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# THE MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE AND ITS PERCEPTION IN EUROPE

**William C. Chittick**

The basic premise of my paper is that the dominant forms of Western scholarship, as exemplified by Orientalism and the reactions to it, have failed to understand what “the Muslim intellectual tradition” was all about and, as a result, have invariably interpreted it in the ideological context of modernity. As a result, it has been perceived as a curiosity of the past, with little or no contemporary relevance. If, however, we look at this tradition on its own terms, we can see that it represents not only a living possibility of human fulfillment, but also a method of throwing light on the wrong-headedness that characterizes the ideologies and aspirations of modern society.<sup>1</sup>

To argue my point, I could start with examples drawn from scholarly writings, but that would divert me from a more important task, which is to explicate the nature of the intellectual tradition and to suggest why its very nature has made it invisible to most modern scholarship. This invisibility extends to most Muslims, whose opinions about this tradition are hardly different from those of the vast majority of Europeans and Americans, for reasons that should be obvious: The educational models and goals that have ruled over the Muslim intelligentsia for the past century have been taken from the West. Muslims who are able to speak coherently in Western languages have absorbed modern-day views of the universe and the history of the human race either from the explicit content of their education or from its context and methodologies.

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1 For much more detailed versions of the arguments presented in this paper, see my *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2007.

In speaking about the intellectual tradition was all about, the standard Western categories are not particularly helpful—e.g., philosophy, theology, science, mysticism, or, for that matter, “intellectuality.” I have tried for years to find a category that might be adequate to summarize the contents and methods of the tradition, and a few years back I borrowed the term “anthropocosmic vision” from Tu Weiming, professor of Chinese thought and director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, in the hope that it might prove more helpful. Clearly “anthropocosmic” derives from the two Greek words *anthropos* and *cosmos*, and it implies that the universe and the human self are viewed as inseparably linked.

By saying that the Chinese traditions in general and Confucianism in particular see things “anthropocosmically,” Tu wants to say that Chinese thinkers and sages have understood human beings and the cosmos 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 all. As long as Chinese civilization retained its anthropocosmic vision, it could never develop instrumental rationality—the Enlightenment view that sees the world as a conglomeration of objects and considers knowledge the means to manipulate and control them. In the anthropocosmic vision, the observed object cannot be disjoined from the observing subject. The purpose of knowledge is not to manipulate and control the world but rather to understand both the world and ourselves, and the goal of this understanding is to live up to the fullness of our humanity. As Tu likes to put it, we are not born human but rather need to learn how to be human. “The Way [Tao],” he says, “is nothing other than the actualization of true human nature.”<sup>2</sup>

### *The Intellectual Tradition*

I use the word “intellectual” to designate the tradition of thought that developed and articulated this Islamic anthropocosmic vision to translate the Arabic word *ʿaqlī*, specifically as it has been used in the classification of the Islamic sciences, where it is contrasted with *naqlī*, “transmitted.” Transmitted knowledge is passed from person to person, but true “intellectual” knowledge can only be discovered by the human mind from within itself. In

2 Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, 10.

the specifically Islamic context, examples of transmitted knowledge include Koran, Hadith, grammar, and jurisprudence. More generally we find it in everything that we think we know from books, teachers, television, and the media. In contrast, intellectual knowledge is found only inside oneself. Its essential content does not depend upon being passed down from others. A common example is arithmetic, which can be grasped by any healthy intelligence irrespective of events and history.

Among the traditional Islamic sciences, philosophy in particular aimed at the acquisition of intellectual knowledge. It is true that seekers of wisdom began by studying philosophy as transmitted knowledge, but their goal was to actualize their innate intelligence such that they would come to know the truth for themselves. They wanted to be able to speak of what they know firsthand, not by hearsay. This sort of learning dealt with many disciplines that we now consider “scientific,” such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, but its real focus was on the far less “scientific” realms metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology—so long as we understand these terms in their pre-modern meanings.

Western historians have paid special attention to the intellectual tradition because it alone has produced figures who have been looked back upon as scientists in something like the current meaning of the word. But it would be a great mistake to think that the Muslim intellectuals were interested in scientific pursuits for the same reasons that these have been pursued in modern times. Unless we understand their anthropocosmic vision, we will miss the fact that the heart of their enterprise was to actualize true human nature.

