

ISLAMIC THOUGHT FACING THE 21st CENTURY'S CHALLENGES

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Abstract

In the 21st century, Muhammad's s.a.w.s. *Ummah* is struck by severe outer and inner challenges, the latest being a new form of the American-Israeli imperialism which threatens the world peace, modern civilization, and the 'Muslim world' as such. Second challenge is the harmful influence of the Western European epistemic imperialism that deleted, from the Muslim memory the remembrance of the most luxurious intellectual heritage from the 'golden age' of the thinking Islam and set up a regime of producing 'knowledge of endosmosis' which it isn't, as it is useless and without a purpose. The third challenge are multiple and deep divisions in the 'Muslim world' of the doctrinal, juridical, sectarian and ideological nature. They are a serious threat on the path to achieving a pan-Muslim unity on the principles of the original *Ummah*. But, perhaps the most serious challenge before the Muslim world of today is the complete reinterpretation of the tradition of belief and tradition of thinking of today's Muslims. A requirement without which it is impossible to make is a serious reform in the domain of Islamic upbringing and education which in itself is the challenge of all challenges in regard to the existing state of affairs in the indicated domains of Muslim epistemic and ethically-moral culture of ascension.

Keywords: *Muslim Ummah, Contemporary Challenges, Epistemic Imperialism, Islamic Education Reform*

Outer Challenges

Muhammad's (peace be upon him) *Ummah* and the thought it harbors today, if at all, find themselves in a time context in which challenges overtake each other. It is almost impossible to determine which one is more important than the other when it comes to the Muslim confronting them. The concept of *Ummah*, however, today already belongs to the predominance of pure and unrealized ideals. Today, it has almost no contact with the real life of the 'Muslim world'. It is a mere 'floating signifier' of a universal pan-Muslim identity, which does not have its own recognizable geographical homeground. That homeground is hardly even found on the geographical map by which one should recognize that geopolitical entity called the 'Muslim world' today. All the more so because Muslims today are scattered everywhere: in exile and in migration flows, or enslaved in their native countries of the 'Muslim world' by the despotic, dictatorial and corrupt political and religious elites. They do not even possess enough spiritual substance within themselves to be at least called cultural and historical heirs of the former great Islamic empire from the time of the Umayyads and Abbasids, and even less the spiritual descendants of great Muslim empires such as the Muslim Caliphate in Andalusia and the great Safavid, Mughal or Ottoman Empires in the East. In all these political entities, the concept of *Ummah* had real ground under its feet and constituted the spiritual flavor and religious and cultural-civilizational link of all Muslims across the entire geographical latitude of that time. But this is not the case today.

In addition to this common spiritual and cultural-civilizational denominator, the Muslims of that time were also adorned with the spirit of universal citizenship, a cosmopolitan spirit and belonging to Muhammad's (peace be upon him) *Islamopolis*, and a common luxurious spiritual culture that was built upon on daily basis by their valid tradition of thought. A special linkage between them were the 'Islamic languages' such as Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish, and even Urdu, in which the wisest Muslims of the time created and with their cognitive, cultural and civilizational advances brought Muslims to the very religious, scientific, cultural, civilizational and other rooftops of the world. (Dabashi, 2023, p. 255).

But, in today's 'Muslim world' there are no 'Islamic languages' anymore, and the flourishing spiritual culture that these languages once spread to all

four corners of the world cannot be recognized even in traces there today. Even worse is the fact that today's Muslims in the 'Muslim world' are not at all capable of at least rediscovering the former high spiritual, intellectual culture of the thinking Islam, because they no longer remember it. Exceptions to this fact today can be only three countries of the 'Muslim world': the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. These three countries not only cultivate a culture of remembering and promoting in the public space of the achievements of the most brilliant pages from the history of the thinking, intellectual Islam and comprehensive forms of cognitive culture, but they also raise the level of their military defense culture every day, notwithstanding of their enemies, which guarantees them survival and a dignified life in their own country and in their own spiritual identity. If only they could create a common economic market, following the example of the European Union, which, as an economic, geostrategic, political and military structure, rose above the borders of European nation states, these three Muslim countries would create a solid economic basis for re-translating the ideals of the *Ummah* from the state *in potentia* to the state *in actu*. In contrast to these three countries of the 'Muslim world', the rest of the countries of that world mostly dwell in the predominance of the post-colonial dream and in the cognitive illusion of producing post-colonial knowledge of 'endosmosis', knowledge which is not that, which is useless and which nobody needs (Dabashi, 2008).

