



The Other Jihad: Muslim Intellectuals and their Responsibilities

Muslim scholars and intellectuals have a vital role to play in removing injustice and oppression from Muslim societies as well as the world at large. But if they are to gain the trust and respect of the *umma* they have to take their responsibilities more seriously and show positive concern for the culture and values of the world-view of Islam. They must pursue truth and justice as independent seekers and modify many of their character and intellectual traits to meet the needs and demands of contemporary societies, writes *Ziauddin Sardar*

ACTIONS, it is often said, speak louder than words. But how we perceive our actions has a profound impact on the final outcome. Consider the famous sufi anecdote of a man who comes across three stone cutters. He asks the first, "what are you doing?". "I am cutting the stones," he says. He then asks the second stone cutter the same question. "I am earning my livelihood", comes the reply. Finally, he repeats his question to the third stone cutter. "I am building a magnificent mosque" is his answer. All three are doing the same job; but their perception of what they are doing are different. And it is their perception of the ultimate conclusion of their actions that transforms a mere stone cutter into a builder of historic monuments.

Similarly, the impact of *jihad*, surely one of the most action orientated concepts of Islam, on a society de-



a variety of levels.

The Qur'an uses the word in a number of different ways: "As for those who strive in Us, we surely guide them to Our paths, and lo! Allah is with the good" (29:69); "And whosoever striveth, striveth only for himself, for lo! Allah is altogether Independent of His creatures" (2:6); "And strive for Allah with the endeavour which is His right" (22:78). Thus, in its most general term, *jihad* is "an effort", "a striving" for justice and truth. Classical Muslim scholars have seen this effort in three categories. Ibn Taymiya, for example, argues that *jihad* is achieved sometimes by the heart, sometimes by the tongue and sometimes by the hand. *Jihad* of the heart, or against one's own weaknesses and inner evil, is often described as "the greater *jihad*". What could possibly require more effort than fighting oneself? Ibn Taymiya also tells us

The polymath: classical Muslim civilisation was unique in having the polymath as the basic unit of scholarly and intellectual activity, a tradition that needs to be revived in our own time – this one is from "Best Sayings and Most Precious Dictums" by the 13th century writer al-Mubashshir

that *jihad* of the tongue and hand becomes necessary. And when it does become necessary, it becomes the responsibility not of individuals but the community as a whole.

It is thus clear that *jihad* has nothing to do with aggression, or with the spread of faith, individual ego, or with fanaticism or irrationality. It is a carefully considered, well thought out, defensive community action against oppression and injustice in all its varied forms. Its goal is to remove injustice and not to replace one unjust system with another, or to replace the domination of one group by another. It is indeed unfortunate that both in history and in modern times, *jihad* has been hijacked by certain groups to propagate their own ends. Amongst the Muslim legal schools, the fanatic Kharijites (the "Seceders") used *jihad* to impose their opinion on the rest of Muslim community in the name of transcendent and extreme idealism. More recently, various 'Muslim' leaders have used *jihad* to maintain their hold on power and propagate their oppressive policies. Nothing could be further from the spirit of *jihad* and the ideals of Islam.

As reasoned action against oppression, *jihad* requires a great deal of patience, preparation and understanding of the contemporary situation. Considering the injustices that are rampant in the modern world – from the evils of apartheid, the displacement of the Palestinians, the persecution of minorities, to the inbuilt biases in the global economic system, the unjust and culturally exclusive nature of the world's intellectual system, the culturally subservient nature of technology, the intricate link of science with weapons of mass destruction, all of which need an uncompromising stand – *jihad* becomes an obligation on the Muslim *ummah*, the totality of Muslim people, and the intellectual preparation for this *jihad* becomes a pressing need. Of course, to begin with our intellectual efforts have to be concentrated on our own problems; but the uncompromisingly universal character of Islam dictates that our intellectual struggle should be cast in a wider net. The problems of injustice and oppression are not unique to Muslims; in this respect *jihad* is an unceasing intellectual and physical struggle for justice.