### *The Philosophical Quest*

Among the schools of Islamic thinking, the philosophers were the most careful to distinguish between transmitted and intellectual learning. Compared to jurists, theologians, and Sufis, philosophers paid relatively little attention to the Koran, Hadith, and other forms of transmitted religious knowledge. It is true that most of them were well versed in the transmitted sciences, and some of them even wrote Koran commentaries and juridical works. They were not hostile toward the transmitted learning, but they focused their attention elsewhere. They wanted to develop their own intellectual vision, and they saw this as the task of

working out all the implications of *tawhîd*, the assertion of divine unity that lies at the heart of the Islamic perspective.

The philosophers, and along with them many of the Sufis, understood that if they were to grasp the full import even of transmitted knowledge, they needed to investigate the nature of Ultimate Reality, the structure of the cosmos, and the reality of the human soul—the three domains of metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology. In the quest for understanding, *tawhîd* was the underlying axiom. The philosophers took it for granted that anyone with a healthy mind would immediately grasp the ultimate unity of reality. Even so, they provided numerous proofs to help human intelligence remember what is latent in itself.

My basic point here is that Muslim “intellectuals” 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 over all things. They never saw their efforts as opposed to the goals and purposes of the religious tradition. They accepted that prophets came to remind people of *tawhîd* and to teach them how to be fully human. They also believed, however, that the commoners had one path to follow, and those drawn to intellectual pursuits had another, because of their specific gifts and aptitudes.

Seekers of intellectual knowledge were trying to actualize their true human nature by undergoing a 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.”<sup>3</sup> This is a “humanistic” vision, but a humanism that 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,

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

3 Tu, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1985, 137.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 Koran explicitly commands the study of the universe and the self as a means to know God.

As for the theologians and jurists and their claims to authority in all religious matters, they were speaking on behalf of the transmitted learning, that is, the knowledge of God and the Prophet received from the past. Seekers of wisdom were engaged in a quest for another sort of knowledge altogether, so 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 the philosophers among them (in contrast to the many Sufis who were also engaged in a quest for intellectual knowledge) preferred to employ a language colored more by Greek models than the imagery and symbols of the Koran.

Once we recognize that Islamic "intellectual" learning stands aloof from transmitted learning, we begin to understand why the modern scientific enterprise could not have arisen in Islam. Science gains its power from instrumental reason, that is, from treating human intelligence as the means and instrument to get things done. Science cannot ask questions of purpose and goal. It gains its power from the rejection of any sort of teleology, the brute separation of subject and object, the refusal to admit that the consciousness and awareness of the knower is far more real than known facts, the exclusive concern with the domain of the senses, and the disregard for the ultimate and the transcendent.

Instrumental rationality did not appear suddenly in the West. A long and complex history gradually brought about an ever deep-

4 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 102.

er separation between the domain of reason and that of revelation. Many scientists and philosophers remained practicing Christians, but this did not prevent them from coming taking the rational domain as free from the givens of religion. These givens were posed in the dogmatic and historical terms of transmitted learning. They were not primarily based on intellectual knowledge, rather on the historical fact of the incarnation, knowledge of which was transmitted by the church.

In contrast, the intellectual tradition in Islam never based itself upon historical events. It is rooted in the truth of *tawhîd*, the unity of reality. *Tawhîd* has no history, because it is simply an expression of the nature of things. This is why the Koran teaches that all prophets came with the message of *tawhîd*, and that Adam himself was a prophet. Knowledge of *tawhîd* pertains to the human *fitra*, the original human nature given by God. One does not need revelation to understand it.

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 instrumental rationality—the idea that the only function of human intelligence is to get the job done.

A more pertinent question to ask is why Muslims, in contrast to Europeans, continued to pay relatively little attention to the workings of the physical universe. The reason is simply that the axiom of *tawhîd* infused all intellectual endeavor. It prevented the deep split that occurred in the West between subject and object. Cartesian style dualism would have appeared to the tradition as an absurdity. To imagine that human intelligence stands apart from the existence of the universe or that its role is simply to control the world is to misunderstand our true human nature and our proper function in the cosmos.

