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Traditional Islamic Thought and the Challenge of Scientism

Given the vitality of modern Western thought in its various forms and the vociferous claims that are made for its universal relevance and coming global dominance, it seemed appropriate for me to think through, once again, my reasons for continuing to waste my precious time studying the intellectual masters of an all but vanished civilization. Is there anything in traditional Islamic thought that makes it any more than a historical curiosity, fit for museums and rotting libraries? Is there any reason to claim that Islamic thought is relevant to the very real and concrete issue of survival in the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century?

It seems to me that there are many reasons to make this claim. In order to provide a few of them, I will begin by reviewing a few salient characteristics of traditional Islamic thought. Then I will suggest how the Islamic perspective can throw sobering light on the current global intoxication with technological progress.

Thought

I need to preface my remarks by recalling the important role that has been given to thought throughout Islamic history. By "thought" I mean the human capacity and ability to be aware of things and to articulate this awareness in concepts and language. For those familiar with the Islamic worldview, it is not too difficult to see that thought has always been considered the single most important component of human life, and that it must be attended to before all else.

The principle of the primacy of thought is made explicit in the first half of the testimony of Islamic faith, the Shahādah. *Tawḥīd* or the assertion of God's unity – which is voiced in the *kalimat at-tawḥīd,* the statement "There is no god but God" – has no direct relationship with the facts and events of the world. *Tawḥīd* is essentially a thought, a logical and coherent statement about the nature of reality, a statement that needs to inform the understanding of every Muslim. Moreover, in the Koranic vision of things, *tawḥīd* guides the thinking of all human beings, not just Muslims, inasmuch as they are true to human nature *(fiṭra)*. Every prophet came with *tawḥīd* in order to remind his people of their own true nature. *Tawḥīd is* the very foundation of intelligence, so much so that God himself declares it as the principle of his own understanding. As the Koran puts it, "God bears witness that there is no god but He" (3:18).

In this traditional Islamic view of things, thought is far more real than the bodily realm, which is nothing but the apparition of thought. I do not mean to say that the external world has no objective reality, far from it. I mean to say that the universe is born from the consciousness, awareness, and "though" of the divine and spiritual realms.

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It should be obvious that by real "thought" I do not mean simply the superficial activities of the mind, such as reason, reflective thinking, ideation, and cogitation. Rather, I mean the very root of human existence, which is consciousness, awareness, and understanding. The Islamic intellectual tradition has usually referred to this root as *'aql,* or "intelligence". Thought in this sense is a spiritual reality that has being and life by definition. In contrast, the bodily realm is essentially dead and evanescent, despite the momentary appearance of life within it. Intelligence is aware, but things and objects are unaware. Intelligence is active, but things are passive. Intelligence is a living, self-conscious, dynamic reality. In its utmost purity, intelligence is simply the shining light of the living God, and that light gives being, life, and consciousness to the universe. It is the creative command whereby God brought the universe into existence. It is the spirit that God blew into Adam after having molded his clay, the divine speech that conveys to Adam the names of all things.

In traditional Islamic thinking, it is taken for granted that God is the source of all reality. It is recognized that the universe and all things within it appear from God in an orderly fashion, somewhat as light appears from the sun by degrees. The spiritual world, which is the realm that the Koran calls *ghayb* or "unseen", is the realm of life, awareness, and intelligence. The bodily world, which the Koran calls *shahāda* or the "witnessed", is the realm of death, unawareness, and unintelligence. The closer a creature is situated to God, the more intense is its light and the more immersed it is in intelligence, consciousness, and thought. Thus angels and spirits are vastly more intense in luminosity and intelligence than most inhabitants of the human realm.

In this way of looking at things, what exactly are human beings, who, in Koranic terms, were made God's *khalīfa* or vicegerent on earth In

brief, people are nothing but their thought. Their awareness and consciousness determine their reality. Their thoughts mold their nature and shape their destiny. The great Persian poet Rumi reminds us of thought's primacy in his verses:

Brother, you are this very thought –
the rest of you is bones and fiber.
If roses are your thought, you are a rose garden,
if thorns, you are fuel for the furnace.
If rosewater, you will be sprinkled on the neck,
if urine, you will be dumped in a hole.[1]

It is human nature to understand that we are nothing but thought and awareness. Nonetheless, we forget it constantly. We are too preoccupied with our daily activities to stop and think. We are too busy to remember God and apply the principle of *tawḥīd*, which guides all true thought back to the One from which thinking arises. Without the constant reorientation of thought by the remembrance of the One, people can only forget their real nature, which is the intelligence that was taught all the names by God himself.