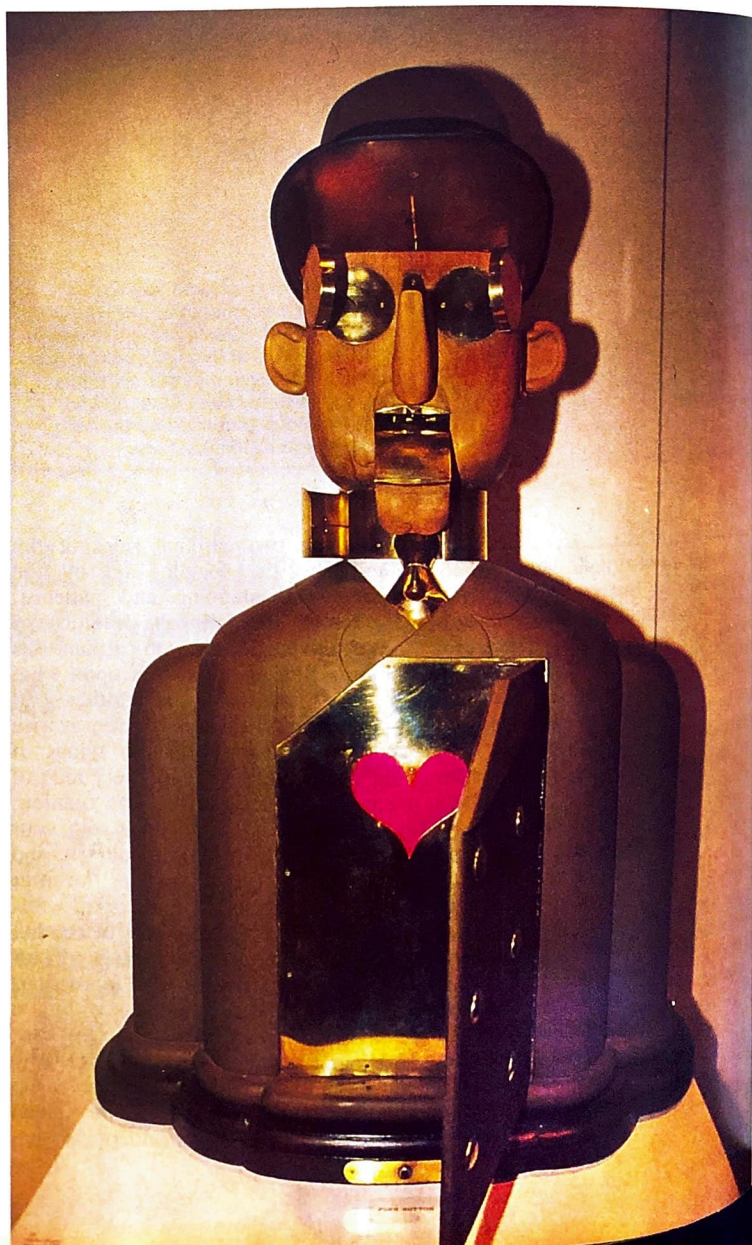
To some extent, as we have pointed out in the pages of *Inquiry*, Muslim scholars and intellectuals have already started laying the foundations for the intellectual *jihad* of our time. A host of new learned journals have appeared

