

THE ANTHROPOCOSMIC VISION IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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I take the expression "anthropocosmic vision" from Tu Weiming, Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and Confucian Studies at Harvard University. Professor Tu has used this expression for many years to encapsulate the East Asian worldview and to stress its salient differences with the theocentric and anthropocentric worldviews of the West.^[1] By saying that the Chinese traditions in general and Confucianism in particular see things "anthropocosmically," he means that human beings and the cosmos are understood as a single, organismic whole. The goal of human life is to harmonize oneself with heaven and earth and to return to the transcendent source of both humans and the world. As long as Chinese civilization remained true to itself, it could never develop "instrumental rationality," the Western Enlightenment view that sees the world as a conglomeration of objects and considers knowledge as a means to manipulate and control the objects. In the anthropocosmic vision, the world as object cannot be disjoined from the human as subject. The purpose of knowledge is not to manipulate the world, but to understand the world and ourselves so that we can live up to the fullness of our humanity. The aim, to use one of Tu Weiming's favourite phrases, is "to learn how to be human." As he writes, "The Way is nothing other than the actualisation of true human nature."^[2]

With slight revisions in terminology, Tu Weiming's depiction of the Confucian anthropocosmic vision could easily be employed to describe the overarching worldview of Islamic civilization in general and Islamic thought in particular.^[3] By "Islamic thought" I do not mean the many scholarly disciplines that developed in the Islamic world, but rather those specific schools that asked and answered the deepest human questions about ultimacy and meaning. These are the questions that great thinkers, philosophers and sages have addressed in all civilizations. Specifically, I have in mind the Islamic wisdom tradition. I understand the word "wisdom" in the broad sense of Arabic *ḥikmah*, which embraces Hellenized philosophy as well as other perspectives, in particular theoretical Sufism (what is often called *'irfān* or "gnosis"). I focus on the wisdom tradition for two reasons. First, among all the Islamic approaches to knowledge, this discipline alone has produced figures who have been looked back upon by Western historians and modern-day Muslims as "scientists" in something like the current meaning of the word. And second, only this approach has discussed the significance of being and becoming without presupposing faith in Islamic dogma, so its language can easily be understood outside the context of specifically Islamic imagery.

In the technical terminology of the Islamic sciences, the wisdom tradition is commonly classified as "intellectual" (*'aqlī*) rather than "transmitted" (*naqlī*). Transmitted learning is all knowledge that has been passed down from previous generations and that cannot be gained by the human mind functioning on its own. Typical examples are language, divine revelation and law. "Intellectual" learning is all knowledge that can, in principle, be acquired by the human mind without help from past generations or divine revelation. Salient examples are mathematics and astronomy. However, intellectual learning also includes what can be called "metaphysics," "cosmology" and "psychology." It is these three domains that are most explicitly informed by the anthropocosmic vision about which I wish to speak.

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In Western civilization, it has been common to draw a sharp distinction between reason and revelation, or between Athens and Jerusalem. In order to understand the role that the "intellectual" sciences have played in the Islamic tradition, it needs to be understood that the predominant Islamic perspective sees reason and revelation as harmonious and complementary, not antagonistic. The very content of the Qur'anic message led to a viewpoint that diverges sharply from what became normative in the Christian West. Without understanding the divergence of viewpoint, it will be difficult to grasp the role that the wisdom tradition has played in Islam.

If Christianity is considered in terms of the dichotomy between intellectual and transmitted knowledge, what immediately strikes the eye is that the first truths are indebted to transmission, not intellection. The defining notion of the Christian worldview is the incarnation, a historical event that is known to have occurred on the basis of transmitted knowledge. To be sure, the incarnation was seen as a divine intervention that transmuted history, but it was also understood as occurring in the full light of historical actuality. In order to know about it, people needed the transmission of knowledge within history. Once the incarnation was acknowledged, it was possible to see how it is prefigured in the unity of God, through the logos and the trinity. Even though a whole tradition of thinking developed that began with the ideas in the divine Mind and that can be called "Christian Platonism," the Christian content of this tradition depended upon the

historical fact of the incarnation.

The Islamic tradition has a very different starting point. It is often assumed by both Muslims and non-Muslims that Islam began with the historical event of Muhammad and the Qur'an. Of course, there is some truth in this, but this is not the way the Qur'an presents the picture, nor is it the way more reflective Muslims have understood their religion. Rather, Islam began with the creation of the world. In its broadest Qur'anic meaning, the word *Islām* ("submission, submittedness, surrender") designates the universal and ever-present situation of creatures in face of the Creator.^[4] This helps explain why the first and fundamental dogma of the religion has nothing to do with the historical facts of the Muhammad and the Qur'an. It is simply the acknowledgment of a universal truth, a truth that expresses the nature of things for all time and all eternity.^[5]

The primary truth upon which the Islamic tradition is built is stated most succinctly in the first half of the Shahadah, the testimony of faith that is the basis for all Islamic teaching and practice. This is the statement *lā ilāha illa'llah*, "(There is) no god but God," a formula known as *kalimat al-tawhīd*, "the word that declares unity." This statement is taken as a declaration of the actual situation of all things, since everything submits to God's Unity by the very fact of its existence. All creatures declare the oneness of their Creator by their very createdness. However, this is not a free declaration, but rather one that is imposed by the actual situation of all things. Only human beings have the peculiar situation of being able to accept or reject this truth. Its free acceptance is declared by uttering the first half of the Shahadah and thereby giving witness that God is the Unique Source of all reality. The Qur'an attributes *tawhīd*, the acknowledgment of God's unity, and the free acceptance of its consequences to all rightly guided human beings, the first of whom was Adam. Included here are all the prophets—who are traditionally said to number 124,000—and all those who correctly and sincerely follow the prophets.^[6]

In the Islamic perspective, *tawhīd* stands outside history and outside transmission. It is a universal truth that does not depend upon revelation. So basic is the recognition of this truth to the human situation that it is typically said to be an inherent quality of the original disposition (*fiṭrah*) of Adam and all his children. Remember here that in the Islamic view, the fall from the Garden does not represent a serious shortcoming. Rather, it signifies a momentary lapse, a single act of forgetfulness and disobedience. The lapse had repercussions to be sure, but it was immediately forgiven by God and Adam was designated as the first prophet. God had created Adam in his own image and this image was in no way blemished by the fall, even if the divine image does indeed become obscured in many if not most of Adam's children.^[7]

As for the historical tradition of Islam, that began in the seventh century with the revelation of the Qur'an. The testimony of faith does not acknowledge it until its second half, the statement "the Muhammad is the messenger of God." *Tawhīd* precedes Muhammad and his revealed message because it does not pertain to history. Rather, it pertains to the nature of reality and the substance of human intelligence.

