This obsession with change is obvious in the wide spectrum of the contemporary West — from fashions to customs and from living space to the workplace. This obsession with change governs both individual as well as collective lives. But instead of taking it as a symptom of a deep fissure and aberration, even this obsession has been made a virtue and those societies which seek permanence, stability and norms borne out of a desire to an unflinching attachment to higher, permanent and absolute ideals, are seen as static, unprogressive, even backward.

And yet, there is an ironic aspect built into this obsession with change: the more one changes, the more one becomes unsatisfied with the change, leading to a desire for further change. This obsession goes hand in hand with the notion of personal freedom and, in fact, provides a facile and illusory belief that one is, in fact, free — free to change. It is another matter altogether that one is merely changing one set of changeables with another.

If personal freedom, expressed through an insatiable desire for change, is one aspect of the irony bred by this universalist claim of the Western civilization, the other side of that same coin is an overriding desire to escape from freedom. This escape from freedom plays out in the contemporary Western civilization at various levels, and there are numerous channels and mechanisms of this escape; the most obvious being the fear of being left alone. Solitude is abhorred and was once considered the number one cause of numerous psychological problems prevalent in the West. In the last few decades hundreds of technological gadgets have penetrated the personal sphere of an average person to eliminate “loneliness” — from cellular phones to palm-computers, these instruments of intrusion have conquered the personal space to such an extent that now it seems impossible for anyone to be truly alone. This intrusion of technology into the personal space has created a deprivation,

eliminated the spiritual space and has made modern man a slave of the gadgets of his own creation.

Another route of escape from freedom has been provided by the cult of hero worship. Instead of the worship of God, which frees human beings from all other bondage, the contemporary Western civilization provides a defused and dispersed mode of hero worship through a parallel culture that takes sports as its point of departure for building a large but diffused cult. No other civilization in human history is known to have bred such a phenomenon. Even the Greeks, whose legendary sport events are still celebrated, had numerous other checks and balances against an unrestrained growth of hero-worship through sports. No such checks now exist. Modern Western civilization has built such a powerful cult around sports that at times whole nations are glued to their television sets while a handful of individuals play in the hockey or football field. This cult provides a route of escape from personal freedom, which is readily given up for a collective cult. This cult around sports is but only one example of routes of escape from freedom.

Automaton conformity is another way in which individuals forfeit their real self and trade their real freedom for an illusory freedom through adopting cultural patterns and social behaviour offered by the society. This mode of escape has numerous dimensions. In the political realm, its workings can be seen most clearly in the United States and Canada where individual choices have been eliminated through the emergence of a two party system in which both parties offer essentially the same policies and practices, creating a political culture of conformity, driven by market forces which are, in turn, controlled by a few corporations owned by a few hundred individuals. In the economic realm, this automaton conformity is evidenced by the rapid disappearance of personal and family-owned businesses. A large majority of population is thus forced to go to buy the same grocery from various corporate-owned grocery stores which sell the same product with different brand names.

These are merely the most outward and obvious contradictions and manifestations of a deeply flawed concept of personal freedom. These contradictions arise because the notion of unchecked, uncontrolled personal freedom is an aberration that cannot be sustained, because humanity is not constituted to exercise such freedom. Human freedom has limits because of constraints originating in our constitution, living space and reliance on certain necessities. There are limits which extend from our biology to social needs and from our psychological make up to our emotional needs.

In Islam, limits of human freedom are defined by boundaries of God, (*ḥadūd Allāh*). These boundaries, in turn, gave rise to various social, moral, and economic patterns in various Muslim societies. Some of these patterns have,

no doubt, degenerated into various forms of oppression, but that does not mean that the very notion of limits and boundaries can be discarded. Moreover, in stark contrast to the Western civilization, Islamic civilization bases its criteria of right and wrong on a foundation that is supra-human. This fundamental difference between the two civilizations is the reason for two different concepts of personal freedom. In the case of Islam, this concept is intimately connected with a series of links and relationships, the most important of which is related to the consequences of one's deeds in this life as well as in the Hereafter. This high modality of relationships that exists between individual freedom and human behavior places personal freedom within a Divinely guided legal and moral system of values in which personal freedom comes with an acute sense of accountability.

In a polity driven by such a relational notion of personal freedom in which one aspect of the relationship is rooted in God and His Laws, it would be impossible to think of a legislation of the kind which was recently enacted in Canada, allowing for same sex marriages. This is so because in such a polity, the legislative power is not granted to Man. When judged by the standards of the contemporary West, this, however, would be considered a "discriminatory restraint", a lack of personal freedom and non-progressive behaviour. What is at stake in this discourse is the right to define the legislative role. In one civilization, this role is solely the prerogative of the Creator; in the other, it has been appropriated by Man.