However, the situation could be even worse for the 'Muslim world' at this moment. Muslims today live in a world ruled by ignorants, thugs, moral freaks and people without any human integrity. By destroying all the norms of international law and expanding the strategy of the most brutal state terror, two political regimes in the world today are becoming the most serious threat, not only to peace in the world, but also to the survival of human civilization: the political regime in Washington, which blindly and aggressively draws a new map of the world order, and the terrorist regime in Tel Aviv, that *map cancer* in the tissue of the Muslim world, which for decades has been a 'fuse of intrigue' (*al-Ma'idah*, 82) and a source of anarchy and terror in the Middle East and beyond. This new form of imperialism is not only changing the face of the 'Muslim world' today, but is also slowly changing the face of Europe and the West, as it already attacks important territories in Western Europe itself as well. With the disappearance of the old form of imperialism of the previous two centuries, the new American-Israeli imperialism is undis-

guisedly erasing the West, but at the same time its former binary imperialist vocabulary too. The *West* as we knew it until now is disappearing, but also the *Rest* of the world, referring primarily to the ‘world of Islam’, a term coined by the Western Orientalism of the time for the needs of the then imperialist West in its colonial and imperial enslavement of the ‘world of Islam’.

Now this uncontrolled American-Israeli imperialism is slowly introducing Europe and the rest of the world into a post-Western history and into a new post-Western world. How will the European peoples, who themselves are becoming a target of the new American-Israeli imperialism, live in that world and what will the new European societies be like in that new post-Western world? What will it mean *to be* a Muslim in the societies of this post-Western world, any Muslim who, due to insecurity in his own homeland, wants to leave and integrate into post-Western European societies? How will Muslim peoples even live in such a ‘Muslim world’ that, also, is already disappearing in the context of the new imperialist American-Israeli imagination?

It is clear that Muslim peoples must build a new world within what is vaguely and indeterminately called the ‘Muslim world’ today. This new post-‘Muslim world’ must have completely new governance structures, valid political and religious hierarchies, a new public discourse that will restore into the public space all those ‘Islamic languages’ which will bring back that cosmopolitan and multicultural spirit of the glorious Muslim culture, science, civilization, and even of the genuine religious scientific culture, even if these ‘Islamic languages’ are now recognized as English, German, French, and Italian, since today it is in these languages that the most prominent Muslim intellectuals in the West and Europe write the world literature, science, philosophy, literature, poetry, and more. The *intellectual sun* of the thinking Islam is now, undoubtedly, shining in the West and in Europe thanks to these ‘new Islamic languages’, and it would therefore be natural that the light of this *intellectual sun* would illuminate and shine the physical and spiritual space of the new, upcoming *Islamopolis*, which will be established on the map of the former ‘Muslim world’.

But the condition of all conditions for this to happen is the inevitable need to overthrow the old and establish a new regime of producing knowledge in the new *Islamopolis* with its own canons of thought, significantly different from those previously prescribed by five Western European universities, which had the title deed to all the knowledge of the world (Dabashi, 2013, ch. 1&2).

It is precisely this old regime of producing knowledge that has, over the past two hundred years, removed Muslims from all the rooftops of the world, subjugated them, and destroyed their most creative energy. Through two centuries of Western European colonialism over the 'Muslim world', the colonial regime of producing knowledge in the 'Muslim world' has erased from the young Muslim generations the best intellectual memory of all those values of universal Muslim scholarship that for centuries made Muslims the spiritual vanguard and the cultural-civilizational beacon of the world. Therefore, today's young Muslim generations must be re-taught that layered language of paramount Muslim scientific culture, science, spirituality, even the language of high scientific religious culture, which illuminated not only the former Muslim metropolises and cities within the Muslim Caliphate in Andalusia and the Islamic Empire in the East, but also numerous European cities before they became witnesses to the false myth of the universal 'Enlightenment' modernity of Europe, which ultimately ended in the horrors of the Holocaust and brutal slaughter and bloodshed on the European continent.

If the young Muslim generations in the new *Islamopolis*, as a synonym for the Islamic *Ummah*, or in the new post-Western societies of Europe, if it survives the latest brutal imperialism of America and Israel, could return to the *language* of the former most brilliant thinking tradition of Muslims, by virtue of that *language* as once *koine* or *lingua franca* of Muslim spirituality and culture, they will convey to themselves and to the world the cognitive fullness that the treasuries of that *language* keep in themselves, though still deeply buried, along with the entire intellectual tradition of Muslims, in the layered historical oblivion of the 'Muslim world', an oblivion that has its roots in the times of Western European colonialism. With that and such a *language* they will gain a new worldview, because the worldview of language as such is equally the worldview of the world, the world they once lost, and now they will regain it with the power of the *new language* that facilitates the reading of history and the world as a once truly lived experience (Gadamer, 1975, 399-401).