In this perspective, *tawhīd* informs all true knowledge in all times and all places. Every one of the 124,000 prophets came with a message based upon *tawhīd*, and each of them taught it explicitly. However, they did not teach it because people could not know about it without being told. They taught it because people had forgotten it and needed to be "reminded" of it. The Arabic word used here, *dhikr* (along with its derivatives *tadhkīr*, *tadhkīra*, and *dhikrā*) designates one of the most important concepts in the Qur'an. It informs Islamic religiosity on every level of faith and practice. The word means not only to "remind," but also to "remember." In the sense of reminder, it indicates the primary function of the prophets and in the sense of remembrance it designates the proper human response to the prophetic reminder. The whole process of "learning how to be human" depends first upon being reminded of *tawhīd* and second upon the active and free remembrance of *tawhīd*, the assertion of God's unity that is innate to the human soul.

In short, *tawhīd*, the foundational teaching of Islam, stands outside history because it is woven into the deepest nature of every human being from Adam onward. With rare exceptions, however, coming to understand it will depend upon being reminded of it by someone who knows it. Once it is understood, it is recognized as a self-evident truth having no essential connection with historical revelation. The Islamic doctrine that Adam was the first prophet suggests in mythic form the idea that to be human is to have present within oneself, as a direct consequence of being created in the image of God, the recognition of God's unity.

Given that the Islamic testimony of faith differentiates between a universal, a historical truth and a particular, historically conditioned truth, it already distinguishes implicitly between knowledge that is intellectual and knowledge that is

transmitted. The first half of the Shahadah declares *tawhīd*, a knowledge innate to the original human disposition and free of historical particularity. The second half of the Shahadah designates the specific, historical fact of the coming of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. This second knowledge cannot be gained without historical transmission.

Although transmitted and intellectual knowledge are implicitly differentiated in the first principles of the religion and explicitly differentiated by the later tradition, this does not mean that the two sorts of knowledges should be considered independent. It is obvious that all understanding depends upon transmission, if only the transmission of language. And it is also obvious that transmission alone is no guarantee of understanding. The relationship between the two modalities of knowing can perhaps be best understood as complementary, in something like the yin-yang manner. Transmission is needed to actualize understanding and understanding is needed to grasp the full significance of transmission.^[8]

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Among all the schools of Islamic thinking, the philosophers were the most careful in distinguishing between transmitted and intellectual learning. They themselves were not primarily interested in transmitted knowledge, so they paid relatively little attention to the Qur'an, the Hadith, and disciplines such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This is not to deny that most of them were well versed in these sciences, or that some of them even wrote Qur'anic commentaries and juridical works. Despite the suggestions of some historians, they were not hostile to the transmitted learning. Rather, they focused their primary attention elsewhere. They wanted to develop their own intellectual vision, and they saw this as the task of working out all the implications of *tawhīd*.^[9] If they were to understand the full significance of the transmitted knowledge, they needed to investigate the nature of the Ultimate Reality, the structure of the cosmos, and the reality of the human soul. These are the three domains of metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology mentioned earlier. However, in the quest for understanding, *tawhīd* was always the underlying axiom. The philosophers took it for granted that anyone with a healthy understanding would see the unity of God as a self-evident truth. Nonetheless, they did not neglect to provide numerous proofs to help human intelligence remember what is latent within itself.

My basic point here is that Muslim "intellectuals"—in the specific sense of the term *intellectual* that I have mentioned—always saw themselves as investigating things in the context of the most fundamental declaration of the Islamic tradition, which is the unity of God, the Ultimate Reality that rules all things. They never saw their efforts as opposed to the goals and purposes of the religious tradition. They accepted that the prophets came to remind people of *tawhīd* and to teach them how to be human. However, they also believed that the commoners had one path to follow, and the philosophical elite because of their specific gifts and aptitudes, had another path. It was perhaps the attitude of keeping aloof from religious dogma and counting the theologians and jurists as commoners that often led to their being severely criticized by other Muslims.

In the view of the wisdom tradition, seekers of intellectual knowledge were trying to learn how to be human in the fullest sense of the word *human*. The primary focus was always on the transformation of the soul. As Tu Weiming says of the Confucian anthropocosmic vision, "The transformative act is predicated on a transcendent vision that ontologically we are infinitely better and therefore more worthy than we actually are."^[10] This is a "humanistic" vision, but the humanism is elevated far beyond the mundane, because the "measure of man" is not man or even rational understanding, but rather the transcendent source of all. As Tu puts it: ^[11]

Since the value of the human is not anthropocentric, the assertion that man is the measure of all things is not humanistic enough. To fully express our humanity, we must engage in a dialogue with Heaven because human nature, as conferred by Heaven, realizes its nature not by departing from its source but by returning to it. Humanity, so conceived, is the public property of the cosmos, not the private possession of the anthropological world, and is as much the defining characteristic of our being as the self-conscious manifestation of Heaven. Humanity is Heaven's form of self-disclosure, self-expression, and self-realization. If we fail to live up to our humanity, we fail cosmologically in our mission as co-creator of Heaven and Earth and morally in our duty as fellow participants in the great cosmic transformation.