Free Market Economy

The third reigning orthodoxy of the Western civilization that it wants to impose on the rest of the world is its free market economy. "Despite the bad moral odor that capitalism has had for both the traditionalist-religious Right and the socialist-Marxist Left", says Fukuyama, "its ultimate victory as the *world's only viable economic system* is easier to explain in terms of the Mechanism than is the victory of liberal democracy in the political sphere".²¹ The rise of capitalism in the West is so thoroughly meshed with its post-Renaissance history at home and military and economic exploitations of the colonized lands that it is simply impossible to separate these strands of the Western civilization from each other. Throughout the eighteenth century, European nation-states were establishing corporations and companies, which received immunity from competition, allowing them to amass vast amounts of capital. After the American War of Independence, the State administrations in

²¹ This statement occurs in the chapter tellingly entitled as "Accumulation Without End", Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 90; emphasis added.

the US continued to grant monopolies over canals and railroads. During the second half of the nineteenth century, these corporations and companies were provided legal cover through laws enacted by institutions which served the interests of these corporations.²² There was resistance against the enactment of these laws. For example, in 1892, the *American Law Review* voiced outrage that “constitutional ordinances earned on the field of battle and intended as charters of human liberty, have been turned into the shield of incorporated monopoly”,²³ but this resistance was inconsequential and halting the complex developments which gave birth to modern capitalist system now associated free-market economy. The emergence of this system in the Western civilization, as its most powerful material resource, is inextricably linked with this civilization’s other cornucopia: its industry, corporate culture, social, and political patterns, its incessant need to change, its mobile class system and its infatuation with acquisition — all of these, and many other strands of this civilization are meshed together through a worldview that takes the material gains of this worldly life as its centerpiece.

Organized in the form of corporations, this economic system which emerged in the Western civilization under its own specific social, political and cultural conditions and which operates in that very specific clime, is now being imposed on the rest of the world. This attempt to “incorporate” the entire world is not only being described as beneficial, it is said to be the destiny of the human race. Globalization, which is sometimes referred to as Americanization of the world, is a process that aims at spreading this specific product of the Western civilization. Although there is popular resentment against this in Europe, this opposition is based on economic and, sometimes, cultural differences, not on the foundation of any civilizational difference and certainly not on the basis of any religious belief system which cannot accept a culture of greed and an economy based on interest with the goal of accumulation of wealth.

²² A good way to trace these developments is to follow the history of a given corporation or company. This would provide a definitive account of how various legal provisions, specific to that company, were enacted into state or national laws for the sole benefit of the owner or shareholders of that company. A good example is the brief history of the Coca-Cola Company whose principal owner Asa Candler incorporated one collection of Coca-Cola partners in 1888 for \$12,000; four years later, he reincorporated the company for \$1000,000, based on an extrapolation of putative annual profit; he could do so because by then, the transformed US economy had produced a transformed legal system which treated a corporation “as an artificial person created by law for specific purpose”; the specific purpose here being accumulation of capital. For an interesting account of these developments, see Humphrey McQueen, *The Essence of Capitalism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2003), 27–32 and passim.

²³ See, *ibid.*, 26.

III

This broad outline of the nature of challenges faced by Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community of believers brings us to the main intent of this article: what is to be done? But before enumerating some of the most important and urgent steps needed, let us point out that it is not Islam as a religion that faces any challenge *per se* because it is secure in its foundational sources, the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Thus, what is meant by challenges faced by Islam is nothing more than the challenges faced by believers in accessing this veritable source of Truth and Guidance. There are numerous examples in history which suggest that it is possible to “eliminate” Islam from a whole region by making it inaccessible to people through force. The case of Central Asian Republics is an eye opener; a region which produced some of the most respected scholars of Islam has now become a spiritual wasteland. This was accomplished by the Soviets through brute force, by banning Islamic practices as well as through making the sources of Islam inaccessible to the populace. Thus, the danger faced by Islam in the contemporary world is not that it will become an extinct religion but that its practice will be corrupted and modified to such an extent that it will lose its effective power as a complete system of beliefs and practices — a system that aims at producing a community of believers with distinct Islamic traits. This is possible, though it will take a huge effort and resources, both of which are in abundant supply these days. There is also no dearth of those who are trying to find or create a Luther of Islam. Faced with these myriad challenges, the Muslim community as a whole needs to undertake proactive measures to survive; some of these urgent tasks are listed below:

1. Understanding the Great Unmaking of the Islamic Civilization
2. Understanding the Institutional Transformation
3. Understanding the Modes of Resistance
4. Understanding Civilizational Currents
5. Understanding the West
6. West's Understanding of Islam and Muslims
7. Understanding the Transformed World of the Twenty-First Century
8. A Modus Operandi for Breaking the Vicious Circle.

First Task: Understanding the Great Unmaking of the Islamic Civilization

The first task faced by the Muslim Ummah today is to understand what went wrong. What happened to the Ottoman, Şafavī, and the Indian Tīmūrī Empires which were apparently powerful and resourceful at the dawn of the

eighteenth century? Why were Muslims not able to resist their subjugation? What made it possible for the European powers to conquer almost the entire Muslim world in a relatively short period?

These questions have many dimensions. Take, for instance, the question of balance of power in the world at the dawn of the eighteenth century. At that time, Aurangzeb (1658–1707) had seven more years to live and, after a long and protracted process, he had successfully subdued revolts against the central authority. But during the course of that century, India saw an unprecedented expansion of British control over India. This rise of the British power in India, which is sometimes attributed to their better weapons, has much more to do with the gradual decline of the local institutions and internal disputes than better weapons — a fact that has been brought to light with considerable clarity in general histories — but what remains enigmatic is the absence of any successful effort at restructuring of the military and economic institutions to meet the new challenges. What were the social, political, economic and intellectual factors which prevented this? After all, it was the century in which men like Shāh Walī Allāh (1703–1762) lived and taught, but their presence and influence was insufficient to give birth to a new force that could restrict the expansion of foreign control and power. Why? Likewise, similar questions remain unanswered about the Ottoman and the Şafavī empires.