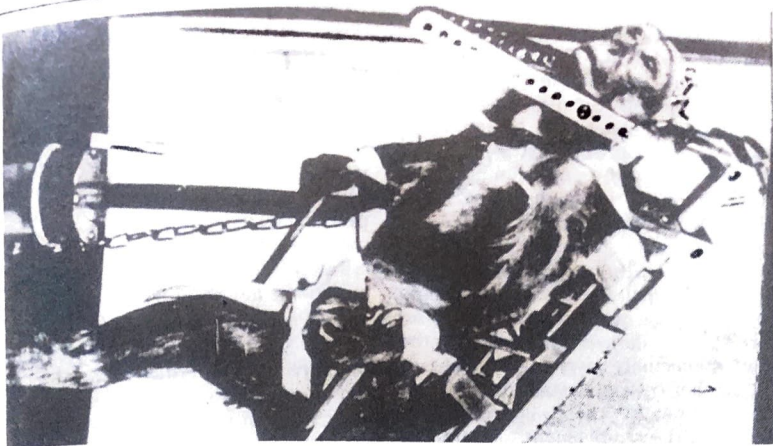
depends on how it is perceived by those who engage in it. *Jihad*, as normally understood by many Muslims and projected by countless Western writers, is not "holy war". The term "holy war" gives *jihad* the connotations of disparate acts of irrational and fanatical men who want to impose their world-view on others. In fact, *jihad* has nothing to do with fanaticism or the spread of Islam: one can no more persuade people to accept Islam by irrational actions and force than one can get them to love one. If it did, it will negate one of the basic tenets of the Qur'an: "there is no compulsion in religion". *Jihad* is standing up, in all forms, to oppression, despotism and injustice wherever it is committed and on behalf of the oppressed whoever they may be. But fighting in the name of justice is only one aspect of *jihad*, for like so many other Islamic concepts, it operates on

about the two cardinal rules of the *jihad* "by the tongue and by the hand": understanding and patience. He quotes the following tradition of our beloved Prophet to explain his point: "You are to enjoin upon what is proper, and forbid one another what is improper, till when you see avarice indulged, passion pursued, things of the world preferred and every man of sense enamoured of his own opinion, and you see no compliance with your command – then look to yourself, and leave off ordering the masses; for after you come the days of patience, when it will be like getting hold of red-hot cinders, when one who can act will get a reward ...". Thus like all injunctions of Islam, *jihad* operates within a boundry, the *hudud*, which in this case are patience and understanding. Only after genuine patience has been exhausted, ample warning has been made against injustice and oppression

in the last decade, many of which, like the *Muslim World Book Review* published by the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, *The MAS Journal of Islamic Science* published by the Centre for Science Studies in Aligarh, the American Association of Muslim Social Scientists' *American Journal of Islamic Studies*, the *Journal of Islamic Economic Research* published by the International Centre for Research in Islamic Economics of the King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, and *Muslimedia*, published by The Muslim Institute, are breaking considerable new ground. And as Parvez Manzoor has pointed out, quite a few of the old scholars like Fazlur Rahman, have shed their modernist garb, realised that modernism is little more than westernisation in disguise, and have now begun an earnest search for genuine Islamic alternatives. In addition, a whole new generation of intellectually bold and demanding Muslim scholars is coming to the fore. The new intellectuals – Chandra Muzaffar in Malaysia; Zaki Kirmani and his associates in India; M M Qureshi, Nawab Haider Naqvi, and Mohammad Akram in Pakistan; Ibrahim Saulaiman and his colleagues in Nigeria; Gulzar Haider in Canada; Munawar Ahmad Anees, Sulayman S Nyang and Samir Abed-Rabbo in the United States; Khurram Murad, Manazir Ahsan, Merryl Wyn Davies and Shirin Akiner in Britain, to mention just a few – thoroughly disenchanted with the stagnation of many of the *ulamas*, apologetic stance of the modernist scholars, and the suffocating confines of Marxist ideology and methodology, can be seen teaching and learning, arguing and discussing, in universities throughout the Muslim world as well as many western institutions of higher learning. Many of the new intellectuals have set up their own academic establishment, research institutions and learned circles. (*Inquiry* has paid particular attention to these new groups of scholars: many have either appeared in, or have been taken to task, in its pages). The work of many of these scholars is evident in the number of new intellectual areas that have been opened up for exploration and the discussions on a host of new disciplines from the “softer” social sciences, for example Islamic economics and Islamic anthropology, to the “harder” natural sciences, for example the search for an Islamic science which is a true embodiment of values and culture of Islam.