If thought determines our present situation and our final outcome, what should be the content of thought? Toward what end should thought be directed? The position of the Islamic tradition has always been that thought must be focused on what is real, and that there is nothing real in the true sense but God alone. The whole activity of thought must be ordered and arranged so that it begins and ends with God. Moreover, moment by moment, thought must be sustained by the awareness of God. Forgetting God, what one needs to recall, is Adam's sin. In Adam's case, the sin was quickly forgiven, because Adam immediately remembered. But most people do not remember,

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especially in modern times, and the consequences have been catastrophic. As the Koran puts, "They forgot God, so God forgot them" (9:67).

True thought, then, accords with the divine spirit that lies at the heart of human awareness. It is the understanding of things as they are. Things can only be understood *as they are* if one is aware of them in relation to the Creator who sustains them moment by moment. True thought is to see things in relation to God. This is precisely the meaning of *tawḥīd*.

Rumi tells us repeatedly about the proper object of thought, and he often reminds us that true thought is living intelligence, or another kind of vision. Take these verses:

To be human is to see, and the rest is only skin.
To see is to see the beloved.
If your beloved is not seen, better to be blind.
If your beloved is riot the Everlasting, better not to have one.[2]

What Rurni is telling us is that human beings are governed totally by their awareness of goals and desires. Any thought, any vision, any understanding, that is not informed and guided by the awareness of God's overwhelming and controlling reality loses sight of the nature of things and forgets the purpose of human life. The ultimate outcome of such thought can only be disaster for the individual, if not for society as a whole.

The Intellectual Tradition

In speaking of "traditional Islamic thought" I have in mind that branch of Islamic learning that focused on intelligence, *'aql*, as the

source of the universe and the goal of human life. This tradition was called *ʿaqlī*, "intellectual", to distinguish it from *naqlī*, "transmitted". Intellectual learning includes fields such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and natural science, and it also embraces a good deal of Sufism and some Kalām. Transmitted learning includes Koran, Hadith, jurisprudence, and language.

There were four main areas of inquiry that dominated the concerns of Muslim intellectuals. First is metaphysics, or knowledge of the ultimate reality. Second is cosmology, or knowledge of the universe, its origins and its ends. Third is psychology, or knowledge of the human soul, its beginnings and its destiny. And fourth is ethics, or knowledge of the traits of human character that allow for a harmonious and healthy development of the soul.

The various branches of intellectual learning that resembled what we nowadays call "science" focused on various peripheral issues pertaining to cosmology. Most Muslim intellectuals were not interested in such issues per se, but only inasmuch as they could throw light on the primary topics.

It is important to understand that *tawḥīd* is the underlying insight and the starting point of the intellectual tradition. It is this that makes it a thorough-going Islamic discipline and not simply a continuation of Greek philosophy. Anyone who has read the great texts of this tradition knows that *tawḥīd* was self-evident to Muslim intellectuals. It was the very root of their perspective. It allowed them to see from the outset that God is the origin of all things, that God is the ultimate destiny of all things, and that God is the support and sustenance of all things at every moment.

In this metaphysics of *tawḥīd,* all true and proper sciences are applications of *tawḥīd.* Cosmology is the application of *tawḥīd* to the origin and appearance of the universe, psychology is the application

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The primary characteristic of Islamic intellectuality was its unitary vision of things. The various sciences were not understood as separate and independent realms of inquiry, but rather as complementary domains. This meant that the more one investigated the outer world, which is the domain of cosmology, the more one became aware of the inner world, which is the domain of psychology. In fact, the names that I have employed – "metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, and ethics" – do not have exact parallels in the classical Islamic texts, and the investigations of these domains tended to be interrelated and intertwined. In all cases, metaphysics was the foundation.

The interrelationship among the domains of intellectual inquiry can be seen clearly in the two realms that I have labeled "cosmology" and "psychology". It is sometimes thought that the Sufis focused on psychology and the soul's perfection, and that the philosophers were more interested in cosmology and the origins of the universe. In fact, both philosophers and Sufis were deeply interested in both domains. On the philosophical side, this is already apparent in the expression *mabda' wa maʿād*, "The Origin and the Return". Both Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Ṣadrā, arguably the two greatest representatives of the philosophical tradition, wrote books by this title.

As Islamic philosophy developed, *maʿād*, or the soul's return to God, became more and more the center of attention. Those who discussed *maʿād* were not primarily concerned with death, afterlife, and the Resurrection. Rather, they wanted to understand and explicate the nature of the human ascent toward God in this world. Moreover, even though metaphysics and cosmology focus on God and the cosmos, both were studied with the aim of understanding the true

nature of the human soul. The simple reason for this is that we cannot understand ourselves without understanding God and the universe. Only in terms of a true comprehension of the nature of things can people orient themselves in relation to their ultimate concerns. Only on the basis of a correct orientation can they set out to achieve the goal of human life, which is to be completely human.