Of course, these and similar questions have been asked before and numerous partial answers exist but these questions have never been answered in a definitive manner and there is a need for a thorough and detailed investigation of the source material in order to uncover various facets of this fatal decline and eventual disappearance of the independent political entities that existed in the Muslim world prior to its colonization.

This is not merely an academic exercise; rather, it is an essential undertaking for two reasons: (i) without a clear, detailed and exhaustive understanding of the processes which contributed to the decline and eventual dissolution of the Ottoman, Şafavī, and the Indian Tīmūrī Empires, the contemporary Muslim world would not be able to understand the fault lines of its historical restructuring; and (ii) such an inquiry is of utmost important for a renaissance of institutions which nourish civilizations. It is obvious that no one else is going to undertake this task for the benefit of Muslims; it is a matter of their survival and only they are responsible and in need of such an undertaking. This is not to say that non-Muslims cannot be involved in this project; quite the contrary. The participation of non-Muslims in this project would, in fact, enhance the reflection in many ways but what is being said is

simple: no European or North American university or research institution has an existential need for such an undertaking.

The fact that almost half a century after the end of the direct rule over the colonies and the emergence of more than fifty Muslim states, such an essential project has not been undertaken, merely points to the lack of appreciation of its essential qualities. But the past must not dictate the future. There is no reason why a team of scholars cannot be gathered to devote focused attention to this undertaking.

The Second Task: *Understanding the Institutional Transformation*

Colonization of the Muslim world was accompanied by an almost total transformation of the institutional structure of the Islamic civilization. From education to state bureaucracy and from military to judiciary, it was a large-scale reordering of the constituting building blocks of the Muslim world. What were the factors that made it possible for the colonizers to destroy the old institutions and implant their own? Why were they successful in eliminating or marginalizing institutions that had emerged over centuries? Understanding this process is of utmost importance for the survival of the Muslim world as well as for its renaissance, because, in a particular sense, the departing colonizing powers seem to have left behind a mechanism of their own survival through these implanted institutions which are still functioning all over the Muslim world. Even new institutions that have come into existence in the so-called post-independence period, have been generally molded on the pattern of the implanted institutions and in most cases, these clones only differ from their parents in name. This cloning is most apparent in education and in institutions dealing with scientific research as well in numerous state controlled institutions.

In many cases, these colonial implantations are even considered benevolent; this is especially so in the case of educational and scientific institutions. This is based on the premise that it was only the rise of modern science that had produced a concentration of social power, economic wealth and military strength in Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries and the rise of science occurred on the basis of these institutions. This premise may be valid for Europe but what is of interest here is to investigate if the Indian Academy of Sciences did for the Indian society during the Raj what the Royal Academy of sciences did for the British society during the same time period. More importantly, what needs to be investigated is the impact of the emergence of these implanted institutions on the existing institutions? In other words, in this specific case, Muslims need to explore:

How did science serve the empire?²⁴ A team of specialists, working under a project director, is bound to find a wealth of material which will tell us something about the great deluge that swallowed the existing scientific, economic and social institutions in the Muslim world and replaced them with European institutions which were not only foreign to the local civilization, but which were specifically implanted in the Muslim lands to ensure quick financial gains and long-term servitude. A case in point is the establishment of institutions like the Botanical Gardens. Recent research shows that even such apparently benign institutions had an imperial agenda and they served to consolidate the power of the empire. “There is no doubt”, writes Baber,

that throughout the nineteenth century, the botanists of the East India Company played a major role in the transfer of commercial plants and crops across continents that contributed to the consolidation [and] expansion of the British colonial power. Tea and cinchona, two plants that significantly affected the fortunes of the British empire could not have been transferred across national and continental boundaries without the expertise of the Company botanists and institutional support from the newly established botanical gardens in India.²⁵

The Third Task: *Understanding the Modes of Resistance*

A third aspect of understanding the present challenges pertains to the studies focused on the resistance against colonization. It is a well-known fact that the colonization of the Muslim world was not accomplished without political, military and intellectual resistance at various levels, but we do not have a definitive overall picture of the intricacies of this resistance nor any substantial understanding of the causes of its failure. This area of Muslim history not only remains poorly understood; in textbooks used even in the Muslim countries, this resistance is often seen from the perspective of the colonizers. Thus in Pakistan, a country established with the clear and fully expressed purpose of establishment of an Islamic polity, the heroic but ill-fated uprising against the British in 1857 is usually called *Ghadar* (mutiny or rebellion against a lawful

²⁴ This is the subject of an enormously enriching sub-clause of sociological studies on history of science. Some recent works show promising insights. See, for instance, Satpal Sangwan, *Science, Technology and Colonisation: An Indian Experience (1757–1857)* (Delhi: Anamika Prakashan, 1991); John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

²⁵ For a brief but fascinating account of the transfer of tea plants from China and Cinchona plants from South America, see, *ibid.*, 168–176.

authority), instead of a fight for freedom.²⁶

At first sight, research into the details of resistance against the colonization of various parts of the Muslim world may seem to be a purely academic exercise but it is not so because such studies are helpful not only for understanding the extent of success and failure of those resistance against colonization at that historical juncture but also in our own times. In addition, this research will provide Muslims with an understanding of their own history that is not tainted with Orientalism or colonialism and may yield new source material for rewriting of textbooks. A large number of monographs on various aspects of resistance will eventually provide an overall understanding of various levels and modes of resistance.

