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“The Role of International, Religious, and Academic Institutions in the Renewal of
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Abandoning the outdated religious intellect

A totally different religious discourse must be put into place rather than attempting to renew the traditional religious discourse, for the renovation of religious discourse is nothing more than the renovation of an old structure. Instead, we should erect a new structure endowed with new concepts, new language and new terminology if we are to delve into the portals of a new religious era.

Renewal of the religious discourse is not feasible without bringing about a new religious intellect. Personally, I do not believe in repairing the old religious intellect since it was shaped under social, political, economic and conceptual circumstances that were imposed by an earlier age. Old intellectual structures suit the age in which they were created, rather than ours, inasmuch as the epoch is not the same, the place is not the same, people are not the same, and old challenges are at variance with those that daunt us today.

I really adore my father's old house, but I prefer not to dwell in it. By the same token, I appreciate the legacy of the past, but I (and many others) love to create a new legacy and make it my home or abode. People who lived in earlier ages were endowed with various capacities, and likewise, the people of today also have certain capacities. They were rational beings, and likewise, we too are endowed with human intellect. Many people, including myself, prefer not to join the herd that holds aloft the slogan “*We follow that wherein we found our fathers*” [Qur'an 2:170]

This was precisely the goal, as far as religious discourse is concerned, when we composed our book *Towards the Establishment of a New Religious Era* نحو تأسيس عصر ديني جديد. Our postulate is that, after the point in time when the Qur'an declared that religion was complete, all that followed is questionable human endeavour. In some cases, such endeavour is of the genre of scientific attempt to know the truth. In others, it is merely political opinion that tints the religious texts with personal and biased interests. In all cases, be they objective or subjective, such opinions are not sacred revelation, but rather, human viewpoints which can be subjected to scientific criticism and analysis.

Religious intellect is not representative of religion in its original pure form, but rather, a mindset that took its shape gradually, down through history. If religion in its primal purity is divine in origin, religious intellect is merely human thought that has been formulated in the matrix of history, with some

of its constituent parts being divine in origin, while others were of social, economic, and cultural tributaries – all under the influence of prevailing degrees of human maturation. Development of religious intellect, together with its constituent parts, notably the science of religious fundamentals [‘Ilm ‘Usul-iddin], proves impossible unless it is deconstructed, and its human elements are laid bare.

Developing a new religious intellect is not feasible without new thinking modalities and overhauling the science of religious fundamentals

Development of the intellect comprises five governing factors, if our approach is rational, critical, and systematic. These factors are:

First: Developing theoretical intellect

Second: Developing religious intellect

Third: Liberating the faculty of conscience

Fourth: Overhauling the instinctive energy’s *modus operandi*

Fifth: Developing practical reason

The following, among others, are the most important pre-requisites for formulating a new religious intellect.

1. *Rehabilitating the method of thinking*

Inasmuch as the mind, led astray by its whims, ignoring rational evidences and proofs, cannot be redeemed unless its intellectual machinery is overhauled; the method of *thinking* is indeed man’s intellectual approach, as elucidated earlier in one of my works,

“The intellectual approach is the procedure one follows in the process of thinking and the steps of inquiry pursued. The process of inquiry consists of consecutive steps, with each step leading to the next. For it is possible that a positive idea may be referred to a person who uses the faculty of intellect properly and, at the same time, referred to an ISIS terrorist. Would these two persons handle the same idea in the same rational approach? Undoubtedly, the answer would be “No!” The positive idea, when received by one who uses a sound intellectual approach, will lead to tangible results and more positive thought – such as social development, progress, collective endeavours and *esprit de corps*. In contrast, however, the same positive idea, when received by the extremist mind that follows an erratic intellectual approach, will be misconstrued into totally different results – such as sanguineous motives, arson, and butchery. In other words, the transmitting point may be that same vigorous and positive sender, while the peril remains latent in the minds of those who receive such ideas and the type of intellectual approach they pursue! The determining factor and decisive element in the resulting outcome and its nature will always be the receiver’s intellectual approach and modality of translating incoming ideas when subjected to deduction and conclusion.”