In short, the purpose of all the intellectual studies was to prepare the ground for achieving human perfection. Perfection can only be reached by "returning" to God, that is, by traversing the route of the *maʿād*. Traversing the route of the *maʿād* meant going back where one had come from without waiting for this to happen after death. Both philosophers and Sufis were striving to become what it is possible to become in the light of our human status as vicegerents of God. To use the expression that was made famous by Ibn Arabi, the goal of human life was to become an *insān-i kāmil*, "a perfect human being".

Taqlīd and Taḥqīq

In trying to understand the nature of the Islamic intellectual tradition, it is important to grasp the nature of the knowledge that Muslims were trying to acquire. One way to do so is to reflect on the difference between *taqlīd* and *taḥqīq*. As is well known, the word *taqlīd* has two opposites in the Islamic sciences. If we are discussing transmitted sciences such as *fiqh* and the Sharīʿah, its opposite is *ijtihād*. Muslim believers have the duty either to follow someone else's *ijtihād* or to be *mujtahids* themselves. Given the qualifications needed to become a *mujtahid*, most Muslims over the past few hundred years have held that the gate of *ijtihād* is closed. Nonetheless, this was not a universal idea, and it has certainly been questioned in modern times.

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By its very nature, "understanding" is an intensely personal experience, because it is to actualize correct knowledge of something in oneself. As a methodology *taḥqīq* was always conceptualized as finding the *ḥaqq* for oneself and in oneself. No one can truly understand anything whatsoever by way of *taqlīd*. A *muḥaqqiq* is someone who knows things directly and then acts in the appropriate manner on the basis of this direct knowledge. A *muḥaqqiq* fulfils his responsibility toward God, creation, and society on the basis of a verified and realized knowledge, not on the basis of imitating the opinions and activities of others.

In order to understand the difference between the goals of Muslim "intellectuals" properly so called, and the goals of those who were experts only in transmitted learning, we need to keep in mind the difference between *ijtihād* and *taḥqīq*. We also need to remember that in matters of transmitted learning, *taqlīd* was considered the proper path for almost everyone. By contrast, in matters of intellectual learning, *taqlīd* can at best be the first stage of learning. In intellectual affairs the goal is always *taḥqīq*, not *taqlīd*.

In transmitted affairs, it is necessary to accept the Koran and the Hadith on faith and it is perfectly legitimate to follow the opinions of the great *'ulamā'*. In intellectual learning, seekers could not simply imitate the great intellectuals. Rather, they had to find out for

themselves. You can be an *ʿālim* on the basis of *taqlīd,* but not an *ʿāqil.*

When great Muslims of the past, such as Rumi or Ghazali, criticized *taqlīd* they were not criticizing *taqlīd* in matters of the Sharīʿah.[3] Rather, they were attacking *taqlīd* in questions of understanding. You cannot understand God or your own self by quoting the opinions of others, not even if the others be the Koran and the Prophet. The only way to understand things is to find out for yourself in yourself – though you certainly need the help of those who already know. In other words, the goal of the intellectual tradition was to allow people to actualize proper thought for themselves, not to follow someone else's thinking. On the basis of proper thought, people can reach a correct understanding of the objects that pertain strictly to intelligence. The first and most important object of intelligence is *tawḥīd*, the one truth that underlies every truth. This means that the goal of the intellectual tradition was to understand and actualize *tawḥīd* first hand, for oneself, not on the basis of *taqlīd.*

Today, the real disaster that looms over Islamic civilization has little to do with *ijtihād* and everything to do with *taḥqīq*. A society without *mujtahids* can function adequately on the basis of *taqlīd*, but a society without *muḥaqqiqs* has surrendered the ground of intelligence. Such a society cannot hope to remain true to its own principles, because it can no longer *understand* its own principles. What I am saying is that *tawḥīd* can only be understood through *taḥqīq*, not through *taqlīd* and certainly not through *ijtihād.* Once Muslims lose sight of their own intellectual tradition, they have lost the ability to see with the eye of *tawḥīd.*

To lose the ability to see with the eye of *tawḥīd* means to see with the eye of *shirk. Shirk*[4], as everyone knows, is Islam's only unforgivable sin, because it is an utter distortion of human perception and

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understanding, a complete corruption of the human *fiṭra*, a total obscuration of the intelligence that is innate to every human being. Given that *tawḥīd* is the primary duty of every Muslim, and given that *tawḥīd* can be defined negatively as "the avoidance of *shirk*", it follows that avoiding *shirk* is the primary duty of every Muslim. And, just as *tawḥīd* is the first principle of right thinking, so also *shirk* is the first principle of wrong thinking. In other words, *shirk* is an intellectual issue, just as *tawḥīd* is an intellectual issue. Any form of thinking that is not rooted in *tawḥīd* necessarily participates in *shirk*.