The Fourth Task: *Understanding Civilizational Currents*

Civilizations never sprout spontaneously nor continue to exist in vacuum; they are anchored in a belief system and they are supported by institutions that act like their pillars. The Islamic civilization had emerged on the basis of Revelation and it developed and was enriched through an elaborate institutional system which produced a sustained flow of intellectual activity. When foreign currents came into the Islamic civilization — such as the vast body of scientific and philosophical literature produced by the Translation Movement of the eighth to eleventh centuries — they were rapidly appropriated and transformed. What could not be taken was discarded, what could be accepted after modifications was modified and what was a beneficial addition was welcomed as such. This was an organic process. All civilizations do this. Like a living body, civilizations continuously receive nourishment from diverse sources, digest, discard, modify and accept — but always according to their own internal needs. Europe did this during its Renaissance when it appropriated a large body of knowledge from the Islamic civilization, just as the Islamic civilization had done earlier in respect to the Greek, the Persian and the Indian civilizations.

It seems that at present, the Islamic civilization has a major ailment with its “digestive system”. A glance at the rapid inroads being made by the Western civilization in the Muslim world is sufficient to infer that there is something severely wrong with those mechanisms which allow a civilization to appropriate material from another civilization. As a result, a torrent is sweeping away whatever remains Islamic in the lifestyles, cultures, even food habits of Muslims in the traditional Muslim lands. Instead of an active process

²⁶ This “colonized description” is merely one example of the general intellectual servitude of the educated classes in the Muslim lands. There are numerous other ways to infer the same.

of appropriation and digestion, there is a passive and uncritical receptivity. Whether it is education, culture, science, technology, lifestyle, or literature, a sweeping wave of Westernization is rapidly eroding the Islamic tradition.

One can point out various scientific, technical, economic and social factors that have given the Western civilization an unprecedented ability to reach out to the remotest island on planet Earth and project its social, economic and military power aggressively through various means but this would merely state the obvious; what faces Muslims is the task of understanding and curing the malfunctioning of their own civilization which remains prostrate before this aggression. This is a suggestion to undertake an essential task for the survival of Muslims as a distinct people, living by their beliefs, not by the beliefs of others. What is really wrong with the Islamic polity at this point in its history is not only a rapid eclipsing of its own foundational roots and its own vision of life, but also its state of prostration and weakness in the wake of an aggressive and dominant civilization which is attempting to wipe out all other forms of lifestyle, social and economic institutions and even cultures. It is this internal weakness — rooted deep in the decay of educational, religious and social institutions of the Islamic civilization — that needs to be studied, examined from various angles, stated with increasing clarity and allowed to sink into the consciousness of more than one billion believers who now live on this planet. This constitutes the fourth essential task faced by Muslim intelligentsia today. In order to understand this belittling state, those who would undertake this task will have to understand the roots, and not the branches, of this ailment. These roots lie in various failures, perhaps most of all in the failure of the Islamic educational system. This task also entails numerous practical steps required to address the malaise. During the 1970s, some efforts were made to address the issues pertaining to Islamic education,²⁷ but this movement dissipated without achieving any significance success.

²⁷ These efforts have resulted in various international conferences, such as the “First International Conference on Muslim Education” held in Makkah al-Mukarima in 1977, in which a galaxy of Muslim intellectuals participated and which was instrumental in the emergence of various International Islamic Universities. Then there has been the movement to “Islamize” knowledge, an idea associated with the work of Ismā‘il al-Fārūqī and carried forward by the International Institute of Islamic Thought. Though these efforts have produced an enhanced understanding of the dilemma faced by the Muslim world, the intellectual output of these efforts has not been enough to produce a basic change in the situation. Various International Islamic Universities, established to revive the Islamic tradition of learning, have, likewise, generally followed the norms of the Western Academy. Populated with staff distinguished by their Ph.Ds generally earned in the West, these universities are unable to produce the desired results because there is hardly any feeding-mechanism that can bring fresh blood into these

The Fifth Task: *Understanding the West*

As already pointed out, there is no doubt that both the Islamic and the Western civilizations have claims to universality — a fact that may be the real root cause of the aggression of the West against Islam and Muslims. It should also be pointed out that it is only Islam that poses such resistance to the encroachment of the West; no other contemporary civilization is faced with the dilemma of encountering a Man-made belief system which wishes to replace a Revelation-based belief system. This can be seen from the rapid westernization of China and Japan, which are not merely cultural or economic events; there is something in these civilizations that allowed them to accept the model of the materially successful West. Islam and Islamic civilization, on the other hand, cannot accept the values of the West without committing an act of self-annihilation. This is a fundamental factor in the current challenges and even an otherwise superficial and inaccurate description of the present conflict is forced to recognize it:

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West.²⁸

As compared to the enormous undertaking by the West to understand Islam and Muslim in its own terms, Muslim understanding of the West remains, for the most part, an understanding which is grounded in an intellectual tradition belonging to the West. This has produced a schizophrenic behaviour which makes general attitudes of Muslims toward the West a very complex, ungrounded and unsystematic affair. This fragmented understanding of the West comes from the lack of application of the Islamic criteria for judging civilizations and societies. The task faced by Muslim intellectuals in this area is, therefore, to develop fundamental principles, rooted in the Qur'ān, which can be used to understand the West in a comprehensive manner so that its material prosperity as well as its moral and ethical values form one continuous

higher academic institutions. What is needed is a much more basic effort at raising a new generation of Muslim children from the very early stages of their lives.

²⁸ *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, 217–18.

spectrum of the same phenomenon. Given the long tradition of Islamic scholarship in this area, this should not be difficult undertaking.

The Sixth Task: *West's Understanding of Islam*

This complex and important area has many facets, all of which need a systematic approach for their proper understanding. At the popular level, Islam remains the most maligned religion in the West, perceived and understood by the general populace through its daily media association with acts held most despicable by them: terrorism, violence, subjugation of women, lack of personal freedom, and a host of other issues. These depictions are not merely an act of chance; there is a production factory behind the scene which is working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This factory, in turn, has come into existence through a historical process that goes back to the early anti-Islamic polemics that dominated the two centuries after 1100. This tradition, which continues to this day, naturally has variety within its wider unity, but this variety is of peripheral nature; the core elements of the West's attitude toward Islam and Muslims have remained the same. The brief interlude during which a small group of professionals was enthralled by the achievements of Islamic scientific tradition, remains a passing phase in this history of animosity and as soon as the Western science surpassed the Islamic science, this fleeting appreciation turned into scorn.²⁹ It was perhaps due to these attitudes toward the Islamic scientific tradition that when textbooks were produced, the vast enterprise of science in the Islamic civilization was treated in a marginal fashion, thereby creating an ongoing mechanism for its devaluation.³⁰

²⁹ This phase of the relationship between the two civilizations is one of the most fascinating areas of study for understanding the dynamics of their mutual association. A well-documented addition to our understanding of the British attitudes is Gerald Toomer, *The Study of Arabic in England during the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Also see, M. Feingold, "Oriental Studies" in Nicholas, Tyacke, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and M. Feingold, "Decline and Fall: Arabic Science in Seventeenth Century England" in Jamil Ragep and Sally Ragep, eds., *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 441-69.

³⁰ Even though many new works of history of science have made important contributions to our understanding of the Islamic scientific tradition, most textbooks in the West still gloss over the entire tradition by including a cursory paragraph or two on how the Islamic scientific tradition safeguarded the Greek heritage and served as a conduit for its transference to Europe. This attitude is so entrenched in the West that even "scholarly texts" continue to depict seven hundred years of Islamic scientific tradition in the same colors. See for instance, A. C. Crombie, *The History of Science: From Augustine to Galileo*, 2 vols. in one (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. A. C., 1959, repr. 1970, 1979 and 1995); a more recent example is the work of sociologist Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West* (Cambridge:

The main intent of this article does not allow us to trace the history of West's understanding of Islam,³¹ in any detail, our purpose here is merely to depict its various facets with the hope that a research agenda can be constructed to redress some of the most glaring shortcomings of this important area which dominates public discourse on Islam in the West.

While a particular brand of popular understanding of Islam in the West is propagated through a multi-million dollar media enterprise which serves the religious and political goals of a small subsection of Western population, the Academy makes its own peculiar attempts to understand Islam and Muslim history through the apparatus of a secularized understanding of religion that dominates Western academia. This facet of academic research, which has gained respectability in the West, insists on subjecting the sources of Islam to the same kind of "higher criticism" which has been applied to the Biblical scholarship and which, according to the norms of the Academy, has yielded important results through literary, historical and linguistic analyses of the textual sources. Thus, this scholarship — which ranges in its scope from searching for the authors of the Bible to looking for the historic Jesus (peace

University of Cambridge, 1993). There are numerous other standard histories of science in which the Islamic scientific tradition, which is still the longest known scientific tradition in history, is summarily dismissed as a mere conduit between the "glorious" Greek tradition and the triumphant modern science. Such attitudes breed a caricature of Islamic civilization in the school textbooks, feeding into the general misunderstandings about Islam. The work of a small group of historians who are painstakingly accumulating data about the exact nature of Islamic scientific enterprise and whose assessment already points to numerous quantum leaps and advancements over Greek science, remain confined to the specialists. See, for instance, various studies on Islamic astronomy by David King, E. S. Kennedy and David Pingree. An interesting example is to be found in the Persian manuscript by the fifteenth century Iranian scientist Jamshid ibn Mas'ud ibn Maḥmūd Ghiyāth al-Dīn al-Kāshī (or Kāshānī). The discovery of this manuscript has also helped to push the date of the "decline of Islamic science" well past the generally assumed period of 12th or the 13th century. This work has been edited and translated by Edward S. Kennedy, *The Planetary equatorium of Jamsbid Ghiyath al-Din al-Kashi (d. 1429): an edition of the anonymous Persian manuscript 75 (44b) in the Garrett Collection at Princeton University; being a description of two computing instruments, the plate of heavens and the plate of conjunctions, with a translation and commentary* by E.S. Kennedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). A more recent work is the account of the discovery of two world maps by David King, *World-Maps for Finding the Direction and Distance to Mecca* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1987); also of interest is a work on astronomical instruments, David King, *Islamic Astronomical Instruments* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1987).

