Review Article

An Early Crescent: The Future of Knowledge and the Environment in Islam*

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An Early Crescent is about the exciting and greatly anticipated emergence of ideas which will inaugurate the rededication and renewal of Muslim effort and spirituality. It is about the process of intellectually taking charge of the environment and the discourse dominated by the West. There are two dimensions to this process of taking charge. One is the Islamization of Knowledge, and entails mastering the dominant idiom and then, from a position of strength and confidence, creating a uniquely Islamic paradigm in the field of knowledge. The second dimension recognizes that "discourse" is not just academic knowledge, but that discourse and knowledge are also inextricably tied into the environments and ecologies surrounding the Islamic community.

The book is structured between the overview of Anwar Ibrahim and the epilogue of Abdullah Omar Naseef, two people deeply involved in contemporary politics, thinking, and policy making. Between this are writings about two dimensions of the process of taking charge of the dominant discourse, with the first part considering the Islamization of Knowledge and the epistemological characterization of the contemporary discourse, dominated as it is by the West, and the second part dealing with the way the dominant discourse configures the environment and ecology surrounding everyone in general, and the way it constrains the ummah specifically.

Ziauddin Sardar's critique of the Islamization work plan centers around its veneer of positivism and the concommitant reification of the disciplines. Certainly there are overtones of positive theory building in the work plan, but it must also be remembered that the work plan is not designed to be revolutionary as much as corrective, and that it is aimed not so much at intellectuals as at students through the production of textbooks. And textbooks are certainly examples of knowledge-production. But no one who reads the impassioned prose of al Fārūqī can imagine that here is a man who would simply pass an Islamic wand over the disciplines to Islamize them. On the contrary, his descriptions of contemporary Muslim alienation imply that we

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must strive to gain autonomy and distance from Western disciplines.

The work plan was not designed to be the final word on the disciplines, for it produces textbooks, not horizon-expanding works. As the horizon expander par excellence writes about the Western Thought Project: "It is important to distinguish between two levels in planning the project: the pedagogic level focusing on mastering the modern disciplines and producing authoritative textbooks to meet the educational needs of Muslim institutions [which was the work plan's objective]. . . . The other level focuses on the broader intellectual and cultural dimensions of the Western Heritage and assumes the educational goal within this broader perspective" (Abul-Fadl, IIIT).

Because the Islamization of Knowledge took its lead from the already established field of Islamic economics, another problem crept in. The assumption was that as with Islamic economics, "Western disciplines, with the addition and subtraction of a few values and principles, could be radically transformed and Islamized" (p. 39). Sardar's group has made the valid point that in the case of Islamic economics, we are still *homo economicus* and not *homo islamicus* (cf. Asaria). This is probably due mostly to the pressure emerging nation-states exerted on Islamic economics. Interested less in justice than in maintaining a neocolonial status quo (with an Islamic veneer), leaders of nation-states asked for and received a system of economics which had more to do with socialism or capitalism than with Islam.

Parvez Manzoor's essay is a delight to read. He has drawn very poignant images of the Muslim intellectual, who is necessarily the person who must sell his/her soul for a seat at the table with the other intellectuals. But the Muslim intellectual must end the debilitating fascination with the West and begin a process of genuine rediscovery. This rediscovery is to be driven by a balance between or "dual allegiance" to transcendence and immanence. This is necessary to avoid the trap of historicism, which would see history itself as a great evil. Thus, while the West talks of an emancipation in history, the Indian tradition talks of emancipation from history. The Muslim has no such options, and must take charge once again of the world in order to fulfill the sacred duty of enjoining good and rejecting evil.

Manzoor's dismissal of Sufism (whatever that means) is that "though Sufism has undoubtedly enriched Islamic culture in a number of ways, the philosophy and psychology of the self which is its special contribution to Islamic thought is not amenable to the growth of social and political knowledge" (p. 68). Sufism's preoccupation with the eternity of the self devalorizes the problem of society and history, if it does not render it totally superfluous, he remarks. Manzoor of course acknowledges that "the actual historical Sufi practice . . . is often in dire contradiction to the Sufi theory" (p. 81). Given this admission of tremendous diversity of "Sufi" thought, perhaps this is an ideal time to rethink Sufism in light of the impossibility of reconciling the

belief that Sufis are apolitical with the Sanūsīyah and the *ṭuruq* in Central Asia, along with many other examples. Manzoor concludes that Sufism cannot contribute to devising concrete policy options at the level of the state or even at that of civil society. Perhaps it is the nation-state, and not the Sufi vision, which is the problem?