Therefore, it becomes imperative in the first place to pry open those latched minds and revamp the intellectual approach of bigots, for we will never be able to infuse tolerance into the heart of someone who has the profound conviction of being the owner of absolute truth and is immovably certain

that all others have gone astray. By the same token, we cannot infuse the thoughts of a fair-minded person into a padlocked brain. The latched brain is not yet equipped to receive such thoughts, like an old black-and-white analogue TV set that is not equipped to receive broadcasts of modern HD satellite channels.

2. The need for a world-embracing vision

It would be a futile attempt to entice a certain community to practice tolerance, while its adherents believe that the universe is fashioned with one single colour, rather than the full range of colours of the rainbow. Likewise, it is impossible to convince someone to be tolerant, while s/he harbours a profound conviction that uniformity is God's wish for humanity, or that s/he believes that the Almighty's purpose in creation is absolute similarity and not diversity.

By the same token, how much more impossible it is to influence someone who believes that s/he is preferred in God's sight, merely because of being able to murmur certain words, or just for being born into the fold of a certain community.

With these facts in mind, it becomes imperative that we transform people's view of their world and renew their religious notions and beliefs. The way in which people view the world cannot be changed unless the universe itself is refashioned as one, single Holy Book, revered by the believers of all the holy scriptures and of various religions. While the holy scriptures of diverse religions are likewise diverse, this leaves us with a single Holy Book around which no two souls differ – the universe itself as a divine creation. God's handiwork can be readily perceived in His Universal Holy Book, revealing to us an infinite degree of diversity and polarity that is as whole-embracing and infinite as Divinity Itself.

In such a Universal Holy Book, one finds no creature or phenomenon that represents an absolute replica of another - clear evidence that diversity, dissimilarity, and plurality are the underlying foundations of universe.

Notwithstanding that God's natural laws are based on diversity, there is not a single law therein that contradicts or negates the other – they all function under the umbrella of a creative and harmonious universal system, and this is what the Qur'an refers to by the verse "*He [God] creates also what ye know not of.*" [16: 8]

If this concept could only take hold of all minds, such a philosophic view of Divine handiwork, enshrined in God's Cosmic Holy Book, will fling open doors not only from the perspective of viewing the world, but also from that of renewing the understanding of religious belief. When such doors are unlocked, minds, souls, and consciences will, as a consequence, also be opened to the notion of accepting the other, no matter how s/he is different from you or me. This movement will also lead to widening various avenues towards peace, and for tolerance coupled with plurality and diversity in the spheres of culture, modernity, religion and ethnicity. Furthermore, this would block the movement of hatred shown for mere difference and stifle any exercise of violence as a means of competition.

The immense plurality of cosmic creation mirrors forth the immensity of God's glorious creation and, likewise, the illimitable variegations in the realm of existence reveals the diversity of God's infinite

handiwork. To this sublimity of God's creation, the following verse is a testimony: *"To whatever is loftiest in heaven and earth is He [God] to be likened"*. [30: 27]

We can assert that the degree of social openness, variegation and diversity determines the degree of power invested in both society and the state, and the level of people's progress and advancement. But this assertion is conditioned upon society's capability for "conflict management" in a harmonious and creative framework.

How to usher in a new religious era

In order to create a renaissance, we need to refer to the philosophy of history, as it reveals that the ages of great transformation do not come about unless and until intellectual approaches undergo a total change. It is this same change that was effected by God's Great Prophets and the world's prominent philosophers, religious reformers, and political leaders.

If the battle between the traditional and modern minds constitutes, among others, a "hermeneutical struggle," then the upper hand will be that of the side that wins the battle of changing the "intellectual approaches". Invariably, all battles that raged during eras which witnessed a movement from an old age to a new, took place between traditional ways of thinking on one side, and new intellectual approaches on the other.

It is for the reason mentioned above that we, here at Cairo University, took to the task of developing the intellect and changing modalities of thinking. Foremost among our means are the two curricula of *Critical Thinking* and *Entrepreneurship*, coupled with an array of other endeavours, such as an initiative for enriching and modernizing the Arabic language; launching a project for economic development and religious reform; setting off the "Take a Book" initiative; and last but not least, the rehabilitation of the University's examination system and format.