Scientism

If the goal of the Muslim intellectual is to know things on the basis of *tawḥīd* through *taḥqīq*, not *taqlīd*, then it seems fair to say that there are few Muslim thinkers left on the face of the globe. Although a great deal of thinking does go on among contemporary Muslims, most of this thinking – with a few honorable exceptions – is deracinated, which is to say that it has few if any roots in the Islamic tradition itself. Although it frequently calls upon the Koran and the Hadith as witness, it is rooted in the imitation *(taqlīd)* of habits of mind that were developed in the West during the modern period. These habits of mind, if judged by the principles of Islamic thinking, are misguided and wrong-headed. In other words, they are rooted in *shirk*, not in *tawḥīd*.

If we accept that few Muslim thinkers live in the verified reality *(taḥaqquq)* of the Islamic intellectual tradition, it will be obvious that a great deal needs to be done if this tradition is not to succumb totally to the flood of modernity. If the tradition is to be revived and recovered, the nature of intellectual health will need to be thoroughly re-evaluated. This will demand careful scrutiny of the great texts of

Islamic philosophy and theoretical Sufism and a serious attempt to understand Islamic principles by way of *taḥqīq*.

However, before revival can begin in any real way, the problem must be correctly diagnosed. Correct diagnosis depends upon recognizing error for what it is. The difficulty here is that thought rooted in *shirk* is omnipresent, not only in the Islamic world, but also elsewhere. It is so much a part of the way that most people think today that they imagine it to be natural and normal. Like someone suffering from a debilitating disease from childhood, they have lost any sense of what health might involve.

In order to understand the nature of the disease, we need to remember that practically all of us suffer from it, whether or not we are aware of it. The reason for this is that it is a characteristic of modernity (and of "post-modernity" as well). The disease is co-extensive with the worldview that informs modern thought.

It is very difficult to characterize the modern worldview with a single label. One word that has often been suggested is "scientism". I understand this word to designate the notion that the scientific method and scientific findings are the sole criterion for truth.[5] So defined, scientism is a belief-system. Like most belief-systems, it has become second nature to its believers. They do not recognize it as a beliefsystem, because they think it is self-evident truth.

Scientism is a basic characteristic of the modern worldview and the contemporary zeitgeist. People see the world and their own psyches in terms of what they have learned in schools, universities, and television documentaries. It is taken for granted that the universe as described by science is the real universe. As for religious teachings, these are understood to pertain to ritual and morality, but not to the "real world", since we have been taught to see the world only with scientistic eyes.

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One of the many implications of the scientistic worldview is the common belief that the cosmology and natural sciences discussed in the Islamic intellectual tradition were early stages of the development of what we nowadays call science, and that the findings of those early stages of human thought have now been proven to be false. People imagine that modern science has progressed far beyond medieval ideas.

However, there is a basic fallacy in this view of pre-modern science. It is the assumption that the aims and goals of pre-modern science were the same as those of contemporary science. If this were true, then indeed the pre-modern ideas would be incorrect. However, the fact is that the medieval scientists were occupied with a totally different task than that which has occupied modern scientists. In order to understand the quest of traditional Muslim intellectuals, it might be better to avoid altogether the use of the word *science* to designate what they were doing. This word has been pre-empted by the empirical methodologies that characterize the modern period. Instead, we need to recover a term that represents fairly the real goal of Islamic learning.[6]

One possible name for both the methodology and the goal of the intellectual tradition, a name that was commonly used, is *ḥikma* or "wisdom". This word has the advantage of not implying a "scientific" and empirical approach to things, and it also has the advantage of being a divine attribute. In English, it makes perfect sense to say that God is "Wise", but to say that God is a "Scientist" would sound absurd. The English word *wisdom* and the Arabic word *ḥikma* have preserved enough of their ancient meaning to imply both right thought and right activity, both intellectual perfection and moral perfection.