*Tawhîd* prevented the separation of subject and object because it declares the interrelatedness of all things. 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 truly separate from each other or from the One Principle. Quite the contrary, the more they investigated the universe, the more they saw it as manifesting the principles of *tawhîd* 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.”

In speaking of the decline of the Muslim intellectual tradition, people also ignore the history of Christian civilization, which did in fact undergo a profound decline, because it experienced a breakdown of its synthetic worldview. Part of the reason for Christianity’s decline and the concurrent rise of a secular, scientific, and anti-religious worldview was the transmitted nature of Christianity’s basic givens. The historical events upon which Christianity is based could too easily be called into question by non-dogmatic thinkers. In the Islamic case, Muslim intellectuals did not depend on revelation and transmission for their understanding of *tawhîd*, but rather on their own intelligence, so theological squabbles and historical uncertainties could not impinge upon their basic vision of reality.

To forestall misunderstanding, I need to say that I am not implying that the Muslim philosophers rejected Muhammad as their prophet or the Koran as their book of guidance. Generally speaking, they saw no reason to question the dogmatic basis of the transmitted knowledge, because they considered religious teachings to be beneficial for everyone, and they acknowledged the necessity of knowledge transmitted from the prophets for learning correct ritual activity. Nonetheless, wisdom—true intellectual learning—was by its very nature accessible only within the self. Those who felt the need to seek for it were by definition few and far between. This “undemocratic” and “elitist” position goes back to the nature of things, the fact that, as Ibn ‘Arabî likes to remind us, the self-disclosure of the divine Reality never repeats itself. Everything, like the One God Himself, is uniquely itself; every human gift—physical, psychical, spiritual, intellectual—is unique to the recipient. Moreover, political ideology played no role in the pre-modern Muslim understanding of social reality.



The philosophers took society as they found it, not as they wished it to be.

*Realization: The Methodology of Wisdom*

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 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 *taqlîd*, 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 the appropriate aptitudes. The quest for knowledge was defined not in terms of *taqlîd* or “imitation” but in terms of *tahqîq*, “verification” and “realization.”

It is important here not to confuse *tahqîq* with *ijtihâd*. Both these words are used as opposites of *taqlîd*. However, *tahqîq* pertains to the intellectual sciences, and it means to find the truth and reality of all things by oneself and in oneself. *Ijtihâd* is employed in reference to the transmitted sciences, specifically *fiqh* or jurisprudence. *Ijtihâd* is to gain such a mastery of the Shariah that one does not need to follow the opinions (*taqlîd*) of earlier jurists. For centuries, many legal experts have considered “the gate of *ijtihâd*” to be closed. But the “gate of *tahqîq*” can never be closed, because realization does not depend upon mastery of a vast repository of transmitted learning, but rather on understanding God and the implications of his unity. This understanding is inseparable from self-understanding, and the search for it is woven into human nature.

The distinction between *tahqîq* and *taqlîd* is fundamental. If we fail to see that knowledge achieved by realization is not the same as knowledge 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 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 ac-

cepted the findings of their predecessors on the basis of imitation and trust, as modern scientists do.

Given that scientism—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 depends on assumptions about the nature of reality that cannot be verified by empirical methods. Even if we accept for a moment the proposition that scientific knowledge is uniquely “objective,” it is in fact verifiable only by 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 hearsay (*taqlîd*).

### *Tahqîq*

To come back to the nature of realization, we need to remember that the Arabic word *tahqîq* derives from the word *haqq*. *Haqq* is both a verbal noun and an adjective meaning true, truth, to be true; real, right, proper, just, appropriate. The word plays an important role in the Koran and in all branches of Islamic learning. In its first Koranic meaning it designates God himself. God as *haqq* is absolute truth, rightness, reality, properness, justness, and appropriateness.

*Tahqîq* is a transitive and intensive verbal form derived from *haqq*. 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. *Tahqîq* is to understand and actualize truth, reality, and rightness within oneself, to “realize” it and to make it real and actual for oneself and in oneself.