All this, however, is little more than a humble, and often uncertain, beginning. A phenomenal amount of furth-





Oppression has many disguises: while some go surfing, others wonder about their next meal in South Africa (above left); technology is geared to replace human beings with robots (below left); and Bacon's axiom, "nature yields her secrets under torture", is practised on a monkey in a science laboratory – Muslim intellectuals cannot be oblivious to these issues

er work, in almost every field of human endeavour, needs to be done. Not least, we need to understand the true role of Muslim intellectuals in society and appreciate the kind of background in which they work.

Contemporary Muslim society does not really appreciate its intellectuals and scholars or gives them the respect and credit which is their due. This is partly because the intellectuals themselves have often let their constituency down (under colonialism many Muslim intellectuals collaborated with the imperial powers and adopted their ideology) and partly because of the chronic decline of the tradition of scholarship and learning in the Muslim world. However, the re-emergence, over the last decade, of intellectual activity in Muslim countries, and the dictates of intellectual *jihad*, means that intellectuals must now take their responsibilities more seriously and Muslim societies and people must show a true appreciation of their intellectuals.

Much of the distrust of intellectuals in Muslim societies stems from their flirtation with alien cultures. On the whole, Muslim intellectuals have placed more confidence and trust and given more importance to modernism and marxism than the original teachings and values of Islam. Indeed, they have been largely responsible for providing intellectual justification for the oppressive and culturally dislocating policies of such despots as the

Shah of Iran, Jamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan, Habib Borgabia of Tunisia, and Saddam Hussain of Iraq. As the pendulum always swings from one extreme to another, it is not surprising that the reaction of Muslim masses against the intellectuals who support and supported these despots has been so hostile. For example, the distrust and indeed strong hatred that Syed Hossein Nasr, arguably one of the most powerful Muslim intellectuals of our time, generates in many circles is based on his unqualified support and justification of the despotic rule of the Shah of Iran.

But the support for dictators and despots is not always direct. The emergence of the petro-dollar culture in the Middle East has seduced countless Muslim intellectuals to give indirect support to repressive regimes. Once they are trapped in the cycle of riyals and dinars, most scholars quickly abandon all criticism and objectivity for the promise, often unfulfilled, of more and more financial support. Incredibly absurd and turgid arguments are advanced to justify the modernist and secularist policies so rigorously being pursued in the Gulf. Most of the intellectuals who have sold their soul to the petro-dollars are from Egypt, Pakistan and India. Indeed, some prefer to let their minds vegetate rather than give up the plush, but quite often humiliating, jobs that they do in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Unfortunately, even amongst those who receive support from Iran, there are many narrow minded demagogues who have produced some of the most convoluted and banal arguments to fit the various stances and policies taken by post-revolutionary Iran into their own framework. Such support of Muslim intellectuals for this or that government neither serves the cause of

intellectual *jihad* nor does it bestow the trust of the *ummah* upon them. Indeed, most Muslims would agree with Auden that their intellectuals have been unfaithful to their family:

"To the man-in-the-street, who, I'm sorry to say,

Is a keen observer of life

The word 'Intellectual' suggests straight away

A man who is untrue to his wife".

However, for almost every Muslim intellectual who has betrayed his world-view and culture, or is in the service of a despotic state, there are countless others who are carrying out the intellectual struggle in various "socialist" states, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen. The price of criticism, intellectual boldness and courage in these states is imprisonment, torture and death. Even in allegedly more "liberal" states, such as Malaysia and Egypt, intellectual life is fraught with danger. For example, before the arrival of Nasser, Egypt supported 200 Arabic newspapers and journals, 65 learned journals and magazines in foreign languages, and the pressing problems of Egyptian society were openly debated and discussed in mosques and coffee shops. The 1952 nationalist revolution which overthrew King Farouk and brought Nasser to power not just thwarted this growth of thought and ideas but eradicated it almost totally. Any criticism of Nasser or his policies meant ruthless oppression. During the Nasser era, Egypt, and indeed the Muslim world, lost more intellectuals, including the intellectual father of the Muslim Brotherhood, Syed Kutb, than under any king or monarch during the last 300 years. After Nasser and during the rule of Anwar Sadat, intellectual life in Egypt only performed two functions: first, to spread government orthodoxy through state-sponsored institutions, and second, to promote the secularist and modernist trends in society. A whole generation of Egyptian intellectuals know little except to receive government hand-outs, sing the praises of modernist thought, however absurd it may be, and downgrade Islamic culture and values. Anwar Sadat personified the attitudes of state-sponsored intellectuals when, in front of the television cameras, he took off the turban of Shaikh al-Ahzar, placed it on the floor and trampled on it saying, "this is what we think of you and the values you represent". While the respect for the Rector of al-Ahzar University, the first university in the world, has declined exponentially in recent times,