In contrast, modern scientists long ago abandoned any claim that science can help people find the road to right activity, not to speak of moral perfection. The role of science is simply to provide more power over God's creation. Science does not and cannot address the issue of understanding the true nature of the universe, because the true nature of the universe cannot be understood without reference to the Creator of the universe. Nor can science address the issue of how we are to find the wisdom to use correctly the power that we gain over creation. Using power incorrectly is one definition of *ẓulm* – wrongdoing, injustice, iniquity, tyranny.

Another name that fairly describes the goal of Islamic thought is the already mentioned *taḥqīq*. The Muslim intellectuals were not trying to contribute to the so-called "progress of science". Rather, they were trying to develop their own understanding of things. The focus of their attention was not on the practical affairs of this world, but on the full actualization of human intelligence. This demanded not only discovering the *ḥaqq* of things, but also acting in accordance with the *ḥaqq* of things, a *ḥaqq* that can only be determined with reference to the Absolute *ḥaqq* which is God himself. *Taḥqīq* demands both right thought and right activity, both intellectual perfection and moral perfection.

The Islamic quest for wisdom was always a quest to achieve unity with the divine light or the divine spirit, a light and spirit that was called "intelligence" or "heart". By the nature of this quest, Muslim intellectuals knew from the outset that everything had come from the One Principle and will return to the One Principle. In other words, *tawḥīd* informed their vision from beginning to end. Their quest was not to "believe" that God is One, because they already knew that God is One. God's unity is too self-evident to be called into question, unless someone's intelligence has become atrophied or stunted. The

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The Reign of Takthī

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In brief, the purpose of searching for wisdom was what we can call "the *taḥqīq* of *tawḥīd*". In other words, it was to verify and realize the truth of *tawḥīd* for oneself, and then to put *tawḥīd* into practice in all one's thoughts and activities. The goal was spiritual transformation. This transformation was understood to involve a total conformity with the divine attributes *(ṣifāt)* and character traits *(akhlāq)*. It was often called *ta'alluh*, "deiformity" or "being like unto God", or *takhalluq bi akhlāqi'llāh*, "assuming the character traits of God".

In the Islamic wisdom tradition, *tawḥīd* was the guide of all efforts. It was both the seed and the fruit of human possibility. It was the seed that was planted in human awareness in order to yield the fruit of perfect understanding and perfect activity. In such a view of things, it was impossible to separate the realms of learning into independent domains. *Taḥqīq* was a holistic enterprise that yielded a unified vision of things. This unified vision demanded the unity of the human subject with the cosmic object, that is, the conformity of the full human soul with the world in all its grandeur. Soul and world were always seen as complementary manifestations of the One, Single Principle, which is God. When God created Adam in His own image, he also created the universe in His own image. Perfect understanding means the ability to see all things in their proper places, which means to see them as divine images and in their relationship to God.

The Reign of Takthīr

I said earlier that the modern worldview is governed by a certain type of false thinking. I suggested that one name for that thinking is

"scientism", and it is false because it fails to see the *ḥaqq* of things and makes unwarranted claims. But there is a much deeper reason why the modern worldview is essentially false. In order to explain this, I need to develop a few more implications of *tawḥīd.*

I said that the loss of *tawḥīd* is called *shirk.* I want to suggest now why science in its modern sense demands *shirk.* This is perhaps a startling claim, and it will offend many practicing Muslim scientists, not to mention all those Muslims who believe that modern science can be justified by reference to the Prophet's commands to seek knowledge. Nonetheless, my point needs to be made as starkly as possible. If it is not grasped, there will be no hope for the revival of the intellectual tradition. The evidence for the claim becomes completely obvious as soon as one understands what the Islamic intellectual tradition was trying to do.

I reminded you that the guiding principle of the Islamic wisdom tradition has been *tawḥīd.* If this is true, it is not too difficult to see that the guiding principle of modern science and learning is the abandonment of *tawḥīd.* We can call this abandonment *shirk,* but I do not want to deny a certain positive content to science. In its common usage, the word *shirk* is too heavily loaded with negative connotations to have any positive sense. Moreover, I do not want to make a moral or even a religious case against science. Rather, I want to make an intellectual case, in keeping with the tradition from which I am drawing.

So, let me suggest that the guiding principle of modern science and learning can be designated by the word *takthīr. Takthīr is* the literal opposite of *tawḥīd. Tawḥīd* means "to make one", and *takthīr* means "to make many". *Tawḥīd* means "asserting unity", and *takthīr* means "asserting multiplicity". *Tawḥīd* is to recognize the primacy and ultimacy of the One Reality. It is to acknowledge that everything

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comes from God, everything returns to God, and everything is sustained by God. *Takthīr* is to declare the primacy and ultimacy of many realities. It is to assert that things have many origins and many destinies and that they are sustained by many different things.

