

The Crisis of Thought and Ijtihad

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The Muslim mind experienced a crisis of thought when, during the early centuries of the Islamic era, ijthihad began to be viewed as limited to legal matters rather than as a methodology for dealing with all aspects of life. This limited understanding engendered a malaise that allowed taqlid to attain such prominence and respectability that its cancerous, constricting, and irrelevant fiqh spread throughout Muslim life. Had ijthihad retained more of its lexical meaning and creativity, and had fiqh been considered only one of its uses, perhaps Muslims would have overcome many of the problems that confronted them. However, this particularization of ijthihad confined the Muslim mind, and taqlid eventually led to the paralysis of its creative abilities.

Had ijthihad remained a way of life for Muslims as Allah commanded, they would not have fallen behind in establishing the Islamic sciences necessary for their society and civilization. They also would not have had to watch the reins of leadership fall pass to the West, whose most important qualification was its ability to engage in creative and scientific reasoning. Although its intellectual tradition was tainted with pagan Greek influences, the West achieved world leadership. Had Muslims taken up those sciences and laid the foundations of society on the basis of *tawhīd* (unity), the face of the earth would be different today and the state of civilization itself would be far more felicitous than it is at present.

Before ijthihad was confined to the purely legalistic framework of fiqh, the Muslim mind was enlightened, eager to deal with all manner of thought, and able to meet challenges, generate solutions, and achieve its goals. Had it not been for taqlid and its subduing of the Muslim mind, that mind would have achieved great things. Certainly, a mind with its beginnings in the verse, "Read! in the name of your Lord Who created . . ." should be more than able to renew the ummah's mentality, to continually adjust to changing circumstances, and to initiate the sciences of civilization at a time when the West was overrun by wild forest tribes.

What Do We Mean by Ijtihad?

For the reasons indicated above, we are calling for a new type of ijthihad. Rather than the ijthihad specified by the scholars of *uṣūl*, which will

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be dealt with in a later article, we speak of an *ijtihād* that is more of a methodology for thought. Such an understanding would allow the Muslim mind to participate in an intellectual *jihad*, a *jihad* launched with the aim of generating ideas and building a new Muslim identity, mentality, and personality. This *jihad* would apply to all fields of knowledge and would seek to make the *ummah* qualified to shoulder its responsibilities as regards vicegerency (*khilāfah*) and also to be a median nation (*wasatīyah*). While such an *ijtihād* would apply to legalistic, juridical, and jurisprudential *fiqh*, it would also apply to such new forms of *fiqh* as the *fiqh* of religiosity (*fiqh al tadayyun*) and dialogue (*da'wah*), as well as to all fields requiring the *ummah*'s attention and creative thinking.

Ijtihad: The Ally of Jihad

Both "ijtihād" and "jihad" are derived from the lexical root, "j-h-d," and both seek the same goal: releasing all beings from devotion to the created so that they may be free to practice devotion to the Creator, to take them from the injustice of religious deviation and superstition to the justice of Islam, and from the restrictions of the physical world and limited thinking to the wide horizons of Islam and the Qur'an. It is for this reason that *ijtihād* is counted among the pillars of Islam in the same way that *jihad* is. Without *jihad* there would be no *ummah*, and without *ijtihād* the *ummah* would have no vitality. Thus both may be considered as essential and continual responsibilities.

Once *taqlid* in matters of *fiqh* established itself as a pervasive intellectual attitude, all that remained of *ijtihād* was its extremely rare use—maybe once in a century—in individual Muslim thinkers and scholars. Their role was of inestimable importance and was, in some ways, as important as that of modern parliamentary and democratic institutions.

Ijtihad was the methodological means that allowed Muslims to confront ignorance, oppression, and deviation. But when it was abandoned by the Muslims themselves, all manner of trouble beset them. In closing the doors to *ijtihād*, Muslims believed that they were solving their legislative problems. In reality, however, all they succeeded in doing was crippling their own intellectual powers. Even so, there has never been a time when the call to revive *ijtihād* was entirely silenced. Such calls were never enough to extract the *ummah* from the intellectual crisis in which it had become mired and, as a result, *ijtihād* was left mainly to heretics and deceivers, and, finally, to orientalist. If a true Muslim were to articulate ideas to which people were unaccustomed or to announce his/her readiness to practice *ijtihād*, he/she would become an immediate target of ridicule and other abuse by the supporters of *taqlid*.