the institution he represents is still valued enough in Egyptian society to produce men like Khalid Istambuli and his companions who took it on themselves to avenge the insult that Sadat threw on a cherished Islamic institution. The Western academic and intellectual circles accord great prestige and shower benign praises on modernist intellectuals like Taha Hussain who make a living by showering abuse on Islamic values and culture, and their mentors like Anwar Sadat. Both Hussain and Sadat are projected as brilliant humanists, pursuing liberal ideals, who were loved by the Egyptian people. In fact, Egyptians loved Sadat and Taha Hussain almost as much as they loved the plague. Despite the fact that most Egyptians did not ignore a single opportunity to let their true feelings be known, western academics and observers remained unaware; as they remained unaware of what was happening under the Shah. Only those with their eyes and ears attuned to Muslim feelings and culture can see and hear what is happening in Muslim societies.

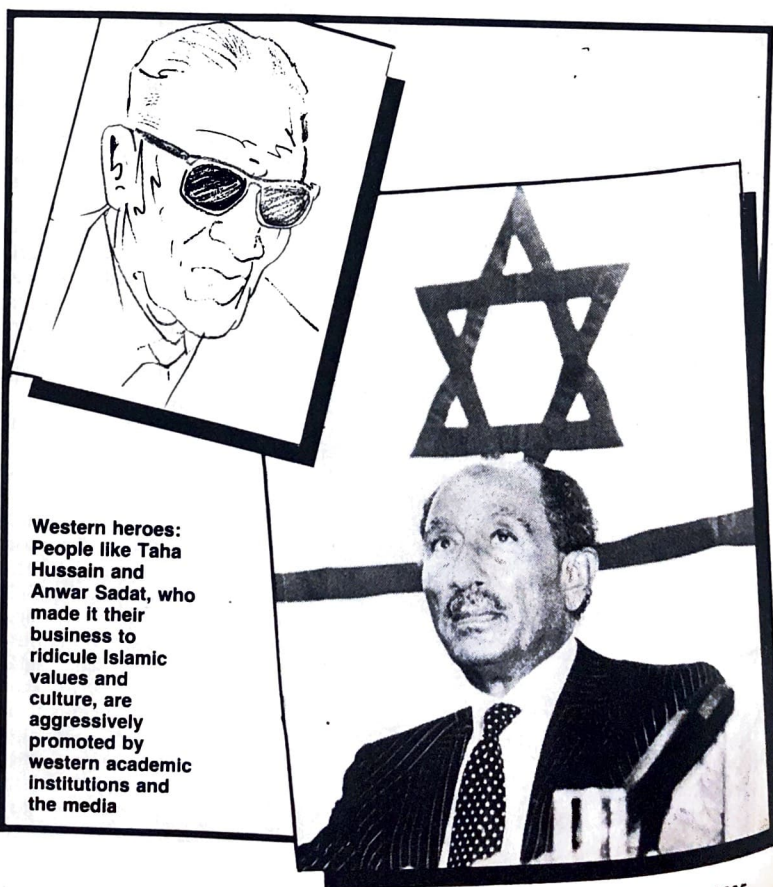
And the only people who can really see and hear are the Muslim scholars and intellectuals themselves. At a time when the Muslim world is engulfed in political unrest, when despotism and oppression are the norm, when kindness and tolerance is under retreat everywhere, when the globe is culturally and intellectually dominated by jingoist and chauvinist western logic and social grammar, the Muslims need their scholars and intellectuals as they have never needed them before. But the *ummah* needs intellectuals who are vigorously independent and true to the world-view of Islam. Who are bold enough to stand up to all injustice and oppression, whether it is in Saudi Arabia or Iraq, Pakistan or Malaysia, South Africa or the United States. Who argue not for financial favours and support, but for the sake of truth and justice. Who can see that just causes can become perverted by the use of unjust methods. Who, while in Iraq, can say to President Saddam Hussein to end the war he started with Iran, or while being a Palestinian can see that the PLO is also to be blamed for the mess it is in now. Who can see that injustice is not just built in the global economic system, but it is *the* system. Who can see that science and war are the two sides of the same coin. In short, Muslim *ummah* needs the intellectuals who are uncompromisingly independent, brave enough to stand against any despot, and have the insight to see through the in-built