One of Manzoor's best insights is the power of the concept of *ẓulm* for informing Islamic critical research. He shows this concept to be very powerful in understanding the West without a debilitating fascination, in order to bring out what Abul-Fadl calls the disenchantment of the West (*entzauberung*) and the empathetic reading of the West (*einfühl*). The concept of *ẓulm* and *ẓulm al nafs* would contribute to a critical theory of the self and the world that is derived from the Qur'an and which would "go a long way toward ending the spell of spuriousness which victimizes Islamic thought at present" (p. 60). This kind of conceptualization would strongly condemn nuclear weapons, for instance, and opens up "endless possibilities for the radicalization of the Muslim consciousness and promises the advent of an authentic discourse about the nature of global oppression and institutional victimization" (p. 86). But I find it difficult to understand why Manzoor, after saying this, could find so off-base the so-called Sufi idea that the socio-economic and political problems bedevilling Muslim society are symptomatic of the spiritual malaise afflicting individual believers.

Munawar Ahmad Anees displays much excitement about the Information Age, and terms like "spectacular," "fascinating," and "continually unfolding story" suggest that the video-arcade rapid-fire style of the Computer Age is more about fun than knowledge. This is a mode of thinking which denigrates the serious, spiritual, contemplative knowledge characteristic of the inner dimension of Islam. His criticism of Seyyed Hossein Nasr as "oft-nostalgic" betrays his lack of understanding about a traditional world Nasr describes where every action was permeated with spirituality, and the loss of these times is not merely sentimental. When Gai Eaton describes the comb-maker Burckhardt met in Fes, he remarked that "to regret the passing of this old man and of others like him has nothing to do with sentimentality. It has to do with fear, the fear that once we have become quite useless—totally unsanctified and unsanctifiable—we shall be fit only for the bonfire which awaits the debris of a ruined world."[1]

Anees does make the distinction between knowledge and information, but this distinction is so vague as to be utterly unworkable. He expresses incredulity that anyone could suggest that the proliferation of information is the decrease of knowledge, a position which is even held after all by computer consultants who have noticed with dismay that the office which is computerized

[1]Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 212.

is often less efficient than it was before. Anees writes: "It is rather odd to postulate that the quantitative increase in information in the contemporary world is inherently the loss of knowledge or that incremental information is inversely proportional to the deficiency of wisdom" (p. 99). But it is not odd at all. Information is very easily substituted for knowledge, and the sophistication of the Western discourse is very likely tied into its great access to information (which makes one look smart) and its consequent lack of humility. The infophobia of the Muslim world may not be caused simply by our "dabbling in the nostalgic past," but may in fact mean that meaning still counts for something among the sophia-philes.

The sum total of knowledge may one day fit on an object the size of the Rosetta stone, Anees quotes. Is this not the total reduction of knowledge to its constituent data?

Although Anees praises the *ḥuffāẓ*, he comments that the human expert is certainly superfluous in this age of electronic memory. Although he would like to see memorization and recitation never come to a halt, he questions the cognitive relevance of those practices. His closing challenge is "how could the model of the city state of Madinah be operationalized in today's informatized society?" (p. 120). The two "ominous challenges" facing the ummah are the manifest technological superiority of the West and the "slow and steady epistemological transformation that is likely to spread through infinite products of the cognitive revolution" (p. 120). It seems that the intellectual Muslim world has already succumbed unwittingly to the most pernicious forays of the modern Western world. It does not take an *'ālim* to recognize the pervasive quality of this modern world, where

> culture is transmitted not through education or through a genteel propaganda of superiority, but subliminally, subcutaneously: in the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the music you hear, the television you watch, the newspapers you read. You do not eat a hamburger, the universal "food," without taking in the American way of life with it; you do not watch television without accepting the American worldview; you do not listen to pop music . . . without losing your ability to hear other voices, your ability to reflect, weigh, meditate; you do not read the newspapers without losing your sense of truth.[2]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's excellent essay addresses the naive idea that science commenced with Islam and played havoc with Christian Europe, but that science will somehow be fine once it is reappropriated by Muslims. Nasr

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[2]A. Sivanadan, "New Circuits of Imperialism," *Race & Class* (1989): 12.

points out that it is not so simple. The critical examination of Greek thought which the ulama' performed before has not been repeated, and we do not therefore have at the present time an Islamic perspective on modern Western science. Nasr writes that "the abdication of the ulama' from this important task allowed the even greater spread of Western science, under the banner of a 'religious' colored positivism, into the Islamic world without an effective Islamic response" (p. 129). Such a response would have allowed the Islamic world to digest this science and make it part of its own organism through assimilation as well as rejection, rather than through the wholesale, uncritical swallowing of Western science and technology. Two factors made such a digestion impossible. First, science came hard on the heels of political and military superiority, whereas Greek ideas came in the form of naked texts. Second, modern Western science changes very rapidly, and so there is no time to examine science before it becomes even further evolved.