The *ummah* must understand that *ijtihād* provides it with the fundamental means to recover its identity and to reestablish its place in world

civilization. Without *ijtihad*, the Muslim mind will never rise to the levels envisioned for it by Islam, and the *ummah* will not take its rightful place in the world. Unless the call to *ijtihad* becomes a widespread intellectual trend, there is little hope that the *ummah* will be able to make any useful contribution to world civilization or correct its direction, build its own culture, or reform its society. To liberate the Muslim mind, the *ummah* needs *ijtihad* in every aspect of its life. If it is to play its preordained role, it must undertake a new reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, study its past, analyze its present and, by means of these, ensure its future.

Right or Wrong, the *Mujtahid* is Rewarded

No mere call, announcement, or advertisement will result in *ijtihad* or produce a *mujtahid*. Such developments depend upon the preparation of needed intellectual and cultural atmospheres, for a *mujtahid* is one of the *ummah's* most gifted and accomplished scholars. When the Prophet spoke of *ijtihad* and how one who performed it correctly received a double reward, and how one who made a mistake received one reward, he was addressing an *ummah* that understood that only a few people could undertake it. The resulting responsibility was so great that even those few individuals who dared to undertake it did not always announce their opinions if they seemed contrary to those of majority or the rulers.

It is obvious that any mention of *ijtihad* and its importance should be accompanied by serious efforts to bring about the right sort of intellectual and cultural atmosphere. The first step towards this goal is to create an environment of complete freedom of thought and expression. If people lack the courage to perform *ijtihad*, they find it even more difficult to perform *ijtihad* and accept the consequent responsibilities. How many intellectual positions are more difficult to defend than military positions?

In the present straightened circumstances, no one who can generate sound ideas or perform even partial *ijtihad* should hesitate to announce the results of his/her *ijtihad*. No one who is aware of the fact that there is a reward even for those whose *ijtihad* is incorrect has an excuse to refrain from playing a role or from giving the *ummah* the benefit of his/her ideas and creativity. After all, it is possible that those ideas might become the foundations of a new cultural and intellectual order within the *ummah*. Nor should anyone continue to listen to those who warn of the dangers inherent in allowing *ijtihad* to be undertaken. The *ummah* has heard all of their arguments, and nothing they say has been of any help.

The Lexical and Technical Meanings of *Ijtihad*

In the Arabic dictionary, the root "j-h-d" is defined as the exertion of effort on a matter that requires it. In all of its different applications, the

term denotes the expenditure of mental and intellectual effort. A mujtahid, therefore, is a serious scholar who researches and studies all of the sources, information, statistics, and available material about a subject until he/she is satisfied that he/she has done everything in his/her power to learn about the subject in question. After expending all of that effort, it may reasonably be assumed that his/her opinion is reliable. This is why al Ghazālī defined ijihad as "the expending, on the part of a mujtahid, of all what he/she is capable of in order to seek knowledge of the Sharī'ah's injunctions." In a further clarification of this definition, he then wrote: "Complete ijihad happens when the mujtahid expends all of his/her energies in seeking, to a point where he/she is satisfied that no more can be done." This definition refers to ijihad in the field of law and indicates that the effort expended must be exhaustive and emanate from those who are qualified. If an unqualified person undertakes these same efforts, one cannot say that ijihad has been performed.

How Can the Problems of Taqlid and Dependency Be Overcome?

In order to extract ourselves from the clutches of taqlid so that we can create the circumstances under which ijihad can flourish, we must define carefully our intellectual premises. In doing so, however, we must be careful to avoid the modern western paradigm which, for too many reasons to list, has become the center of every academic circle and the starting place for the majority of modern thinkers. One major reason for doing so is that the western paradigm is based on secular materialism, an outlook that rejects revelation outright. It views only that which can be measured or quantified as a suitable subject for serious study. Those who have come under the influence of the West define knowledge as information acquired either through the senses or experimentation. All of the contemporary social sciences and humanities, as well as the natural sciences, are founded on this premise. It is for this reason that modern theories on politics, society, economics, and ethics have their roots in the same definition. Secularism, therefore, has become the basis for all intellectual and academic research, analysis, and synthesis. Thinkers and scholars the world over have now accepted the secular paradigm of knowledge.

The acceptance of this western model has only served to increase the ummah's intellectual dependency. At the same time, it has helped to eradicate whatever traits distinguished nonwestern cultures and civilizations from their counterparts in the West, and has perhaps had a role in the latter's outright plundering of the former. Unless the mentality of dependency is overcome, there can be no ijihad or intellectual ingenuity.