If the word *haqq* is applied to God, that is because God is the absolutely true, right, real, and proper. But, it is also applied to everything other than God. This secondary application of the word acknowledges that everything in the universe has a truth, a rightness, a realness, and an appropriateness. If God is *haqq* in the absolute sense, everything other than God is *haqq* in a relative sense. The task of *tahqîq* is to build on the knowledge of the absolute *haqq*, beginning with the axiom of *tawhîd*, and to grasp the exact nature of the relative *haqq* 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 *tawhîd* can help us to understand the goal of *tahqîq*. If “There is no god but God,” this means, “There is no *haqq* but the absolute *haqq*.” The only true and real *haqq* is God himself. This *Haqq* is transcendent, infinite, and eternal. In face of it, there is no other *haqq*. At the same time, 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 *bâtil*—the opposite of *haqq*—false, vain, unreal, inappropriate.

The *haqq*s of individual things are determined by God’s wisdom in creation. It is in respect to these individual *haqq*s that the Prophet commanded people “to give to each that has a *haqq* its *haqq*” (*âtâ’ kull dhî haqq haqqahu*). “Giving each thing its *haqq*” can be taken as a nutshell definition of *tahqîq*. This is obviously more than a mere cognitive activity. We cannot give things what is rightfully due to them simply by knowing their truth and reality. Over and above knowing, *tahqîq* demands acting. It is not simply to verify 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 an integral part of the quest for wisdom, and many of its representatives made a conscious effort to synthesize Greek ethical teachings with the moral and practical teachings of the Koran.

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, nor by citing the words of the Koran and Muhammad. One verified and realized things by knowing them as they are and 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 better than the famous maxim attributed to the Prophet, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.”

### *Intelligence*

In order to grasp the purpose of *tahqîq*, it is useful to reflect on how the philosophers understood the word *ʿaql*, the noun that gives us the adjective form *ʿaqlî* or “intellectual.” *ʿAql* means in-

tellekt, intelligence, reason, mind, *nous*. To see how the word was understood, however, 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 discussion is not about dogma, because no one can realize anything by memorizing catechisms. The purpose was to find out for oneself, but the words of those who have achieved the goal, or at least set out with this specific goal in mind, revolve around certain common themes. These can be studied as transmitted knowledge, much as we might study the map of mountainous terrain before we set on a trek. We understand that we will not and cannot know the path until we have traversed it ourselves.

The underlying substance of a human being is called *nafs*, a word that functions as the most important reflexive pronoun in Arabic. *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 common activities of Muslim intellectuals. 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 constantly differentiate among them in terms of their modalities of appearance. We know the difference between living things and dead things precisely by the way they appear to us. “Soul” is a generic name for an invisible something that shows itself when we recognize life and awareness.

When we recognize soul in other things, we are simultaneously recognizing it in ourselves. It is soul, or what lies beyond soul in the realm of the spirit, that recognizes soul. We know a living thing because we are alive, and we recognize a self-acting thing because we have self-activity. What we see outside we find inside. Finding the external apparitions of soul is to experience the soul’s presence in oneself. Life and awareness are precisely the properties that we find in ourselves in the very act of discerning them in others.

There are degrees of soul, which is to say that this invisible something is more intense and influential in some things than in others. The classification of creatures into inanimate, plant, ani-

mal, human, and angel is one way of acknowledging 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 human activities, which clearly has something to do with vast differences in aptitude and ability. Because of the diverse and comprehensive powers of their own souls, human beings can grasp and replicate all the activities that other modalities of soul cause to appear in the world.

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 be considered mirror images. In this respect they are often called “microcosm” and “macrocosm,” a notion that has obvious parallels in the other great wisdom traditions.

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 the human microcosm 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 learn how to be truly human. Without human beings (or, one can surmise, analogous beings), there is no reason for a universe to exist in the first place. The teleology was always acknowledged.

For the intellectual tradition, the ultimate purpose of studying the macrocosm is to come to understand the powers and capabilities of the microcosm. By understanding the object, we simultaneously grasp 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.