It is the worldview that was once developed by the Muslim *Islamicate* Empire with its cosmopolitan spirit that included all forms of cognitive culture, including those multicultural forms of other and different cultures within the Islamic societies of the time, which did not hesitate to incorporate into their contextual organon the Qur'anic narrative as well as the culture of remembering the very *Muhammadan* messages, refracted, not only through

the religious, but also through the cultural-civilizational, social, sacred and secular aspects of the daily life within the cosmopolitan and plural 'Islamic societies' (Hodgson, 1974, p. 59; Dabashi, 2013, p. 159).

Inner Challenges

The *epistemic colonialism* of the Western-European-centric mind poses one of the most serious challenges to the Muslim thought in the twenty-first century. The Muslim response to this challenge requires the immediate decolonization of the Muslim mind through a process of systematic deconstruction of Western knowledge and the introduction of a new regime of producing knowledge in Muslim societies. Western European knowledge, which has been introduced into every pore of life within the 'Muslim world' through the process of colonialism, and especially through the epistemic imperialism, is the knowledge of a civilization, Western European, whose whereabouts lie in the religion of Israel, in the Greek culture, and in the Roman law (Reilly, 2010, Foreword).

In parallel with the process of decolonizing the Muslim mind and deconstructing Western-European-centric knowledge, the thinking Muslims must also initiate a process of revitalizing their own intellectual heritage and establishing a new *modus intelligendi* in the categories and concepts that are most directly derived from that intellectual heritage. This latter process should primarily involve the sphere of education and culture in present Muslim societies. The language of the rediscovered intellectual Muslim heritage has already demonstrated its richness to the extent that it was capable of interpreting and preserving the Greek philosophical heritage during the European 'Dark Ages', and later transmitting it to the Latin West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Shortly afterwards, the language of the Muslim intellectual heritage, as well as the heritage itself, through a peculiar 'intellectual suicide', disappeared from the public space due to the emergence of a dysfunctional Muslim culture rooted in a completely deformed apologetic theology and moral infantilization of Muslims. The door to free and creative thought was closed, and the luxurious and layered, multiform spiritual culture of intellectual Islam was already becoming a distant memory. The public space of Muslim societies was dominated by an unbearable intellectual void that would soon be filled by Eurocentric scientific, cultural-civilizational and other Eurocentric values that would bring with themselves Europe's and West's colonialism and epistemic imperialism.

As to what extent has the post-colonial regime of producing knowledge of the 'endosmosis' in the Muslim world brainwashed young intellectuals and emptied them of the once glorious intellectual heritage of Muslims, especially those who live in Europe and the West today, is best evidenced by the statement of a British lord who, back in 1835, stated the following: "A single shelf of a well-stocked European library is more valuable than the entire native literature of the Indian subcontinent and the Arab-Muslim world." Of course, such a saying can only be uttered by a mind that does not know that the former Muslim intellectual heritage developed and supported that Muslim education whose purpose was reflected in the perfection of the soul, the refinement of culture, language, human character, the improvement of the skills of thinking and speaking, the contemplation of the cosmos, and the cultivation of universal wisdom (S. H. Nasr, 1987).

The second great internal challenge for the Islamic thought in this century is the urgent need to make the present-day Muslims clearly and exactly aware of the difference between what Western European civilization strives for and what Islamic civilization has always strived for. Islamic civilization has always strived to create a kind of God's kingdom on Earth, and the foretaste of the realization of such an ideal is the macrocosm that is built upon God's Beautiful Names and Attributes as the leverages of earthly existence and as the ontological bed into which God has placed each of His creatures. On the other hand, man in Islam, in his most perfect epistemological and ethical-moral realization, is the essence of the macrocosmic being and the shadow of God's Beautiful Names and Attributes. His task is to responsibly manage the macrocosm in his full professional dedication, as a universal shepherd (Bukhārī, *Jum'a*, 11; Muslim, *Imāra*, 20), and to respect the ontological Islam (*fitrah*) in it and in the primordial nature of all creation, on the one hand, as well as the epistemological and ethical-moral Islam in the primordial nature of every human being in which he was originally born (Bukhārī, *Janā'iz*, 80; Muslim, *Qadar*, 22), on the other.