For the Islamic wisdom tradition, grasping the full nature of our humanity necessitates investigating the nature of things and the reality of our own selves. This means that intellectuals could not limit themselves to the mere acceptance of transmitted learning. They could not ignore the human imperative to search for knowledge in every domain, especially not when the Qur'an explicitly commands the study of the universe and the self as the means to know God. Although some philosophers paid scant attention to the transmitted learning and looked upon the dogmatic theologians with something akin to contempt, they did not step outside of the Islamic tradition, because they could not doubt the universal

and a historical axiom upon which it is built. In other words, there was no historical chink in their intellectual armour. Historical contingencies cannot touch *tawhīd* because, once it is grasped, it is seen as a self-evident truth so foundational that it becomes the unique certainty upon which the soul can always depend. [\[12\]](#)

As for the theologians and jurists and their claims to authority in all religious matters, the representatives of the wisdom tradition saw their positions as pertaining to transmitted learning, not to intellectual learning, and they saw no reason to submit themselves to the limited understandings of pious dogmatists. To a large degree they kept themselves apart from theological and juridical bickering, and this helps explain why they preferred to employ a language coloured more by Greek models than the imagery and symbols of the Qur'an.

Once we recognize that Islamic "intellectual" learning stands aloof from transmitted learning, we can begin to understand why the modern scientific enterprise could never have arisen in Islam. Science gains its power from the rejection of any sort of teleology, the brute separation of subject and object, the refusal to admit that consciousness and awareness are more real than material facts, the exclusive concern with the domain of the senses, and the disregard for the ultimate and the transcendent. The instrumental rationality of scientific knowledge could appear in the West only after the baby had been thrown out with the bath water. Having rejected the bath water of theology—or at least the relevance of theological dogma to scientific concerns—Western philosophers and scientists also rejected the truth of *tawhīd*, the bedrock of human intelligence. Once *tawhīd* was a dead letter, each domain of learning could be considered as independent from the others.

Instrumental rationality did not appear suddenly in the West, of course. A long and complex history gradually led to the total separation of the domains of reason and revelation. Many scientists and philosophers remained practicing Christians, but this did not prevent them from coming to consider the rational domain as free from the trammels of revelational givens. It is precisely because these givens were posed in the dogmatic and historical terms of transmitted learning that the separation between reason and revelation could occur. In contrast, the Islamic intellectual tradition was always rooted in *tawhīd*, never in theological dogma. No matter what sort of misgivings critical Muslim thinkers may have entertained about the historical contingency of the Arabic language, the events surrounding the coming of Muhammad, the transmission of the Qur'anic revelation, and the interpretation of the revelation by the theologians and dogmatists, these misgivings could never impinge on the fundamental insight of *tawhīd*, which to them was utterly transparent.

My first conclusion, then, is this: Many historians have suggested that medieval Islamic learning declined when Muslim scientists neglected to build on their early discoveries. But this is to read Islamic history in terms of the ideology of progress, which in turn is rooted in contemporary scientism—by which I mean the belief that science has the sort of unique reliability that was once reserved for revealed truth. Scientism gives absolute importance to scientific theories and relativizes all other approaches to knowledge, if it considers them in any way legitimate.

Moreover, historians who talk of the decline of Islamic "science" ignore two historical contexts. [\[13\]](#) The first is the Islamic, in which the axiom of *tawhīd* infused all intellectual endeavour. *Tawhīd* declares the interrelatedness of all things, because it asserts that everything comes from the First Principle, everything is constantly sustained and nourished by the First Principle, and everything returns to the First Principle. Given that Muslim intellectuals saw all things as beginning, flourishing, and ending within the compass of the One Source, they could not split up the domains of reality in any more than a tentative way. They were not able to disengage knowledge of the cosmos from knowledge of God or from knowledge of the human soul. It was impossible for them to imagine the world and the self as separate from each other and from the One Principle. Quite the contrary, the more they investigated the universe, the more they saw it as manifesting the principles of *tawhīd* and the nature of the human self. They could not have agreed more with Tu Weiming, who writes, "To see nature as an external object out there is to create an artificial barrier which obstructs our true vision and undermines our human capacity to experience nature from within." [\[14\]](#)

The second context that people ignore when they claim that the Muslim intellectual tradition declined is the Christian. Christian civilization, qua *Christian* civilization, did in fact decline, because it experienced the breakdown of a synthetic worldview and the eclipse of Christian Platonism. The transmitted nature of the basic religious givens was not able to withstand the critical questioning of non-dogmatic thinkers. In the Islamic case, the Muslim intellectuals did not depend on revelation and transmission for their understanding of *tawhīd*, so theological squabbles and historical uncertainties could not be taken as serious issues. [\[15\]](#)

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In order to suggest some of the implications of the anthropocosmic vision, I need to expand on the distinction between intellectual and transmitted. The *'ulama*, by whom I mean the experts in transmitted learning, claimed authority for their knowledge by upholding the authenticity of the transmission and the truthfulness of those who provided the knowledge—that is, God, Muhammad, and the pious forebears. They asked all Muslims to accept this knowledge as it was received. The basic duty of the Muslim believer was *taqlid*, that is, “imitation,” or submission to the authority of the transmitted knowledge. In contrast, the intellectual tradition appealed to the relatively small number of people who had intellectual aptitudes. The quest for knowledge was defined not in terms of *taqlid* or “imitation” but in terms of *tahqīq*, “verification” and “realization.”^[16]

An important key to understanding the different standpoints of modern science and the Islamic intellectual tradition lies in these two concepts. Unless we understand that knowledge attained by verification and realization is not of the same sort as that received by imitation, we will not be able to understand what the Muslim intellectuals were trying to do and what modern scientists and scholars are trying to do. We will then continue to falsify the position of the Muslim philosophers by making them precursors of modern science, as if they were trying to discover what modern scientists try to discover, and as if they accepted the findings of their predecessors on the basis of imitation, as modern scientists do.^[17]

The Arabic word *tahqīq* or verification/realization derives from the word *ḥaqq*. *Ḥaqq* is both a verbal noun and an adjective. It means true, truth, to be true; and, with similar permutations, it means real, right, proper, just, and appropriate. The word plays an important role in the Qur'an and in all branches of Islamic learning. Its first Qur'anic meaning is as a name of God. God as *ḥaqq* is absolute truth, rightness, reality, properness, justness and appropriateness.