³¹ Fortunately, there exist some excellent studies on this subject. One of the most valuable being Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, published in 1960, and hence free of the influence of the recent hostility, but this survey does not cover material beyond 1955; a recent reprint has been issued without update. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000). Also an important addition to this subject is Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, revised ed. 1997)

be on him) — eagerly wishes to attempt a similar deconstruction of the sources of Islam. But therein lies the rub. The application of these techniques to the Qur'ān is simply an aberration of the first order because the Academy has no category for Revelation as the concept is understood in Islam and, hence, the Academy and its methodological tools, which forever remain outside the threshold of the sacred, find themselves in a fix: a self-proclaimed right to investigate all records of humanity seems to confer upon the practitioners an obligation to study the sources in order to understand Islam but the unearthly text of the Qur'ān remains beyond their reach. This predicament has left the Academy in a lurch and, except for a few genuinely important works, all that it has been able to produce by way of scholarship on the Qur'ān is descriptive studies, hostile tracts or apologetics. The vast array of Islamic scholarship on the Qur'ān still remains outside the purview of the Western Academy for various reasons. These, and many other reasons, have made it impossible for both the Academy as well as the general populace in the West to make use of the primary sources of Islam and this limitation has produced a huge amount of secondary scholarship that continues to depict Islam and Muslims in the most hostile fashion.

A third aspect of the West's misunderstanding of Islam is its conflation of Islam and Muslims: for a large majority, Islam is what they hear or see about the Muslims. At the popular level, the ultimate source for producing this fusion is, once again, the powerful media. The presence of a large and significant number of Muslims in the West has done little to improve this situation because their presence in Europe and North America has remained a marginal affair for these societies and although European Muslims are now beginning to make a difference, the struggle to correct popular beliefs about Islam has hardly begun; most Muslim communities in Europe are still struggling to achieve a minimum set of rights as a distinct community within the larger fabric of the societies in which they live. It is astonishing that these centuries-old cultures, proclaiming rationalism as their guiding principle and individual freedom as their main achievement, feel threatened by a piece of cloth worn by young school girls. Muslims are expected to live as non-Muslims in societies where religious freedom is granted to all other faiths.³²

³² Even the harmless veil as a threat. A recent case (October 2003) in point is that of the education department in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany, which refused to hire Fereshta Ludin as a teacher because she refused to take off her headscarf. Ludin took legal action to uphold her right to wear the scarf while teaching. While the German Supreme Court found her right to be legal, it empowered the states to supply legal basis for their ban; several state governments, including Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony and Berlin, quickly announced their intention to enact laws banning teachers in state schools from wearing a scarf. The German constitution states: "Freedom of belief, of conscience and the freedom of faith and world outlook are inviolable",

These attitudes in the West leave little hope to believe that Islam will soon be understood in the West as it really is. This means that the responsibility for correcting West's understanding of Islam falls on the shoulders of Muslims who need to make a large-scale effort for opening paths to Islam. Notwithstanding the present climate of fear, suspicion, and hostility, there is a need for this effort because when an average Westerner tries to understand Islam through its primary sources, he or she does not find adequate tools to do so. Thus there is a need to produce a large number of new interpretive, descriptive and guiding works on the Qur'an and *Hadith*. These works are needed at various levels, including those accessible to lay persons.

The Seventh Task: *Islam and Muslims in a Transformed World*

A seventh task for the Muslim community is to understand the new realities of the post-modern global societies, shaped and driven by technology. This is a complex issue which has produced a great deal of confusion in the Muslim world with accompanied reactions which cover a wide spectrum of responses. Sometimes couched in terms such as Islam's encounter with modernity, this complex issue is assumed to be basically related to the fact that the modernity and all that it entails has been suddenly lashed onto the Muslim societies through technology. This thrust, it is argued, which has brought twenty-first century products to the remote villages where people were living in the age of ox-driven ploughs, has produced rippling effects which are tearing down the very foundations of these societies. This intrusion, which was already recognized in the previous century by many perceptive minds, has now become a torrential current. This view of "encounter" between Islam and modernity claims that all that Islam and Muslims need to do is digest this new impact. This prognosis, which was common in the middle of the twentieth century, was not limited to Islam and Muslims only but was considered to be a general description of the impact of science on the non-Western cultures.

and article 33 states: "All German citizens have access to every public office according to their own aptitudes, qualifications and professional abilities. The exercise of civil and civic rights, the admission to public office, as well as the rights acquired in the public service, apply irrespective of religious confession. No disadvantage may arise from affiliation or non-affiliation to a particular confession or world view." In fact, Ludin had lost her case in all the lower courts before it finally came before the Supreme Court. The arguments were always the same: A teacher is a civil servant of the state; he or she represents an "authority figure" for the pupils. The state must uphold neutrality, in order to protect the freedom of religion of pupils following different faiths. Since Ludin conducts her lessons wearing an article of clothing demonstrating her religion, and which her young and impressionable pupils cannot avoid seeing, she is unsuitable to carry out her job with the required neutrality. See more details at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/oct2003/scar-o09.shtml>, accessed December 15, 2003.

Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976) — the celebrated physicist whose 1927 Indeterminacy Principle had turned the laws of physics into statements about relative, not absolute, certainties — had recognized this as early as 1958 when he raised the idea that, as compared to the West, modern science was going to have a very different kind of impact on the rest of the world: “One has to remember”, he had remarked,

. . . that every tool carries with it the spirit by which it has been created. In those parts of the world in which modern science has been developed, the primary interest has been directed for a long time toward practical activity, industry and engineering combined with a rational analysis of the outer and inner conditions for such activity. Such people will find it rather easy to cope with the new ideas since they have had time for a slow and gradual adjustment to the modern scientific methods of thinking. In other parts of the world these ideas would be confronted with the religious and philosophical foundations of native culture. Since it is true that the results of modern physics do touch such fundamental concepts as reality, space and time, the confrontation may lead to entirely new developments which cannot be foreseen. One characteristic feature of this meeting between modern science and the older methods of thinking will be its complete internationality. In this exchange of thoughts the one side, the old tradition, will be different in different parts of the world, but the other side will be the same everywhere and therefore the results of this exchange will be spread over all areas in which the discussions take place.³³

But this view has serious limitations. It may be true for non-Western cultures other than those based on the Revelation-based civilization of Islam, but for Islam and Muslims, it is certainly not a question of not “having had enough time for a slow and gradual adjustment”; their encounter with Western technologies is rooted in much deeper soil and it is not merely a question of adjusting to the “modern scientific methods of thinking” but of fundamental shifts in worldviews. The brevity of Heisenberg’s remark should not be misleading, however, for he does note elsewhere in the same book that:

[S]uch remarks should not be misunderstood as an underestimation of the damage that may be done or has been done to old cultural traditions by the impact of technical progress. But since this whole development has for a long time passed far beyond any control by human forces, we have to accept it as one of the most essential features of our time and must try to connect it as much as possible with the human values that have been the aim of the older cultural and religious traditions.³⁴

³³ Heisenberg, Werner, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1958, 1999), 27–28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 202–3.

This dilemma of connecting technologies with values is certainly one of the most important dilemmas of Western civilization itself, but because of its remarkable malleability stemming from its lack of grounding in Revelation, this civilization keeps adjusting its values to the dictates of technologies and market forces, but for the Islamic civilization, such an “adjustment” is unthinkable. Yet, technology-driven market economies and lifestyles are simply unavoidable for any civilization. Thus various questions arise about the avenues available to the *Ummah* which can make this encounter with technology and technologically driven social and cultural patterns less disruptive to its values which arise from its relationship with God. In other words, the task faced by Muslim intellectuals is to explore, in the clearest possible terms, those avenues for Islamic polity which will preserve its cultural and spiritual values in the face of a rapid penetration of an alien tradition into its body through modern technologies. Numerous aspects of this question have already vexed several generations of scholars, thinkers, reformers and politicians but the true impact of this dilemma has yet to be understood and solutions need to be prescribed for those changes which seem to be inevitable with the adoption of technologies as if they are built into the microchips.

But the technological challenge — and there are many aspects of this challenge which need to be explored — is, by no means the only challenge post-World War II global realities have posed for the Islamic civilization; there are numerous others. How can Muslim communities re-establish a new order so that the Qur’ānic concept of *Ummah* is once again operative at various levels, including the social, economic and political? This fundamental ingredient of the Islamic civilization has been sometimes ridiculed by the secularized Muslim intellectuals as the relic of an other era, an anachronism which must be buried. Their prognosis appears credible because of the stark ground realities of post-World War II history which has seen brutal and long wars among Muslim states. These intellectuals also deny that such a concept was *ever* operative in Muslim history and provide numerous examples of conflicts within the community of believers in support of their claims. Thus, the challenge faced by Muslim intellectuals is (i) to explain this fundamental Qur’ānic concept and its relevance to the contemporary realities; and (ii) to show paths that would lead to the emergence of new social and political processes which will break down the artificial barriers created among Muslims through the establishment of nation-states in the post-World War era. The processes that have led to the gradual unification of Europe since the World War II and the emergence and the continuous evolution of the European Union are instructive examples. This gradual process — which had started with the removal of conditions which made it difficult for people and goods to

cross borders — then led to a natural emergence of cross-border trade, numerous social and cultural links between people and institutions and so many other important changes which, in turn, were institutionalized through deliberate policies. These, and hundreds of other small and large steps taken to lead Europe toward a social, economic and political entity, are a remarkable example of the wisdom and statesmanship of those who have contributed to this historical process that promises a leading role for Europe in the affairs of the twenty-first century.