Unlike Islamic civilization, which strives to create God's kingdom on Earth, Western European civilization strives to realize man's kingdom on Earth, in which man becomes the criterion of all things. Living in the dominance of the values of such Western European civilization in the era of colonialism and its epistemic imperialism, Muslims were completely unprepared for their encounter with Western European modernity and postmodernity, and

in their own interpretation of the sources of faith, especially the Qur'anic Revelation, they came under the influence of a postmodernist view of it. Thus, it became unacceptable for them to recognize the constitutive role of the Angel of Revelation – Jibreel-i Amin – in the process of sending the Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) heart, so they denied the very *verbalization* of the Qur'anic Text to the Angel of Revelation and put it into the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) mouth. Such views were shared in particular by Muhamamed Arkoun, Hamid Abu Zayd, Abed Jabri, Fazlur Rahman, 'Abd al-Karim Soroush, etc. Such a postmodernist Muslim view could not possibly have come from the substantive organon of the Islamic intellectual heritage, which is now being rediscovered, but it certainly could and did come from the kind of knowledge that epistemic imperialism produced in the Muslim world during the period of Western European colonialism. Therefore, the emergence of Muslim postmodernism in the interpretive thinking of today's Muslims, in the image of scientific criticism of the Biblical text, represents a much greater and more serious challenge to Muslim thought in this century than did the Western European Orientalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as today's post-Orientalism, for which knowledge in the West becomes a brutal power in the service of the implementation of a new imperial terror by America and Israel (Dabashi, 2008).

No less serious challenge to Muslim thought today is the emergence of sectarianism in the 'Muslim world', both in the doctrinal, as well as in the legal and ideological sense of the word. The selective preference for legal schools, the five *madhhabs* in the Islamic *Ummah*, has become so dominant that today's Muslim 'ulama' barely even pay attention to the primary sources of religion and the crowning aspects of the Islamic interpretative tradition as such. Therefore, the Islamic thinking tradition today has been reduced to barely seven percent of the total content organon of the Qur'anic Text, and is recognizable only and only in the so-called legal version of the 'thinking' Islam. The overemphasized selective preference for legal schools in Islam has, among others, become a serious cause for the disunity of Muslims, because the *madhhabs* in the 'Muslim world' today have become insurmountable walls of division that will always stand in the way of the unification of Muslims and the realization of the ideals of the Islamic *Ummah* in accordance with the ideas and messages of the primary sources of Islamic belief. Reopening of the door to the development of universal, interdisciplinary creative thinking (*ijtihad*) according to the param-

eters of the rich spiritual culture of the former Muslim intellectual heritage is a priority for today's Muslims. Empty chatter about sectarian affiliation and differences between sects will not lead today's Muslims anywhere. Such fruitless discussions will never develop the comprehensive and multiform cognitive culture that the educational institutions of the 'Muslim world' so desperately need, including that religious scientific culture of which one cannot find even a trace there today. Such a type of cognitive culture, for example, in the religious educational institutions of Muslims can only be offered by creative thinking in the sphere of the philosophy of Shariah law, philosophical-theological and religious hermeneutics, religious psychology, religious philosophy, religious and theological-philosophical epistemology, and the like. But today one cannot find even a trace of these cognitive disciplines over there, much less nurtured teachers who would be capable of teaching others on them.

Religious and ideological divisions in today's 'Muslim world' are so entrenched and ossified that it is difficult to say whose incapacity is greater in potentially solving and overcoming this problem among Muslims: the one of the religious or that of the secular Muslim intelligentsia. Both of them spend too much time and energy in dialogue with others, but there is no dialogue among the Muslims themselves. That is why it was not difficult to plant a bone of contention in the form of various puritanical scourges like ISIL, Takfiri, Wahhabi and Salafi groups in the very fabric of the 'Muslim world' – those paid agents of Mossad, CIA and other Western European intelligence services, who by their destructive actions reshaped the traditional map of the 'Muslim world' and contributed to the thorough destruction of several important Muslim countries: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and in most recent times they are trying to do the same with the Islamic Republic of Iran. To be honest, some countries of the 'Muslim world', driven by an unbridled desire to impose themselves on the rest of the world as major regional powers, partook in this dishonorable mission of theirs in a certain way. Their bizarre policy still contributes to the fact that, while the rest of the world, in the latest American-Israeli imperialism of force and terror over the existing world order and international law, is aligning itself into new geopolitical and economic blocs, firmly consolidating its ranks and defense strategy, only Muslims silently watch as their *geographical map crumbles* and fragments with some new self-proclaimed states that are recognized only by the proven enemies of Islam and Muslims.