injustices in the dominant system of thinking and doing.

Such intellectuals, as I mentioned earlier, already exist in Muslim societies and are now beginning to come to the forefront. No doubt, this group will grow in number and strength with the passage of time. However, to be really effective, to make a really profound impact on Muslim societies, and to produce the kind of original and intellectually bold solutions that the contemporary predicament of the *ummah* requires, the new intellectuals have to shed some of the hitherto well established traits. Prime amongst these, so dominant amongst the "movement" orientated intellectuals such as those who owe their allegiance to Jama'at-i-Islami of Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood of the Middle East, is the guru mentality. This attitude reveals itself in the dictum that the mentor, the teacher or the intellectual and spiritual leader — whether it is Maulana Abul Al'a Maududi, Syed Kutb or whoever — is always right, even when he is blatantly in error, and experience has shown him to be downright wrong. No one has a monopoly on being right.

There is thus no justification in continuing to defend the guru in the face of stark reality. The guru attitude plays a great part in subverting critical and analytical faculties as well as the use of imagination. Many devotees would rather edit and translate poor works of the master rather than produce original scholarship of their own. And as the guru is beyond criticism, his mistakes and fallacious arguments are perpetually repeated.

The second, and related trait, of many Muslim intellectuals is their inability to take criticism. Most Muslim intellectuals regard criticism of their work in terms of personal attack; as a result they either sulk and go into isolation or go on an expedition of revenge. This is particularly true if one criticises their cherished intellectual positions. When faced with arguments which makes their position untenable the standard response is "how can I be wrong, I have been working on this problem for ten years?" Admitting error is a virtue, a strength, not a weakness. Entrenching oneself in a more and more untenable and irrational position, and defending one's weaknesses as a matter of honour, is



destructive both for the scholar concerned and for the contemporary Muslim intellectual tradition. *Mahasbah*, criticism and self-criticism, must become a corner-stone of modern Muslim intellectual thought.

In addition, Muslim intellectuals have to leave their reverence and over-the-top trust and reliance on "expertise", Islamic or otherwise, on the scrap heap of history. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in the contemporary scholarly and academic landscape, that is beyond the comprehension of a good intellect. It is true that contemporary knowledge is so vast, and, in certain areas, so deep that it is beyond the capabilities of a single individual to master. But at the same time, there is nothing in social and natural sciences that cannot be grasped by someone who is determined to understand it. All one needs is a good mind and appropriate intellectual apparatus. Quite often the best and most devastating criticism of issues within a discipline comes from intellectuals outside the discipline. "Expertise" is a shroud behind which professionals hide their shortcomings. The more shallow and intellectually shamolic the foundations of a discipline the more it is defended by a priesthood of experts. "You are not an expert, an economist, a scientist, and therefore do not understand" is the last ditch defense of a poor professional.