By no means is *takthīr* inherently false. Rather, it is inherently short-sighted and incomplete. It misses the important points, because it denies implicitly, if not explicitly, the ultimacy of the One Reality that stands beyond all other realities. Once we understand things in terms of *tawḥīd*, we can understand the origin and destiny of the universe and the human soul, and we can also grasp the present status of the world in which we live. *Tawḥīd* answers the ultimate questions and allows people to orient themselves in terms of the beginning and end of all things. If *takthīr* is to have any legitimacy, it must be oriented and governed by *tawḥīd. Takthīr* without *tawḥīd* can only tell us how things are related to other things, but there can be no unifying vision. A perspective based on *takthīr* denies implicitly that there is a purpose to existence. It rejects the idea that human aspirations to achieve moral and ethical betterment and to become intellectually and spiritually perfect have any grounding in objective reality.

The Muslim cosmologists were very interested in the issue of *takthīr.* But, for them, *takthīr* was a divine attribute. It is God's activity in bringing the universe into existence. When Muslim intellectuals investigated the *mabda'*, the Origin of all things, they were explicating the nature of *takthīr.* In effect, they saw God as *al-mukaththir,* "the One who brings the many into existence". In contrast, when they discussed psychology, which is the *ma'ād* or the return of the soul to God, *tawḥīd* was the primary issue. Here the question is simply this: How can we, as beings who dwell in

multiplicity, unify our vision and activity and thereby return happ ltimate end of cre and freely to the One Origin, who is the Place of Return? erfection depend up

In short, within the Islamic intellectual tradition, we can understa f the Islamic wor *takthīr* as the divine principle that makes multiplicity appear from cientific worldview One. *Tawḥīd* is then the complement of *takthīr*. It designates *awḥīd*".[8] I do not h divine and human principle that reintegrates the many into the O upport this claim, One philosopher, for example, tells us that the Universal Intellect earning, where *takth* *khalīfatu'llāh* in the Origin, which is to say that multiplicity appe pecialized nature of from unity on the basis of the radiance of the divine omniscience. earning; the disinteg contrast, human beings are *khalīfatu'llāh* in the Return, which is he modern universit say that the human role in the cosmos is to take multiplicity back o any but the experts the unity from which it arose.[7] This explains why God select f science and learni Adam among all creatures to be taught the names. Only by knowi hought, the result the names of all things can human beings integrate all things, ma isunity, disharmony them one, and take them all back to God. In other words, hum modern science and intelligence has the potential to act directly on behalf of Go ot in God's unity because, in its purest form, it is nothing but the living light and spi nification and harmo of God that was breathed into Adam at his creation.

In brief, the perspective of the Islamic intellectual traditi By nature modern s recognizes both *takthīr* and *tawḥīd*. However, *takthīr* is kept total context, a context tha subordinate to *tawḥīd,* which is to say that the many is always a *awḥīd*. Once we have forever governed by the One. The world and all things within it st n the total scheme o in God's hands and can never leave. The role of *takthīr* can only nd ethical principles understood in terms of *tawḥīd*. Once we understand that God creat he right to control human beings to act as His vicegerent and unify the whole guidance of wisdom. creation through their spiritual and moral perfection, then we c nd *ẓulm* indeed is a understand why God brought multiplicity into existence in the fi ocial institutions. It place. Real understanding and real knowledge depend upon grasp must have had in mi the ultimate end of human existence which corresponds with t bsolute power corru t is perhaps in the r *takthīr* becomes m

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If the Islamic worldview can be characterized as *tawḥīd,* the scientific worldview can be characterized as "*takthīr* without *tawḥīd*".[8] I do not have time to present any detailed arguments to support this claim, so let me look simply at the fruit of modern learning, where *takthīr* is obvious. Take, for example, the ever more specialized nature of the scientific, social, and humanistic domains of learning; the disintegration of any coherent vision of human nature in the modern university; the unintelligibility of the individual sciences to any but the experts; and the total incomprehensibility of the edifice of science and learning as a whole. When *takthīr* rules over human thought, the result can be analysis, differentiation, distinction, disunity, disharmony, disequilibrium, and dissolution. Given that modern science and learning are rooted in the world's multiplicity, not in God's unity, their fruit is division and dispersion, not unification and harmony.[9]

By nature modern science separates things out from their overall context, a context that cati only be properly understood in the light of *tawḥīd*. Once we have wrenched phenomena from their proper places in the total scheme of things, we can ignore the objectivity of moral and ethical principles and justify the view that human beings have the right to control God's creation as they see fit, without the guidance of wisdom. To use power without wisdom is to work *ẓulm*, and *ẓulm* indeed is a key characteristic of modern bureaucracies and social institutions. It is this power without wisdom that Lord Acton must have had in mind in his famous dictum: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