If the philosophers analyzed 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 *tawhîd*. 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 also to all souls. The intellect alone is able to grasp and realize the purpose of human life and all life.

### *The Origin and Return*

What then is this intellect that is the fountainhead and goal of intellectual learning? To define it is impossible, because intellect underlies the very 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. 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, the goal of those who search for realization. Let me deal with cosmogenesis first.

The wisdom tradition typically discussed the birth of the cosmos as beginning with God's creation or emanation of the first creature, which is given many names in the texts, such as intellect, word, pen, light, Muhammadan spirit. Things appear from the One in a definite, intelligible order and in keeping with a fixed and known hierarchy (known, that is, to God and to 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 limitless consciousness is prefigured the universe and the human soul.

This first intelligence is the instrument through which the Real 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 Koranic lan-

guage 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 precisely “realization,” and it is the fruition and fulfillment of human possibility. Although the intellect is 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.

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. However, 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. 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 was 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 display limiting 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 these play positive and necessary roles in the world and 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 *tawhîd*. They must “give to everything that has a *haqq* its *haqq*”—and all things have *haqq*s.

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 has only the *potential* to know all things, not the actual-



ity of knowing. Actuality is a quality of intellect. Every act of knowing realizes something of the soul's potential 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 cannot be known by the intellect. The goal of learning is to know everything that can possibly be known. However, knowable things need to be prioritized. 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 realized 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 core of its being can it be called an “intellect” in the proper sense of the word. At this 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. The philosophers frequently called the human soul a “potential intellect” (*`aql bi'l-quwwa*) or a “hyl-ic intellect” (*`aql hayûlânî*), which is to say that it has the capacity to know all things. Once the soul ascends through the stages of actualizing its own awareness and achieving its own innate perfection, it is called an “actualized intellect” (*`aql bi'l-fi'l*).

Often, philosophers refer to the realization of the intellect by the Koranic terms “salvation” (*najât*) or “felicity” (*sa`âda*). They would agree with Tu Weiming, who writes, “Salvation means the full realization of the anthropocosmic reality inherent in our human nature.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

### *The Quest for Omniscience*

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

5 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 64.



live up to the human potential, and if Aristotle also understood the human potential, that is why they call him “The First Teacher” (*al-mu`allim al-awwal*). They would remind us that the Koran 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.

The traditional Muslim intellectuals might also point out that the 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 actualized intellect, the radiance of God’s own Ipseity. Realization, in other words, will 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” awakening—even if no distinction can be drawn between subject and object when one has actualized 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 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 to synthesize all knowledge and unify the knowing subject with its object. In contrast the modern scientist looks at branches, applications, and phenomena and strives to analyze objects, multiply data, and concoct theories.

The traditional intellectual undertakes the quest for omniscience as an individual. He knows that he can only achieve the realization of the Real within himself and that he can only do so by achieving the fullness of his own humanity, with everything that this demands ethically and morally. The modern scientist undertakes his 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 the sacred enterprise of Science, for Science alone has uniquely privileged methodologies and brilliantly sophisticated instruments. He never imagines that he himself can achieve omniscience—it will be achieved collectively and will

entail a vast compendium of transmitted knowledge that no individual can hope to comprehend. Moreover, the scientist rarely gives any thought to the possibility that every knowledge makes ethical demands upon the knower. If he does give it a thought, he does so not as a scientist, but as an ethicist or philosopher or religious believer. There is no room for ethics in Science.

Traditional seekers of wisdom aim to actualize 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, cosmology, psychology, and ethics that take 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 actualization of all the qualities present in the divine image and named by the names of God. The scientific 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 realizes 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.

Let me recapitulate 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 an-

other 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 spiritual psychology were essential parts of the quest. The final goal was to achieve a realization that gave each thing its *haqq* by situating it in its proper place in an overarching, simultaneous vision of earthly appearances, intelligible principles, and the intelligent self. 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 cosmogonic process. Realization, or attaining to the reality of all things in oneself, meant correct understanding and correct activity, wisdom married to virtue and ethical activity.

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 links that bind the two. To do so would be to forget *tawhîd* 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, minted in the image of God.