There are two very strong contemporary reasons for Muslim intellectuals to penetrate the shell of disciplinary experts. As modern ecology has taught us and western science is rediscovering, nothing in nature behaves as an isolated system. Everything is connected to everything else: an all pervasive principle of interconnectedness is in operation. Thus there is no such thing as pure physics or pure economics devoid of social, political, cultural, environmental and spiritual concerns. As purveyor of ideas, as someone who has the ability and skill to process and synthesise ideas, a true intellectual ought to have mastery of more than one discipline. And as Islam also permeates every sphere of life, we cannot allow "Islamic studies" to become the sole preserve of *ulama* or other "experts". By definition, a Muslim intellectual must have appreciation and understanding of the major elements of the world-view, culture, history and thought of Islam. But a self-respecting Muslim intellectual would go much further: he/she would aim to become a truly interdisciplinary scholar. [Recently, a number of bril-

liant interdisciplinary studies, showing the limits of uni-disciplinary inquiry, have appeared: for example, William Irwin Thompson's *Time Falling bodies Take to Light* (St Martin Press, New Jersey, 1981); Gregory Bateson's *Mind and Nature* (Dutton, New York, 1979) and *Godel, Escher, Bach* (Basic Books, New York, 1979), Douglas Hofstadter's dazzling synthesis that integrates the principles of music, art, mathematics, biology and metaphysics and illustrates the limits of all logical and other symbolic systems – all three deserve attention of those who want to break out of the shell of their individual disciplines].



Maududi: 'the guru is always right even when he has been proved to be blatantly wrong'

And this brings me to the second reason for breaking disciplinary boundaries. Muslim intellectuals are not into re-inventing the wheel; while a great deal needs to be discovered and rediscovered from the perspective of Islam, there is an equal amount of knowledge that we can draw upon and synthesise with the world-view of Islam. The key concept here is synthesis; and synthesis requires knowledge of more than one discipline. Many problems in the whole question of "Islamization" of disciplines arise, as I have pointed out in *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come* (Mansell, London, 1985) and Merryl Wyn Davies has pointed out in her analysis of the emerging discipline of Islamic anthropology, from the fact that Muslim scholars try to cast disciplines based on western axioms and intellectual heritage into Islamic moulds. These, one might as well say fool-hearted, efforts arise mainly from their inability to synthesise: synthesis is not mixing of this with that; it involves

axiomatic analysis and examination and raising of fundamental questions. And only true synthesis can make proper use of existing knowledge and generate new ideas and pragmatic solutions.

Both the principle of interconnectedness and the demand for synthesis require the re-emergence of an old type of scholar and intellectual who has made a profound impact on the civilization of Islam: the polymath. The Muslim civilization of the classical period was remarkable for the number of polymaths it produced. The motives and driving force behind polymathy was not just a deep love and respect for knowledge but also a paradigm which emphasised the interconnection between the sacred and the profane, and pointed out that the physical universe was not inferior to the spiritual, that both as manifestations of Allah's bounty and mercy, were worthy of study, and equally valid. Moreover, the method of studying the vast creation of God – from the mystic's ecstasy to a mother's love to the flight of an arrow, the circumference of the arth, the plague that destroys an entire nation, the sting of a mosquito, the nature of madness, the beauty of justice, the metaphysical yearning of man – were all valid and could not be deprived of eternal values and human concerns. It was this paradigm that the polymaths used so successfully to synthesise the learning of earlier civilizations, transforming it totally and integrating it completely with the world-view of Islam. Contemporary Muslim scholars and intellectuals have to rediscover that paradigm and develop into the kind of polymaths who can perform the great synthesis that is the need of our time.

The final goal of intellectual *jihad* is the creation of an intellectual space which is a genuine embodiment of the world-view and culture of Islam and which can lead to pragmatic solutions to the contemporary problems of the Muslim *ummah*. This *jihad* can only be undertaken if Muslim scholars and intellectuals really appreciate the responsibility that rests on their shoulders and function with humility and without regard for worldly rewards and favours. In its turn, the Muslim community must give the regard and dignity that is due to its scholars and intellectuals. Our Beloved Prophet summed up the importance of the intellectual *jihad* and the intellectuals to the *ummah* when he said that "the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr". ■