Tahqīq is a transitive and intensive verbal form derived from *ḥaqq*. It means to ascertain the truth, the right, the real, the proper. Ascertainment is to know something for certain. The only place where certainty can be found is within the human self, not outside of it. *Tahqīq* is to understand and actualise truth, reality and rightness within oneself, to “realize” it and to make it actual for oneself and in oneself.

The word *ḥaqq* is applied to God, because God is the absolutely true, right, real and proper. But it is also applied to everything other than God. The secondary application of the word *ḥaqq* acknowledges that everything in the universe has a truth, a rightness, a realness and a properness. If God is *ḥaqq* in the absolute sense, everything other than God is *ḥaqq* in a relative sense. The task of *tahqīq* is to build on the knowledge of the absolute *ḥaqq*, beginning with the axiom of *tawḥīd*, and to grasp the exact nature of the relative *ḥaqq* that pertains to each thing, or at least to each thing with which we come into contact, whether spiritually, intellectually, psychologically, physically or socially.

The formula of *tawḥīd* can help us to understand the goal of *tahqīq*. If “There is no god but God,” this means, “There is no *ḥaqq* but the absolute *ḥaqq*.” The only true and real *ḥaqq* is God himself. This absolute *ḥaqq* is transcendent, infinite and eternal. In face of the absolute *ḥaqq*, there is no other *ḥaqq*. At the same, all things are God's creatures and they receive what they have from God. God creates them with wisdom and purpose and each has a role to play in the universe. Nothing that exists is inherently *batil*—the opposite of *ḥaqq*, that is, false, vain, unreal, inappropriate.^[18] The *ḥaqq*s of the individual things are determined by God's wisdom in creation. It is in respect to these individual *ḥaqq*s that the Prophet commanded people “to give to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*” (*ita' kulli dhī ḥaqqin ḥaqqah*). “Giving each thing its *ḥaqq*” is often taken as a nutshell definition of *tahqīq*.

To give things their *ḥaqq*s is obviously more than a simple cognitive activity. We cannot give things their rightful due simply by knowing their truth and reality. Over and above knowing, *tahqīq* demands acting. It is not simply to verify and realize the truth and reality of a thing; it is also to act toward that thing in the appropriate and rightful manner. The intellectual tradition always considered morality and ethics as an integral part of the quest for wisdom, and many of its representatives made a conscious effort to synthesize Greek ethical teachings and the moral and practical teachings of the Qur'an.

The task of the seeker of wisdom, then, was to verify and realize things. This could not be done by quoting the opinions of Aristotle or Plato, or even by citing the words of the Qur'an and Muhammad. One verified and realized things by knowing them as they truly are and by acting appropriately. More than anything else, the intellectual quest was a rigorous path of self-discipline, and the goal was to achieve true knowledge of self and appropriate activity on the basis of this knowledge. Nothing encapsulates the spirit of the quest as well as the famous maxim attributed to the Prophet, “He

who knows himself knows his Lord.” Historians have considered this statement to be an Islamic version of the Socratic maxim, “Know thyself.” Certainly, the fact that this version of the maxim links knowledge of self with knowledge of God is indicative of the primary importance that is always given to *tawhīd*.

It should be obvious to everyone that one cannot know oneself and one’s Lord by memorizing the opinions of Avicenna. One can surely take the prophets and the great philosophers as guides on the path to self-knowledge, but one cannot claim to know what they knew unless one discovers it for oneself and in oneself. The quest for wisdom was an intensely personal activity, a spiritual discipline that demanded the training of one’s mind and the honing of one’s soul. To verify and realize things was to achieve an authentic vision of reality, a correct perception of the world, a sound understanding of the self, and a true knowledge of the First Principle. At the same time, it was to act in keeping with what one had come to know. It demanded an ethical vision and virtuous activity.

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In order to grasp the purpose of *taḥqīq*, it is useful to reflect on how the philosophers understood the word *'aql*, the noun that gives us the adjective form *'aqlī*—which I have been translating as “intellectual.” *'Aql* means intellect, intelligence, reason, mind, *nous*. To understand what is meant by the word, we need to review a few of the basic teachings of the intellectual tradition. These teachings provide pointers toward the knowledge that Muslim intellectuals were trying to verify and realize. The teachings should not be taken as dogma, because no one can realize anything by memorizing catechisms. One has to find out for oneself.

The underlying substance of a human being is called *nafs*, a word that functions as the most important reflexive pronoun in the Arabic language. *Nafs* is typically translated as both “self” and “soul.” In its philosophical sense, it designates the invisible something that makes its appearance in the cosmos wherever there is life and hence it can be ascribed to any living thing.

Verifying the nature of soul was one of the foundational activities of the Muslim intellectual. A standard way to do so was to begin by investigating the apparitions of soul in the visible world. The visible realm is a conglomeration of bodily appearances, yet we instinctively differentiate among things in terms of their modality of appearance. We know the difference between living things and dead things precisely by their appearance. “Soul” is a generic name for the invisible power that shows itself when we recognize life and awareness. Moreover, in the act of recognizing soul in other things, we are simultaneously recognizing it in ourselves. To see the apparitions of soul in the outside world is to experience the presence of soul in the inside world. Life and awareness are precisely the properties that we find in ourselves in the very act of seeing them in others.

There are degrees of soul, which is to say that this invisible power is more intense and influential in some things than in others.^[19] The classification of creatures into inanimate, plant, animal, human and angel is one way of acknowledging the different degrees. The most intense and at the same time the most complex and layered soul is found in human beings. Outwardly, this appears in the indefinite diversity of their activities which clearly has something to do with vast differences in aptitude and ability. Because of the diverse and comprehensive powers of their souls, human beings can grasp and replicate all the activities that appear in the world by means of other modalities of soul.

In discussing the human soul, the texts frequently elaborate upon the intimate relationship between it and the cosmos. So similar are soul and world that they can even be considered mirror images. As two mutually reflecting images, they are often called “microcosm” and “macrocosm.”

The correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm was understood as something like a subject-object relationship. The human soul is an aware subject that can take as its object the whole universe. So closely intertwined are soul and universe that, in Tu Weiming’s term, their relationship can properly be called “organismic.” The human soul and the world can be seen as one organism with two faces. It follows that there can be no microcosm without macrocosm, and no macrocosm without microcosm. The vital cosmic role of human beings was always affirmed. It was recognized that the macrocosm appears in the visible realm before human beings, but it was also understood that the macrocosm is brought into existence precisely to make it possible for human beings to appear and then to learn how to be human. Without human beings (or, one can guess, analogous beings), there is no reason for a universe to exist in the first place. The teleology was always acknowledged.

In the more religious language, this is to say that God created the world with the specific aim of crowning his achievement with human beings, who alone are made fully in his image and are able to function as his vicegerents

(*khalifah*). They alone can love God, because true love demands loving the Beloved for himself. If one loves God with the aim of receiving some gift or benefit, one has not in fact loved God, but the gift or benefit.^[20] Nothing can love God for God's sake alone and without any ulterior motive except that which is made in his image. God created human beings precisely so that they could verify and realize their own divine images and love their Creator, thereby participating in his infinite and never-ending bounty.

For the intellectual tradition, the purpose of studying the macrocosm is to come to understand the powers and capabilities of the microcosm. By understanding the object, we simultaneously come to understand the capacities and potentialities of the subject. We cannot study the natural world without learning about ourselves and we cannot learn about ourselves without coming to understand the wisdom inherent in the natural world.

Social reality was often studied for the same purpose—as an aid in understanding the human soul. It was not uncommon for Muslim philosophers to provide descriptions of the ideal society. But they were not interested in the utopian dreams that have so often preoccupied modern political theorists. Rather, they wanted to understand and describe the various potentialities of the human soul that become manifest through social and political activity. They did not want to set down a program, but rather to illustrate to aspiring philosophers that every attribute and power of the soul, every beautiful and ugly character trait, can be recognized in the diversity of human types. When seekers of wisdom recognize their own selves as microcosms of society, they can strive to know and realize the sovereign of the soul, the true philosopher-king, the intellect whose duty is to govern both soul and body with wisdom and compassion.

If the philosophers analysed the souls of plants, animals, humans and even angels, and if they described all the possibilities of human becoming in ethical and social terms, their purpose was to integrate everything in the universe into the grand, hierarchical vision of *tawhid*. It was self-evident to them that the intellect within us—the intelligent and intelligible light of the soul—is the highest and most comprehensive dimension of the human substance. The intellect alone can see, understand, verify, and realize. The intellect alone gives life, awareness and understanding not only to our own souls, but to all souls. The intellect alone is able to grasp and realize the purpose of human life and all life.

What then is this intellect that is the fountainhead and goal of intellectual learning? To define it is impossible, because it is intellect that provides all the awareness and understanding that allows for definitions. It cannot be limited and confined by its own radiance. However, we can describe it in terms of its role in cosmogenesis, whereby all things are created through it. And we can also depict it in terms of the human return to God, which can be experienced in its fullness only by the actualized intellect, which is the self-aware image of God. Let me deal with cosmogenesis first.

The wisdom tradition typically began discussing the birth of the cosmos in terms of God's creation or emanation of the first creature, which is given many names in the texts, such as intellect, spirit, word, pen, light and Muhammadan reality. Things appear from the One Principle in a definite, intelligible order and in keeping with a fixed and known hierarchy (known, that is, to God and the intellect, but not necessarily to us). It was obvious to Muslim thinkers that the One God creates intelligently and that the first manifestation of his reality, the contingent being closest to his unity, the stage of created actuality nearest to his utter and absolute simplicity, is pure intelligence and awareness. Within this awareness is prefigured the universe and the human soul.

This living intelligence is the instrument with which God planned, ordered, arranged and established all creatures and it lies at the root of every subject and every object. It is a single reality that is the self-aware and self-conscious principle of the universe and the human soul. Among all creatures, humans alone manifest its full and pure light, a light that in Qur'anic language is called "the spirit blown into Adam by God." The "fall" of Adam is nothing but the obscuration of this light.

When we look at the intellect from the point of view of the human return to God, we see that the goal of human existence is to remember God and to recollect our own divine images by awakening the intellect within. The task of seekers of wisdom is to recover within themselves the luminous consciousness that fills the universe. This recovery is the fruition and fulfillment of human possibility. Although the intellect is already dimly present in every soul, human or otherwise, in human beings alone is it a seed that can sprout and then be cultivated, nourished, strengthened and fully actualized.

Although the human soul is a knowing and aware subject that has the capacity to take as its object the whole universe and everything within it, it is typically blind to its own possibilities, and it takes on the color of souls that are not fully human. The soul needs to learn how to be human and being human does not come easy to it. Most of us have to be reminded by the prophets about what being human implies and even budding "intellectuals," with all their gifts, have a

steep and rocky road ahead to them if they are to achieve the goal.

The intellectual tradition held that one of the best ways to begin learning how to be human is to differentiate the qualities of the human soul from the qualities of other souls. Here we come back to a discussion of plants and animals, which represent limited and confining possibilities of soulish existence. All the moral injunctions to overcome animal instincts rise up from the understanding that animals cannot manifest the fullness of intellectual and ontological possibility. This is not to denigrate animal qualities, since they also play important roles in the human soul. The issue is rather one of priorities. People need to put things in their proper places. They must order the world and their own goals in an intelligent manner and this means that they must understand everything in terms of the ruling truths of the cosmos, the first of which is *tawhīd*.

The soul, then, is the subjective pole of manifest reality and its counterpart is the universe, the objective pole. The soul in its human form has the unique capacity to know all things. However, the soul is only the *potential* to know all things. It is not the actuality of knowing. Actuality is a quality of intellect. Every act of knowing actualises the soul's potential to know and brings it closer to the intelligent and intelligible light at its core. But what exactly is the limit of the soul's potential? What can it know? What should it strive to know? The intellectual tradition answers that there is no limit to the soul's potential, because nothing exists that the soul cannot know. The goal of learning is to know everything that can possibly be known. However, knowable things need to be prioritised. If we do not search for understanding in the right manner and the correct order, the goal will remain forever unattainable.