Nasr calls for more efforts in creating a scientific vocabulary in Islamic languages, a development which would go a long way in demystifying science, stripping it of its materialistic and reductionistic trappings, and bringing it under the jurisdiction of Islam. English is becoming still more the language of science, and such a program, desirable as it may be, seems even less possible now.

Nasr ends with a balanced perspective which may provide a good foundation for a genuine strategy toward modern Western science. He says that "one can neither ignore this science as if it did not exist, nor cultivate it [as] if it were not based on the forgetfulness of God and His ever present power within His creation" (p. 138).

Kirmani also calls for an extensive critique of Western civilization, and indeed this does seem to be mandatory for the Muslim intellectual. He makes the comment that perhaps modern science has not flourished in the ummah precisely because the underpinnings of this science are so against the character of the Muslims. Kirmani thus sees that modern Western science is not simply a content-neutral object, but is in fact the purveyor of a paradigm opposed to Islam. He cites Manzoor, saying that intents in science are prior to actions, and there are no facts without values; facts are taken not given, made not observed. This brings out some of the more radical ideas of the book, especially the idea that science must not simply be appropriated, rather that it must be completely rediscovered. We cannot take a bit of science without taking the whole baggage of unwanted concepts; so instead we must develop our Islam in order to rework and recreate an Islamic science and thought.

Ateshin puts together a superb examination of the urban environment of most Muslims. He demonstrates the power of a new terminology drawn from Arabic-Islamic concepts. He expresses the founding conceptual framework for any Islamic examination of the built environment as the *'imārah*

which makes *insān* comfortable and is conducive to *'ubūdīyah*. With these three terms, he begins a truly Islamic analysis. As Gai Eaton remarked, it is impossible to describe what we know to be true in a language from which all the good words have been removed. Nasr has also described the secularization of European languages. Architecture for man so he may worship, with worship already an alien concept to the modern West, still does not mean an *'imārah* conducive to the *'ubūdīyah* of *insān*. The sad condition of the ummah, as al Fārūqī remarked on more than one occasion, is most apparent in its built environment, which is a poor copy of the environment produced by a worldview since the Renaissance that has been a menace to the human race (p. 164). "Hippodamean grid-iron patterns, houses built as pretentious villas, and skyscraper glass and marble towers of financial institutions, arresting the skyline of cities as modern versions of ancient pagan temples, have become universal symbols in lands inhabited by Muslims as well" (p. 164). Manzoor pointed out that the Muslim is only really comfortable during the few moments of *ṣalāh*, and a look at the Muslims' *'imārah* confirms the terrible fact that the Muslim is usually forced to do acrobatics for *wuḍu'*, in a home unsuited to any of the practices of Islam, in an environment in which he/she can never be comfortable, an environment which leads to nothing but the forgetting of Allah.

From his examination of the built environment, Ateshin is able to see that "in succumbing to alien epistemologies, Muslim thinkers have not realized that every term of every science field is colored by the culture of its origins" (p. 167). Ateshin talks of patterns of permissibility and a worldview which springs from Islam. "We are thus presented with a purposeful universe, created in balance and with a value-centered framework, within which *insān* may implement his moral capacity through its reconstruction" (p. 170). Having read Hassan Fathy carefully, Ateshin praises him as the single rose in the architectural ugliness of modern Egypt. "One can easily see in this book," Ateshin says about Fathy's work, "the diametrically opposed attitudes towards the environment which exist between the protagonists of modern technologies, in their wasteful efforts to use the false aesthetic principles of modernity while spending money to alleviate the resulting discomforts, and the traditionally employed (appropriate) technologies that achieve maximum comfort at the minimum cost, while also generating vocabularies unmatched in their honesty and beauty" (p. 178).