The modalities of thinking that prevail around us today are either a faction that wants to imitate the past, namely the past of our forefathers, or that of another faction that wishes to imitate the West. To illustrate the situation, let us consider that when Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud composed his book *Sunrise from the West*, he was of the opinion that a renaissance is feasible only if we imitate the West, in all aspects of life. Sheikh Al-Ghazali, God's mercy upon him, came with a diametrically opposed reply in the form of a book titled *Darkness from the West*. Therefore, what we are faced with are either of the two extremes. But, in my opinion, the path towards renaissance is neither eastwards nor westwards, for the very notion of imitation is unacceptable since every age has its own peculiar circumstances, modalities, and characteristics. Look to this verse from the Qur'an (40:82) to understand that the divine intention of what this verse carries is historical transformation rather than historical happenings.

"Have they not journeyed in this land, and seen what hath been the end of those who flourished before them?"

Current status of religious sciences/Islamic studies

Current day reality indicates, so far, that those religious sciences which were developed around Scriptures had, in fact, petrified and deviated from the very purpose of the Holy Text. Additionally, the Scriptures have been diverted from a contextually *dynamic* content, one which is in consonance with an ever-rejuvenated life, to a *static* form which has been fashioned after the norms of a bygone age. In contrast, the Holy Qur'an proves to be a flexible Text that is in acquiescence with the present age, moving hand in hand with contemporary changes. These facts are evidenced by the fact that the Qur'anic Revelation took place over the span of twenty-three years; however, we find that those human concepts which were formed around the Holy Qur'an and the Tradition of the Prophet were frozen in time and have become unalterable statements.

On the other extreme, we find that contemporary reformists do not refer to the Book in its primal purity. Instead, they derive from the hermeneutic system manufactured by the political, social, and economic circumstances that prevailed in bygone ages and which differ from ours. By the same token, the reformists have viewed all old books as 'sacred books, representing the ultimate point of reference--when it comes to understanding religion--while in fact, these books are, in the final analysis, the product of man.

A stocktaking of jurisprudence and theological achievements over the past two centuries reveals, on one hand, that our scholars have revived all past battles – battles of the time of the Great Sedition which were triggered by the murder of Uthman Ibn 'Affan (the third of the "Divinely Guided Caliphs"). In other words, they made us relive the age of that Sedition with its associated strife, schism, branding others with infidelity, bloodshed, fighting for identity, and jurisprudential battles around trivial topics such as menstruation, sex, and other carnal topics--not to mention disputes over male/female differentiation.

On the other hand, our scholars have yet to delve into the arena of new and modern battles--battles of development and discoveries in the fields of natural, mathematical, social and humanitarian sciences, in addition to attempts to overcome corruption, secure freedoms, uphold the principle of nationhood, and combat the trio of poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy.

Advancement, not Revival!

When the protagonists of reform appeared in the Nineteenth Century, calling for modernity and religious reform, they never made a single attempt at "advancement of religious sciences". Instead, the target of their attempts was the "revival of religious sciences" in the same archaic shape of olden days, as if renaissance comes about through revival of such old sciences. The fallacy of their notions is proven by the fact that old sciences are merely manmade sciences devised to suit, from various social, political and economic aspects, the age in which their authors existed. Consequently, such sciences may not be suitable for application in subsequent ages – ages with unquestionably different circumstances and living conditions.

Sciences that were created around the pivot of religion are, likewise, human sciences that aim at understanding Divine Revelation. The Holy Qur'an is a Divine Text. However, sciences such as

hermeneutics, jurisprudence, fundamentals of religion, terminology of tradition, study refutation, correction of narrators and the like, are human sciences created by humans. In their entirety, they are human endeavours that are, consequently, subject to review and advancement. While this is an obvious postulate and not a heuristic discovery, the fanatics whose minds froze in time and caused everything else to calcify, have adamantly refused to embrace creativity and have instead taken refuge in the fortress of blind imitation. They neither understood, nor have they wanted to comprehend, the exigencies of the current age. It is false logic and sheer confusion to claim that religious sciences are absolutely immovable fundamentals applicable to every age and place, since humans are endowed with relative intellects that change with the passing of time. Meanwhile, the truth is a phenomenon that unfolds gradually rather than arriving in one burst – except when brought about through Divine Revelation. Even Divine Revelation (i.e. the Holy Qur’an) came in a somewhat piecemeal manner over the span of twenty-three years, leaving a space for human endeavour to discover facts and unearth cosmic events, not to mention the derivation of religious rules.