As long as the soul remains occupied with the search for wisdom and has not yet actualised its full potential, it remains a soul—that is, an aware self with the possibility of achieving greater awareness. Only when it reaches the actuality of all-knowingness in the inmost centre of its being can it be called an “intellect” in the proper sense of the word. At that point it comes to know itself as it was meant to be. It recovers its true nature and it returns to its proper place in the cosmic hierarchy.^[21]

The Muslim philosophers and sages often refer to the actualisation of the intellect by the Qur'anic terms “salvation” (*najāt*) or “felicity” (*sa'āda*). They would agree with Tu Weiming, who writes, “Salvation means the full realization of the anthropocosmic reality inherent in our human nature.”^[22] For them, this anthropocosmic reality is the intellect that gave birth to macrocosm and microcosm and that is innate to human nature, a nature that is made in the image of God and identical with his intelligent and intelligible light.

* * *

If the Muslim philosophers saw the quest for wisdom as the search to know all things, can we conclude that they are simply following Aristotle, who says as much at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*? I think not. They would say that they are trying to live up to the human potential and if Aristotle also understood the human potential, that is precisely why they respect him and call him “The First Teacher” (*al-mu'allim al-awwal*). They would remind us that the Qur'an discusses the human potential in rather explicit terms. It tells us, after all, that God taught Adam *all* the names (2:31), not just some of them. They might also point out that this quest for omniscience is implicitly if not explicitly acknowledged not only by all the world's wisdom traditions, but also by the whole enterprise of modern science. But, from their perspective, omniscience can only be found in the omniscient and the only created thing that is omniscient in any real sense is the fully actualised intellect, the radiance of God's own Ipseity. Omniscience, in other words, can never be found in the compilation of data, the collections of facts and the spinning of theories. It is not an “objective” reality, but a “subjective” experience—though no distinction can be drawn between subject and object in the very being of the omniscient.

Nothing differentiates the Islamic intellectual quest from modern scientific and scholarly goals more clearly than the differing interpretations of the quest for omniscience. Both the Muslim intellectuals and modern scientists are striving to know everything, but the Muslim intellectual does so by looking at roots, principles and noumena and by striving for synthesis and the unity of the knowing subject. In contrast the modern scientist looks at branches, applications and phenomena and strives to analyse objects and multiply data.

The traditional intellectual undertakes the quest for omniscience as an individual who knows that he must accomplish the task within himself and that he can only do so by achieving the fullness of humanity, with everything that this demands ethically and morally. The modern scientist undertakes a quest for facts and information as a collective undertaking,

knowing that he is one insignificant cog in an enormously complex apparatus. He sees omniscience as something that can be achieved only by Science with a capital S, for Science alone has uniquely privileged methodologies and brilliantly sophisticated instruments. He rarely gives a thought to the possibility that every knowledge makes ethical demands upon the knower. If he does give a thought to it, he does so not as a scientist, but as an ethicist or a philosopher or a religious believer. There is no room in Science for ethics.

Traditional seekers of wisdom aim to actualise the full potential of intelligence in order to understand everything that is significant for human ends and these ends are defined in terms of a metaphysics, a cosmology, a psychology and an ethics that takes Ultimate Reality as the measure of man. Modern seekers of facts aim to accumulate information and to devise ever more sophisticated theories in order to achieve what they call "progress." In other words, they want to achieve a transformation of the human race on the basis of scientific pseudo-absolutes if not political ideology.

The quest for wisdom is qualitative, because it aims at the actualisation of all the qualities present fully in the divine image and named by the names of God. The modern quest for knowledge and theoretical prowess is quantitative, because it aims to understand and control an ever-proliferating multiplicity of things.

The more the traditional intellectual searches for omniscience, the more he finds the unity of his own soul and his own organismic interrelationship with the world. The more the modern scientist searches for data, the more he is pulled into dispersion and incoherence, despite his claims that overarching theories will one day explain everything.

The traditional quest for wisdom leads to integration, synthesis, and a global, anthropocosmic vision. The modern quest for information and control leads to mushrooming piles of facts and the proliferation of ever more specialized and narrower fields of learning. The net result of the modern quest is particularization, division, partition, separation, incoherence, mutual incomprehension and chaos. No one knows the truth of this statement better than university professors, who are often so narrowly specialized that they cannot explain their research to their own colleagues in their own departments—much less to colleagues in other departments.

* * *

Let me recapitulate my conclusions as follows:

For the Islamic intellectual tradition, the study of the universe was a two-pronged, holistic enterprise. In one respect its aim was to depict and describe the world of appearances. In another respect its goal was to grasp the innermost reality of both the appearances and the knower of the appearances. The great masters of the discipline always recognized that it is impossible to understand external objects without understanding the subject that understands. This meant that metaphysics, cosmology and psychology were essential parts of the intellectual quest. The goal was to see earthly appearances, intelligible principles and the intelligent self in one integrated and simultaneous vision. It was understood that intelligence is not only that which grasps and comprehends the real nature of things, but also that which gives birth to things in the first place. Everything knowable is already latent within intelligence, because all things appear from intelligence in the cosmogenic process.

The anthropocosmic vision allowed for no real dichotomy between the subject that knows and the object that is known. The structure and goals of the intellectual enterprise precluded losing sight of the ontological link that binds the two. To do so would be to forget *tawhīd* and to fall into the chaos of dispersion and egocentricity. Ignorance of the reality of the knower leads to using knowledge as a means to achieve illusory ends and ignorance of the reality of the known turns the world into things and objects that can be manipulated for goals cut off from any vision of true human nature.