It is perhaps in the realm of ethics and morality that the power of *takthīr* becomes most obvious. From the Islamic intellectual

perspective, adherence to right activity and actualization of "praiseworthy character traits" *(akhlāq-i ḥamida)* is demanded by the objective nature of things. After all, the world is actually and truly a display of the divine attributes, and the human soul is actually and in fact made in God's image. Any human soul that does not actualize the divine character traits – such as wisdom, justice, mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness – has failed to live up to human status. Any methodology that yields an unbridgeable gulf between truth and ethics is ignorance, not knowledge. Such a knowledge ignores the *ḥaqq* of things, the moral demands that things make upon us. Such falsified knowledge is occupied with *bāṭil*, the untrue, the vain, the wrong. Under the reign of *takthīr*, intelligence and virtue are torn from their roots in God. The net result can only be the dispersal of human excellence in a vast range of unrelated realms of endeavor, with no connections to be made between knowing and being, or between science and ethics. The raw power that is accumulated through acquiring instrumental and manipulative knowledge can only result in the downfall of human goodness.

I repeat that the remedy for *takthīr*, is *tawḥīd*. God made *tawḥīd* a human imperative because without it, the world can only fall into corruption and ruin. *Tawḥīd* alone can reverse the natural flow of existence and awareness away from the divine unity into the dispersion and incoherence of multiplicity. Only the intelligence and free will of human beings, harnessed by divine guidance, can reintegrate the many back into the One.

Takthīr by itself, then is the process of bringing about multiplicity and disunity. It can only lead to disintegration. It is the direct opposite of *tawḥīd*. *Takthīr* is the animating principle of science as we know it today. Let scientists deny this as much as they want. The tree is known by its fruit, not by the claims of the gardener.

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The Goal of Thought

I said that there is a fundamental difference between the Islamic intellectual tradition and modern science and learning. One way to understand this is to see that Muslim intellectuals were striving to achieve a unitary and unified vision of all things by the divine spirit latent in the human soul, a spirit that they often called *ʿaql*.

In contrast, modern scientists want to achieve an ever more exact and precise understanding of things, one that allows for increased control over the environment, the human body, and society. This control, however, is not given over to the fully actualized intelligence of God's vicegerent on earth – an intelligence that by definition entails the fullness of ethical and moral perfection. Rather, control is surrendered to the passions of the ignorant and forgetful selfhood – what was called *nafs* ("ego") and *hawas* ("caprice") in the Islamic texts. This is blatantly obvious in the various forms of totalitarian government that have appeared in the modern world, all of which take full advantage of scientific and technological power to beat their subjects into submission. But even "democratic" government, as Plato recognized long ago, can only be the rule of ignorant human passions. It can never be the rule of intelligence.

I want to point out still another characteristic of the Islamic intellectual tradition that places it in stark contrast with modern learning. This has to do with the implications of *taḥqīq* some of which have already been discussed. *Taḥqīq* means to verify and realize things, or to give things their *ḥaqq* in view of the Absolute *ḥaqq* that is God himself. In modern Islamic languages, *taḥqīq* is sometimes used to translate scientific "research". However, traditional Muslim intellectuals would not have recognized *taḥqīq* in any forms of modern research. The basic reason for this is that

modern research is based essentially upon *taqlīd*, not upon *taḥqīq* which is to say that it always depends wholly on the findings of earlier scientists. In contrast, *taḥqīq* as understood by the Muslim intellectuals did not accept any intellectual issue on the basis of *taqlīd*. It was an intensely, personal activity that aimed at the discovery of the *ḥaqq* within the seeker's own intelligence. That intelligence was understood, and indeed, experienced, as the supra-individual, transpersonal, universal breath of awareness that was blown into Adam at his creation.

From the point of view of modern science, which is rooted in *taqlīd*, every seeker of wisdom in the Islamic intellectual tradition was trying to "reinvent the wheel". But it is precisely the technological application of knowledge, implied in this expression, that was *not* the goal of the quest. Rather, the goal was wisdom, and wisdom can only be discovered where it resides. Wisdom resides in living intelligence and ethical activity, nowhere else. It must be recovered newly by each human individual. Failure to do so is to fail in the task of being human, and this entails cosmic consequences.