There is no dearth of men and women who have a clear understanding of the Qur'ānic teachings as well as of mechanisms and processes that contribute toward greater unity in the *Ummah*, but they have not been allowed to play a decisive role in the affairs of their fellow believers; instead, the Muslim world has been ruled in the post-World War era by men, and some women, who have led the Islamic polity toward its present fatal crises. Nevertheless, history proves that at times of crises, the Muslim *Ummah* has always found a way out and there is no reason to despair that an effort based on sincerity would fail this time.

The Eighth Task: *How to Break the Vicious Circle?*

The vicious circle runs like this: a yet to be explained internal weakness led to the colonization of the Muslim world, the colonization led to the dismantling of the institutional structure that sustained the Islamic civilization as well as to the implantation of a new institutional structure not conducive to the natural growth of Islamic civilization and these two surgical operations led to the emergence of a weak and unstable Muslim world, in conflict with itself and unable to deal with the changed global realities. In order to change this situation, new institutions are needed which would make a grand effort of reclaiming Islam's formidable tradition of learning and produce men and women who can take their societies out of its present predicament. But this new set of institutions cannot come into existence because there is no room for its existence in the presence of the present mechanisms of control of material and human resources through institutions implanted by the colonizers. This vicious circle leads to a cul-de-sac. The problem, then, is to understand how to break this vicious circle and acquire a "breathing space" in which change can be initiated. How can the Muslim world achieve this breathing space? Where is the island where a nursery can be established from where unspoiled and purely bred seedlings can then be harvested for implantation in the soil of Muslim lands. This is the crux of the matter. This is the challenge that needs to be understood. There is no reason to believe that it is insurmountable given the historical examples of the *Musliḥūn* mentioned in

the Qur'ān, who had to work in similar circumstances, and the Prophetic traditions so copiously preserved for the believers.

The Qur'ānic guidance and wisdom is the unpolluted and ever-fresh fountainhead for the believers in all matters but it is especially worthy of exploring and utilizing for the breaking of this vicious circle. All change occurs through a nuclear activity that generates tremendous amount of energy for a chain reaction. There is something inherently natural to this aspect of the Qur'ānic teachings, something built into the very mould of humanity itself by the Creator. Like the slow appearance of the first light of dawn, a new social, political and economic reality had dawned in Madinah during the Prophetic residence in that city between his Hijrah and his departure from Earth and then from this nucleus, the vast body of believers grew. The renewal of the Islamic polity will happen through a similar process. This model of change and the example of the life of the Prophet (peace be on him) are two essential resources for the Muslim intellectuals for developing a large number of nuclei in various Muslim societies. These may be in the form of institutions which can train young men and women with the specific task of changing the societies for a new Islamic commitment and for a reorientation. This process of reform and renewal, which has always operated in Muslim societies, needs to be actively planned and executed by a new breed of scholars who are rooted in Islamic worldview and who also understand the present challenges. This is not an easy task but, at the same time, it is not an impossible task.

Who is to Undertake these Tasks?

There is very little hope that any government in the Muslim world would devote resources for the undertaking of these tasks. There are numerous reasons for this which need not be stated here. In the absence of this possibility, the responsibility for undertaking the process of revival and reform lies on the Muslim community itself.

This responsibility, which is clearly a religious duty as well, may be undertaken by a group of Muslims who organize themselves for this specific purpose. There are already thousands, if not millions of individual Muslims throughout the traditional lands of Islam as well as in the West who have been thinking about these matters — a fact that can be inferred from various publications and movements which have appeared since World War II. There have been numerous attempts at the social and political levels, even institutions were established but the critical mass required for an effective change has not yet been established. What is being proposed here is a body of Muslim scholars, working under the tentative title of Muslim Scholars' Forum (MSF), especially constituted to undertake the task of establishing nuclei of

reform and revival. MSF will have to be a fiercely independent body, unencumbered by any pre-conceived agenda or ideology. Its goals need to be extremely clear, practical and contextual.

Fortunately, there are examples in Muslim history where similar “low” points in the *Ummah*’s social, moral, political and military strengths have been reversed by diligent application of the Prophetic model and it has always been the learned who came forward with solutions. The current torrential flow beckons Muslim scholars to rise one more time and come forward with solutions to the myriad challenges now faced by the *Ummah*. The inherent truth and power of the guidance of the Divine Revelation is a sure and straight path. In a crumbling world, beset with a multitude of spiritual, moral and ethical problems, the message of Islam offers a new hope, just as it did when it was first revealed. No one has ownership to this message; it is here for all who wish to be guided to the supreme bliss. At a time when the institutions based on secular philosophies and ideologies have brought the whole humanity to the brink of a global disaster, the undistorted Divine principles set forth and preserved in the Discerning Qur’ān and exemplified by the Prophet (peace be on him) offer a message of renewal and revival. To those who are steadfast and look towards the future with hope and strength of Faith, this message provides the ingredients from which a program of revival and reform can be culled. The time for a definitive action is now; the lack of action is an action in itself; those who wish to remain aloof to the suffering and hopes of their fellow human beings, must do this with the awareness that they are making a choice between supporting this calamity and its removal. As for those who have grasped the challenge and have the resilience and strength of faith, time for action has arrived.