The possibilities of human understanding define the possibilities of human becoming. To know is to be. To ignore the reality of either the object or the subject is to fall into foolishness, error and superstition. An impoverished and flattened universe is the mirror image of an impoverished and flattened soul. The death of God is nothing but the stultification of the human intellect. Ecological catastrophe is the inevitable consequence of psychic and spiritual dissolution. The world and the self are not two separate realities, but two sides of the same coin, a coin that was minted in the image of God.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] Tu in turn takes the word "anthropocosmic" from Mircea Eliade. Tu, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on*

Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 126. The present paper is partly an offshoot of an on-going "Islamic-Confucian Dialogue" begun five years ago by Tu and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in which I have been a regular participant. It is also the fruit of an in-house dialogue with my wife, Sachiko Murata, which has been going on for many more years than five. I do not mean to suggest by these remarks that I will now interpret the Islamic tradition in Chinese categories. I cite Tu Weiming to acknowledge a certain influence on my own conceptualization of things and to point out that there is nothing unusual about the Islamic worldview. One can even argue that the anthropocosmic vision I discuss here is the Islamic version of a perspective that is normative for the human race. If there is an incongruity, it is Western natural science and following in its wake, the other disciplines of the modern academy. The real question is not why Confucianism and Islam share a common vision, but why the West has broken from the perennial pattern. The oddity is modern science and thought, not the holistic visions of pre-modern civilizations and cultures.

[2] Ibid. p. 10.

[3] Western scholars have rarely looked to East Asia for help in interpreting Islamic thinking. One reason for this is that we are talking about "Western" scholarship, with all the presuppositions and interpretive biases that this implies. Moreover, Western scholars have been primarily concerned with situating Islamic thinking in its historical context, not with understanding what Muslim thinkers were trying to say and this context is largely the same as that of the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic West. I am not denying the great value of such research, but this approach has meant that interpreters of Islamic intellectuality have been peculiarly insensitive to certain dimensions of Islamic thinking that happen to have a deep resonance with the East Asian traditions. Most modern-day Muslim scholars follow Western models or assume an apologetic and reactive stance vis-à-vis Western scholarship, so they also have not looked to East Asia. Nonetheless, there is no reason to suppose that Islamic thought is in any essential way uncongenial with the East Asian traditions, as Sachiko Murata has illustrated in her study, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). Her more recent research has shown that Muslim scholars in China were at home in the Neo-Confucian worldview, which is eminently anthropocosmic and that they employed its technical terminology to express an Islamo-Confucian vision of reality. See Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

[4] Take, for example, this verse: "What do they desire other than the religion of God, while to Him has submitted [*aslama*] everything in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly?" (Qur'an 3:83). On the different meanings of the word *islam* in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994; rept. Suhail Academy, Lahore, 1998), pp. 3-7.

[5] Except, of course, in the sense that there must first be a contingent reality for the truth to find expression in the universe. Muslim thinkers often say that God's unity (*wahda* or *aḥadiyya*) pertains to God alone, transcending all contingency and all creaturely attributes, whereas *tawḥīd* is the human response to that unity. It is also pointed out that the human response is only possible because God's own reality declares its own unity—as the Qur'an puts it, "God bears witness that there is no god but He" (3:18). This is why it is sometimes said that no one truly voices *tawḥīd* but God himself and every human assertion of God's unity can only be a pale reflection made possible by the human image of God.

[6] The specific verse I have in mind is 21:25: "And We never sent a messenger before thee save that we revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so serve Me.'" Lest someone claim that the statement of *tawḥīd* is itself historically particular, we need to remember that the linguistic formulation is not at issue, but rather the unique, unitary reality that gives rise to the universe. Note also that the Qur'an says that God sends every prophetic message in the language of the messenger's people (14:4), thereby acknowledging that God speaks every language, for "Each community has a messenger" (10:47). In this way of looking at things, what was different about each revelation was not *tawḥīd*, but rather the specific teachings and practices necessitated by the historical context of the people to whom the message was revealed. Of course, it can also be objected that this unitary reality is itself historically particular, because it was invented by human minds. People who hold this position still have to justify it, and that demands a metaphysics: On what basis do we declare history, language, politics, gender, atoms, energy, the brain, or whatever foundational?

[7] This is why certain Muslim thinkers (e.g. Ibn al-'Arabī, as cited in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1989], p. 296) can maintain that even Adam's "forgetfulness" (*nisyān*), which caused his fall, pertains to the divine image that is the defining characteristic of the human race. The transmitted support for this idea is the Qur'anic verse, "They forgot God, so God forgot them" (9:67). If God "forgets," then "forgetfulness" is a divine attribute. Adam "forgot"

because he was made in the divine image. This rather audacious way of putting things can be explained by saying that humans manifest every attribute that configures their divine image. God is both merciful and wrathful. Inasmuch as humans experience the reality of his wrath, they are distant from God, the source of knowledge and wisdom and in this respect their understanding is obscured. Inasmuch as they experience the reality of his mercy, they are near to him and participate in his awareness, luminosity and grandeur.

[8] Some of the discussions concerning the relationship between the two sorts of knowledge might remind us of the constant battles that go on among educational theorists about the relative merit of rote learning or cultural literacy (transmitted knowledge) and critical thinking or creativity (intellectual knowledge). Like other traditional civilizations, Islam stressed that transmitted learning was the foundation for all real understanding. This explains why the process of learning began at a very young age with the memorization of the Qur'an.

[9] I am focusing on *tawhīd*, the first principle of Islamic faith. It should be noted that the philosophers also investigated the other two principles of Islamic faith—"prophecy" (*nubuwwah*) and the "return" to God, or eschatology (*ma'ād*)—as intellectual rather than transmitted issues. They were not especially interested in the historical events surrounding Muhammad and other prophets, or in the details of revealed scripture. Nor, in the earlier period, did they defend the graphic Qur'anic depictions of the afterlife as anything more than rhetorical necessity. However, they were extremely interested in "prophecy" as the highest form of human perfection and they were especially concerned with the immortality of the soul, an immortality that is achieved through intellectual perfection. Because they discussed the three principles of the faith with little explicit reference to the transmitted learning and much mention of Greek antecedents, some historians have found it easy to ignore the thoroughly Islamic character of their writings. If the philosophers were often criticized by other Muslim scholars for the positions they took on the principles of faith, it was because their interpretations did not coincide with the theological and dogmatic readings. Given the nature of theological polemic, the criticism often took the form of accusations of unbelief. But, in a broader view, philosophy and theology were in agreement, especially if we compare their positions with the beliefs that infuse most modern scholarship.