Consequently, it goes without saying that all that came to us throughout history, from that point in time when “the completion of religion” was declared by the Qur’an, is pure human endeavour subject to review and alteration. This scholastic heritage is, in some cases, simply an academic attempt to ascertain truth, and in other instances, takes the form of political opinion and viewpoint that taint the Scriptures with biased goals in order to serve specific self-interests. In all cases, whether objective or tendentious, such endeavours and opinions are not sacred divine revelation; rather, they are human views that are subject to critical scientific analysis and assay.

It is for the reasons shored above that I raise a call for the “advancement of religious sciences” rather than the “revival of religious sciences”. It becomes imperative for us today to deconstruct the traditional religious discourse, together with its protagonist mindset, and to set into motion a new religious discourse. What I am asking for has become, indisputably, a pressing need.

In a nutshell, there is a basic difference between the religious discourse on one hand, and the Religious Text on the other. The latter consists of the Holy Qur’an and the sound Tradition of the Prophet, but the religious discourse represents human attempts at understanding the Qur’an and the Tradition – attempts that are subject to reconsideration. This manmade bulk of scholastic works must be deconstructed if we are to reconstruct religious sciences. This includes a need to renovate the fundamentals of religion and de-emphasize jurisprudence as the sole focal point of scholarship.

Renovation needs a totally different conceptual milieu!

Those who live within the old religious discourse are neither capable of creating a new religious intellect or a new religious discourse. They are even unable to renovate what is old, save by partial means such as, improvement, synopsis, selection, or elucidation. Essentially, they remain captives of the old--in its approaches, concepts and visualizations. In most cases, they regard renewal as the mere alienation of an old school of thought, while recalling yet another one of old. This is because they simply look from within, and their vision is limited to the confines of the interior structure of the building. By the same token, they are actuated by traditional disciplines and prevailing inherited

modalities of thought.

Therefore, I am nearly one hundred percent sure that, as far as the religious discourse is concerned, renovation and advancement can never be achieved at the hands of classic religious institutions, residing within any part of the world. Only and until they are capable of breaking with the past and exhibiting genuine willingness to learn from external bodies of knowledge will it be possible. At best, such institutions may only be capable of an improvement or a beautification of some sort. They can knock down a partition and erect another one in its stead, but the fact remains that they cannot demolish an entire building while they dwell inside.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that renewal must come from external bodies of knowledge or institutions which are capable of breaking from the past. This is what humanity has experienced with all Great Prophets and creative philosophers. A mere perusal of biographies of the Great Prophets reveals that They came with Messages (that) which originated from outside the bodies of knowledge existing among their respective peoples, and that even before Revelation, They were cognisant of these external bodies of knowledge, for Divine Revelation cannot come haphazardly or aimlessly!

While the methods and aims of every Prophetic Mission may need further elaboration allow me to offer some examples of certain great philosophers who have devised novel and intellectual approaches. Both the English philosopher Hume and the German philosopher Kant, in the course of triggering their philosophic revolutions which brought about change in intellectual approaches, derived their thoughts from outside the field of traditional philosophy, which normally had been limited to mathematical and natural sciences. For a detailed commentary on this topic, the reader may refer to my book: “*The Intellect and What Lies beyond Physics (العقل وما بعد الطبيعة)*”, which was published in 1990

Advancement of religious intellect without advancement of language?

The stagnancy of language is one of the main causes for the ineptness at advancing the religious discourse. How would we express a new religious thought while using archaic vocabulary, idioms and linguistic expressions? How would a religious discourse grow while it secludes itself in an inanimate shell? I do emphasize, time and again, the fact that traditional religious institutions are incapable of advancing religious discourse since they use the same old language, with all its archaic notions and conceptions, secluded within the walls of the same inert shell – a shell that is incapable of growth!

The advancement and modernization of language stands as one of the main pillars of ushering in a new era. Transforming intellectual approaches must be extended to the field of linguistic advancement, for language plays a pivotal role in devising new conceptions, visualizations, and ultimately, ethics. There is an interaction between the methodology of linguistic understanding on the one hand, and the intellect on the other. Here we come again to the dialectical synergy of language and the intellect. This is clearly evident in what we find from those thinkers who are captives of *litteratim* and who understand texts and oral traditions in a literal and rigid fashion in accordance to their archaic meanings. This is exactly the opposite of those who understand texts and traditions in accordance with their inferences and contexts. One of the main causes of extremism and fanaticism is, in my view, the way in which this

fanatic faction understands the language. They are locked within the boundaries of the letter and outward appearance of the language in its archaic form, rather than paying attention to its historical and social contexts and inferences.