Ayyub Malik has developed a penetrating insight which is devastating to anyone who would like to let the modern world in by the back door, as it were. His radical politics are developed from the condition of the ummah's ecologies and environment, where "for the first time in the history of the Muslim city, new cities were created which were neither shaped by their citizens nor founded in their own needs and perceptions and, above all, not

meant to be accessible to most of them. A new urban order of dominance and dependence has been created where the rulers were separate from the ruled, politics from the polity, powerful from the weak, rich from the poor, educated from the illiterate, and the decision-makers from those for whom the decisions were to be taken" (p. 198). The alienation of the Muslims is directly related to the environment from which they were alienated. "The human and environmental deprivation in the vast post-independence slums can only be understood, if at all, by reference to the new areas built by the governments and the new ruling groups" (p. 201). The alien environments "are characterized by pretentious and inappropriate arrangements; bizarre and wasteful use of materials and resources; and worse, facile use of traditional forms and motifs to produce caricatures of historical similitude—a more effective method indeed of undermining culture and heritage than even that practised by the foreign rulers themselves a little earlier" (p. 201).

The post-independence industrial revolution so eagerly awaited has brought with it problems which are inherent to the gadgets and products of the modern world. Thus, urbanization is directly tied into the need to absorb surplus labor and stimulate growth. You do not get the car without the factory and the shifts and the pollution and the locking into an international economic system not of your making or under your control. The transfer of wealth, visibly from the generous North to the South, is actually from the poorer nations to the richer ones. And this is not a coincidence or an accident. You cannot have one without the other. And so the people who used to have a dignity which came from their being able to change the built environment are now the victims of disease, poverty, malnutrition, poor health, poor sanitary conditions, lack of employment, education, and living with excessive pollution, noise, and a poor quality of life (cf. p. 201). It is these scholars of the *'imārah* who can see the real consequences of modernization.

Ayyub is sensitive to the core-periphery problems that occur within a nation. Fully aware of the political situation, Ayyub asks rhetorically, "Is it possible to plan a city for Muslims without addressing the central question of distributive justice—of land and resources, of clean water and air, of education, health and hygiene, of freedom from hunger, disease and oppression?" The Ijmālīs are bent on planning, ready to plan a new Madinah in an informatized society. This planning, worse than just being ineffective, is too likely to further undermine Islam and the ummah and make our condition even more destitute and alienated.

In the concluding essay, Abdullah Omar Naseef perceives that "through the spread of technology, the secular values of the dominant culture of our times are reaching every corner of the globe and are making strong inroads in our own societies" (p. 224). Naseef cautions against the backdoor entrance of secularism in the name of science, progress, and humanity, but asks that

the intellectual not simply react to secularism but that he/she transcend it. Against the traditionalists, he insists that the *da'wah* of the Prophet (ṢAAS) was not in simply sweeping away all that existed, but of harnessing, molding, and shaping it in accordance with a new set of values in order to bring forth the new order from the old (cf. p. 229). But if we apply Manzoor's criteria of *zulm* and *zulm al nafs*, we may need to reject categorically the modern world as the *ẓālim*, because any harnessing of *zulm* would entail an unacceptable compromise in religion.

Naseef also calls for a revitalization of the concept of *shūrā*, and this certainly is a very important issue. *Shūrā*, he remarks pointedly, is a basic principle of Islam that should be used in organizations, in government, and in administration.

This group of thinkers is very much aware of the apologist subservience to the modern West that has dominated Muslim thinking in this century, and it is very careful to try to derive its inspiration from the direct sources of Islam and not unconsciously from the dominant culture. There is, however, no clear consensus on just how much the modern West permeates through science and other forms of discourse. The people studying the *'imārah* are very clear that the penetration is without exception harmful. The process all thinkers call for is the reconstruction of the environment and discourse from the sources and inspiration of Islam. Some understand that this reconstruction must take place in ways that will resonate with traditional forms, while not duplicating those forms, and that will oppose modernity. The others seem to believe, somewhat in the manner of utopians, that an Islamic discourse can be reconstructed without reference to politics and the current inability of a Muslim in a modern or postmodern society to recreate his/her Islam in the given spatial environment.

Although Manzoor's insistence that the Muslim ummah must be world-affirming and must be active in the world, there is nevertheless a serious tilting and inclination towards knowledge which would lead to the control and domination of the material world. Gai Eaton has argued that the purveyors of modern science were a people "indifferent to the essential but devoured by the inessential and therefore immensely skilled in dealing with inessentials. Like Mussolini in a later period, they knew how to make the trains run on time."[3]

Read this book for some provocative and powerful ideas. This book should stimulate fruitful ideas and lively discussions.

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[3]Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 21.