[10] *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 137.

[11] *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 102.

[12] I am not suggesting, of course, that it is self-evident to everybody, any more than mathematical truth is self-evident to everybody. My point is rather that the position of the intellectual tradition on *tawhīd* was that once it is understood, it cannot be denied. Its truth is such that, once one understands it, one knows that it has always lurked in one's soul. This is precisely the sense of "remembrance."

[13] I am not denying that there was a decline. I am simply saying that by making the criterion for measurement "scientific progress" or the lack of it, we are accepting the ideological presuppositions of scientism. Why should this historical oddity be considered the universal criterion by which all civilizations should be measured? If we keep in view Islamic criteria (e.g., adherence to *tawhīd*, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah), there was certainly a serious decline in Islamic civilization, especially in the intellectual tradition, but it began much later than historians typically maintain.

[14] *Confucian Thought*, pp. 46-47.

[15] I do not mean to imply that Muslim intellectuals did not accept Muhammad as their prophet or the Qur'an as their book of guidance. The philosophers saw no reason to question the dogmatic basis of the transmitted knowledge, because they considered religious teachings to be beneficial for everyone and certainly so for the masses. Wisdom—true intellectual learning—was by its nature reserved for the qualified, who are few and far between. This "undemocratic" and "elitist" position goes back to the fact that political ideology does not colour their view of social reality. They took human beings as they are, not as they wished them to be.

[16] It is important not to confuse the issue of *taḥqīq* with that of *ijtihād*. Both these words are used as opposites of *taqlīd*. However, *taḥqīq* pertains to the intellectual sciences and it means to find the truth and reality of all things by oneself and in oneself. *Ijtihād* is employed in reference to the transmitted sciences, specifically *fiqh* or jurisprudence.

Ijtihād is to gain such a mastery of the Sharī'ah that one does not need to follow the opinions (*taqlīd*) of earlier jurists. For centuries, many legal experts considered "the gate of *ijtihād*" to be closed. But the "gate of *taḥqīq*" can never be closed, because it is mandatory for all Muslims to understand God and the other articles of faith for themselves. "Faith in God" by imitation is no faith at all.

[17] Given that scientism—the firm belief in the unique reliability of scientific, empirical knowledge—infuses modern culture, it is difficult for moderns to remember that the whole scientific edifice is built on transmitted learning. Despite all the talk of the "empirical verification" of scientific findings, this verification is not possible except for a handful of specialists, since the rest of the human race does not have the necessary training. In effect, everyone has to accept empirical verification on the basis of faith (*taqlīd*). Moreover, the tiny amount of verification that any individual scientist is able to accomplish follows the "scientific method," which is to say that it is based on "instrumental rationality." The experiments show that, given certain conditions and certain goals, y will follow from x. There is no question of discovering the ultimate truth of things, because the means are inadequate and no scientist, qua scientist, can claim that the means are adequate. If he does claim that they are adequate, he does so as a believer in scientism or as a philosopher, not as scientist. It is in terms of scientism, not science, that people declare that there is no such thing "the soul" or "absolute reality." Neither science nor scientism would dream of acknowledging what appeared as a simple fact to the wisdom traditions in all pre-modern civilizations: Human possibility transcends time, space, history, physicality, energy, ideation, the angels and even the gods (though certainly not "God" in the proper meaning of the word).

[18] This is not to say that there is no such thing as "evil." The issue of discerning the *ḥaqq* of "evil" things is one of the more subtle dimensions of *taḥqīq*. Recognizing a thing's *ḥaqq* may entail acknowledging that part of its proper role is to be the occasion for evil and that the appropriate human response is to avoid it. This very need to avoid it alerts us to something of its cosmic role. Without evil, human freedom of choice is meaningless.

[19] Compare Tu Weiming's description of the degrees of spirituality as viewed by the Confucian vision: "Rocks, trees, animals, humans, and gods represent different levels of spirituality based on the varying compositions of *ch'i*" (*Confucian Thought*, p. 44). In the typical Islamic version, the *ch'i* or invisible power that animates rocks is called "nature" (*ṭabī'ah*). Only at the plant level is a second modality of *ch'i*, called "soul," added to the first. Rocks are by no means "only matter." In the hylomorphism adopted by the intellectual tradition, the role of matter (*mādda*) is largely conceptual, because there is no such thing per se. "Matter" is simply the name that is given to an observed receptivity for the apparition of "form" (*ṣūrah*). Form itself is an intelligible and spiritual reality that descends into the domain of appearances from the spirit or intellect and ultimately from God, who is, in Qur'anic language, "the Form-giver" (*al-muṣawwir*). Since all things are "forms," there is nothing in the universe that does not manifest the living presence of the intelligent and the intelligible.

[20] To those who know the Islamic tradition, this will sound like a "Sufi" idea rather than a philosophical position. Notice, however, what Avicenna says: "The knower [*'arīf*] desires the Real, the First, only for His sake, not for the sake of anything else. He prefers nothing to true knowledge of Him. His worship is directed only to Him, since He is worthy of worship and because worship is a noble relationship with Him. At the same time, the knower has neither desire nor fear. Were he to have them, the object of his desire or fear would be his motive and it would be his goal. Then the Real would not be his goal but rather the means to something else, less than the Real, which would be the goal and the object." *Al-Ishārāt wa 'l-tanbīhāt*, edited by S. Dunya (Cairo, 1947), vol. 3, p. 227.

[21] The philosophical tradition often calls the human soul a "potential intellect" (*'aql bi 'l-quwwa*) or a "hylic intellect" (*'aql hayūlānī*), which is to say that it has the capacity to come to know all things. The soul that has ascended through the stages of actualising its own awareness and achieving its own innate perfection is then called an "actualised intellect" (*'aql bi 'l-fi'*).

[22] Tu, *Confucian Thought*, p. 64.