Furthermore, this fanatic faction dwells in an old abode, which is simply the old language. Therefore, it goes without saying that they think and deduce according to old linguistic logic. We do not need to elaborate further on this phenomenon through theoretical analysis – it is sufficient to simply read what they write or observe them as they speak! One would instantly reach the conclusion that they live on the fringes of contemporary history, and that what they gain from modernity is naught but its crust. One would feel totally alien to their speech and approach to thinking and would know of a certainty that the channels of any dialogue with them are severed simply because they belong to a totally different world. It is for reasons like these that they label anyone who does not dwell in their very linguistic abode as an infidel.

If we continued to live under the umbrella of the old form of inherited tradition in general, and of language in particular – such as is the case today – our existential intellectual growth would be stifled. But, if our existence is to grow and progress, our enveloping shell must be animate and expandable. Without expanding this shell, the living organism that resides within it would not grow. What is meant by the *shell*, in this context, is language – the abode of human existence referred to by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Interdisciplinary studies and the need not to consider religious sciences as isolated islands

The desired form of new religious dialogue is unattainable except through interdisciplinary studies which combine more than a single scientific bias within the framework of social and humanitarian sciences. It is such interdisciplinary studies which will bring about an integrated and holistic understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Here are what seem to be the first steps for any serious academic research— an appraisal of the most critical methodological and epistemological *errors* of research made in religious sciences:

- Confusion regarding what is *sacred* and what is human
- Basing an old form of hermeneutics on what is believed to be the right or appropriate derivation, rather than on pluralistic meanings and multiplicity of proper or suitable conclusions
- Dominance of the Ash'arite set of beliefs and the resulting inability to form a new and all-embracing vision of the world
- Confusion in regard to Islam, vis-à-vis the inherited social traditions
- Epistemological indiscrimination between what is semantically clear and what is ambiguous (i.e. ignoring pluralistic meanings and multiplicity of right or correct conclusions).

Some examples of multiplicity of meanings which can be found in the Qur'an:

“O Believers! When ye address yourselves to prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbow, and wipe your heads, and your feet to the ankles.” [5: 6]

“And the Heaven - with our hands have we built it up, and given it its expanse”. [51: 47]

“Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, for three menstruation cycles.” [2: 228]

When it comes to what carries more than one meaning, we find that both the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition contain many points that fall under this category. It is true that scholars of olden ages used to cite all meanings, yet consider one of them as correct and all else as false. In other words, the world for them was black or white, absolutely right or utterly wrong – notwithstanding prevailing multiplicity of right conclusions that need to be addressed by scholars and researchers. The verses cited above are examples of what has multifaceted meanings. Likewise, there are many Prophetic Traditions that bear more than one meaning, for example:

“Nobody shall perform the afternoon prayers except among Bani-Qurayzah” [A commonly narrated saying, quoted as such from Al-Bukhari]

- Epistemological indiscriminability between what is non-historical (static) and what is historical (dynamic), when it comes to jurisprudential rulings around Sharia Law.
- The inability or unwillingness to separate Islam from Muslims
- The absence of critical rationalism
- The monistic perspective of Islam
- Indiscriminability between multi-narrated Prophetic Traditions and those cited by a lone narrator

At this point, an important question comes to mind: Why such confusion prevails and why all such methodological errors are made?

The answer to this question is as follows: “Because those who steer the religious discourse are people with locked minds, enslaved to traditional imitation and who fall under the spell of a theatrical stage on which classic dramas are acted, using play scripts such as *“We have been told and informed by Ibn'ul-Qayyim that ...”*”. Such minds were never trained to use the critical approach, as explained earlier.

Finally, and if we are to examine the prevailing religious phenomenon from the angle of economic sciences, let us remember that the traditional religious discourse, as I see it, is the product of a pastoral economy. This is because we, the inhabitants of the Arab World, still live under a pastoral system of economy – a (s) system that shapes our lives and determines the modes of our social relationships and interactions.