It is a common misinterpretation of Islamic intellectual history to say that Muslim scholars made scientific discoveries, but, having done so, they did not follow up on them, so the torch of learning was passed to the West. But this is to read the empirical methodology and practical goals of modern science back into the intellectual methods and spiritual goals of the wisdom tradition. No, the goal was not to establish a fund of information upon which other scientists could build and from which technologists could draw for practical ends. Rather, the goal was *taḥqīq*, which is to discover the truth for oneself in oneself. Practical, worldly applications were of relatively little interest. Excessive attention paid to physical welfare and material benefit was considered a sure sign of a failed intellectual. In short,

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the true seeker of knowledge had another goal, which was to see for himself. The true seeker of knowledge knew that, as Rumi put it: "To be human is to see, the rest is skin." Seeing for oneself is called *taḥqīq,* and it is to grasp the *ḥaqq* of things – their truth and reality – and then to put all things in their proper places according to their *ḥaqqs.*

In the following verses, Rumi sums up the difference between a *muḥaqqiq* and a *muqallid,* or between someone who knows for himself and someone who imitates others in his thinking. He would surely include in the category of childlike *muqallid,* most if not all of those who are called "scientists" in modern times:

A child on the path does not have the thought of Men –
His imagination cannot be compared with true taḥqīq.
Children think of nurses and milk,
raisins and walnuts, crying and weeping.
The muqallid is like a sick child,
even if he offers subtle arguments and proofs.
His profundity in proofs and objections
drives him away from true insight.
He takes the collyrium of his secret heart
and uses it to offer rejoinders.[10]

Rumi, then, speaks for the whole Islamic intellectual tradition when he says that no one can achieve true and real understanding until he ceases to imitate others and finds out the truth for himself through *taḥqīq*.

My conclusion then is simply this: There will be no revival of Islamic thought until Muslim thinkers put the *taḥqīq* of *tawḥīd* back at the center of their concerns.

[1] **Mathnawī** (Nicholson edition), II, 277–9.

[2] **Mathnawī**, I, 1406–7.

[3] In **kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat**, Ghazali calls teaching learned by way of *taqlīd* "the mold of truth", and contrasts this with understanding the truth in itself: "The cause of the veil is that someone will learn the creed of the Sunnis and he will learn the proofs for that as they are uttered in dialectics and debate, then he will give his whole heart over to this and believe that there is no knowledge whatsoever beyond it. If something else enters his heart, he will say: 'This disagrees with what I have heard, and whatever disagrees with it is false.' It is impossible for someone like this ever to know the truth of affairs, for the belief learned by the common people is the mold of truth, not the truth itself. Complete knowledge is for the realities to be unveiled from the mold, like a kernel from the shell." **Kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat**, edited by H. Khadīw-jam, Tehran: jībī, 1345/1975, pp. 36–37.

[4] Arabic *shirk* means "the placing of another one beside God", "polytheism", opposite of *tawḥīd*, "unity". (Anm. d. Red.)

[5] For a good discussion of the errors of scientism, see Huston Smith, ***Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions***, New York: Harper Collins, 1976.

[6] As is well known, the word "science" is commonly translated into Islamic languages as *'ilm*, and this would be perfectly legitimate if "science" were understood in its etymological sense, that is, as "knowledge" in the broadest sense of the term. However, strict attention to what is meant by "science" in the modern world and what was meant by *'ilm* in classical Islamic texts would, I think, lead us to grasp that what goes by the name "science" today would have been recognized by Muslim intellectuals as systematic ignorance. This is because science ignores, in a careful and methodical fashion, everything that was considered necessary for the true understanding of the nature of things. Instead, it focuses on superficial appearances and outward phenomena.

[7] See Chittick, "Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī's Philosopher-King" in ***Knowledge is Light: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr***, edited by Zailan Moris, Chicago: ABC International, 1999, p. 149.

[8] Even if a "unified field theory" were to be achieved, it would simply show that the "physical" world – that is, the world, not as it is, but rather as it is understood and conceptualized by "physicists" – is governed by unified laws, which no one doubts in any case. But that leaves all the other modern sciences, such as

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biology, which do not follow "physical" laws, not to mention the social and human sciences. No, *takthīr* is the guiding principle of modern thought, and the only possible way to overcome it is to root oneself in *tawḥīd*.

[9] One of ʿAllāmah Iqbāl's great insights, which, however, he did not follow up as he might have, is his understanding that modern science yields disunity and dissonance by definition. I quote: "We must not forget that what is called science is ... a mass of sectinal views of Reality ... The various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair, and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precision." ***The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam***, Lahore: Iqbāl Academy, 1986, pp. 33–34.

[10] **Mathnawī**, V, 1289–93.