Everyone in the 'Muslim world' almost regularly speaks of the Islamic *Ummah*, but everyone there does everything to ensure that this ideal is never realized within their geographical area. More important to everyone are their national, tribal, cultural and ideological boundaries that they place before the concept of *Ummah*, even though this concept, with its layered value universalism, erases all kinds of boundaries between Muslim communities, creating a unique spiritual, political, economic, scientific and cultural-civilizational space. However, it seems that the ideal of the Islamic *Ummah* has been understood much better by everyone else in the world, but Muslims. As much as the European Union, for example, after its political, geo-strategic, military and economic constitution, is still searching for a common cultural identity under which each individual national culture of European peoples will be recognized, it already today mostly and more closely resembles to what the 'Muslim world' could have been transformed into, if only Muslims had wished for it (de Madariaga, 1952).

Although all the challenges presented above within the 'Muslim world' are extremely serious and huge, the greatest and most serious challenge is what we would call the elementary lack of upbringing and education, especially the lack of an interdisciplinary and comprehensive cognitive culture among Muslims today. Here we refer to that form of cognitive culture that is not based on the Western-European values of *epistemic imperialism* from which the Muslim mind must liberate itself as soon as possible, but to that cognitive culture that will clearly define Islamic science as such, its form and purpose, its methodology, so that Muslim researchers, scholars, scientists and cultural workers can be raised and nurtured on that form of cognitive culture. The reason is quite simple: the aforementioned form of cognitive culture with an Islamic foretoken is based on the values of Islam as a universal religious culture that God chose for the last spiritually mature human race (*Āl'Imrān*, 19, 85). It is a religious culture that sediments within itself a unique and unparalleled system of beliefs, a special worldview and style of life, an authentic monotheistic understanding of God, life, the eternal world, culture, society and the community of believers. All these values are primarily understood from the perspective of the inexhaustible content of the comprehensive and eternal *Qur'anic logos* as the only surviving world-historical witness to what God truly spoke to the human race, whose spirit not only illuminated and forever vaulted the pages of sacred history, but also ontologically founded and permeated the entire macrocosm and every form of existence in it (Talal, 1983, p. 22).

Given the well-known fact that the 'Muslim world' today mainly dwells in the dominance of the so-called juridical Islam (*Islām fiqhī*), that is, at the constitutive minimum of the overall content of the believing and the thinking religious culture of Islam, for the new face of the 'Muslim world', for the comprehensive space of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) *macro-cosmic mosque* (Muslim, *Masājid*, 4) as a synonym of the space of all-Muslim cognitive search, for the future Islamic *Ummah* it would be necessary in today's 'Muslim world' to first raise those Muslim scientists who would profile themselves in the field of secular cognitive culture, if one may call it that at all. They are the ones who would move Muslim societies forward with their research and cognitive endeavors. They are not even the so-called 'Doctors of Law' who produce empty legal rulings (*fatwas*) on a daily basis that mean nothing and are forgotten the next day; nor are they the so-called 'traditional ulama' whose below-average intelligence, for example, prioritizes arranging the graves of people whose human and ethical-moral integrity is questionable, instead of trumpeting every day from the *mimbers* and *pulpits* into the Muslims' ears that education and upbringing are a strict and lifelong divine imperative for every individual Muslim, an imperative that in divine Revelation even precedes those imperatives that command Muslims to perform prayer and all the remaining pillars or spiritual institutions of Islamic belief. The aforementioned below-average 'mind' of the so-called 'traditional ulama' simply scolds from the religious hierarchies in the 'Muslim world', as well as here. In order for the quality of this 'wisdom' to be raised to a somewhat more advanced level, its heirs must, first of all, be prepared to receive an *intellectual zakah* every day from those Muslim scholars with a rich and comprehensive cognitive culture. Perhaps, finally, they will see and understand not only how much they do not know, but also how anachronistic their current educational curricula in religious educational institutions are and to what extent they too contribute to the production of useless 'knowledge of endosmosis', the kind of knowledge with which Western European *epistemic imperialism* has been filling the space of the post-colonial 'Muslim world' for centuries (Dabashi, 2015).

The sooner the most responsible among Muslims realize that it is high time to refresh and bring the school curricula in religious educational institutions in our country and in the 'Muslim world' into harmony with the challenges of today, the more likely the spirit of a true religious *scientific culture* and the

ideas of extraordinary Muslim scientists such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn ‘Arabi, Rūmi and the like will return among them. Without this, Muslims and their religious hierarchies can only continue to dream about the ideal of the Islamic *Ummah*, the cosmopolitan spirit of the *Islamicate culture* of the former Islamic Empire and the cosmopolitan spirit of the Muslim Caliphate of Andalusia. Provided that they are even capable of dreaming such dreams anymore!

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