

# **Toward A Theology Of Development**

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# Toward A Theology Of Development

**William C. Chittick**

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I had certain misgivings about accepting the invitation to speak at this conference because the announced themes and sub-themes presuppose certain ideas about civilization in general and Islam in particular that raise many questions for me. I am not quite sure, to begin with, how the organizers of the conference define the words “culture” and “civilization”. It is clear that these terms are understood to have a value connotation. When they flourish, that is good, but when they languish, that is bad. What is not clear is how we are judge when a civilization or culture is flourishing. What are the specific criteria for making this judgment? Certainly, the language employed in the information that was sent to me suggests that the criteria are drawn from modern political and developmental thinking, all of which derives from post-Christian thought in the West.

My second misgiving about the conference has to do with my own interests in Islamic civilization. I have spent most of my adult life studying Islamic thought, with special attention to the school established by Ibn al-Arabi in the seventh century of the hijra. This school, which was a continuation of the efforts of a host of earlier Muslim thinkers and was deeply rooted in the Qur’an and the Hadith, was profoundly influential in the thinking of most Muslim intellectuals down into the nineteenth century.

However, it has been abandoned by almost all contemporary Muslim thinkers and theoreticians, especially those who have had a say in governmental decisions. Muslims who have formulated theories and ideologies for Islam have almost universally condemned this school for leading the Muslims astray and preventing the progress and development of civilization. So how can my interest in this school be turned to the issues that contemporary Muslim thinkers consider as relevant to the development of civilization?

Having accepted the invitation despite these misgivings, I set two tasks for myself: First, to address some of the issues that arise as soon as we look at Islamic civilization in terms of categories drawn from modern thinking. And second, to suggest a few other categories that can be employed as criteria for judgment, categories that are drawn from traditional Islamic thought.

## Development

Development language is strewn with pitfalls for anyone who wants to speak about culture and civilization. What sort of problems arise when we employ the language of development? By “development language” I mean the well-known words that are current in United Nations and governmental agencies throughout the world. I quote list of these words from the table of contents of The Development Dictionary, a book that should be required reading for anyone who is not totally convinced that modern Western society provides the model that all peoples in the world must follow: “development, environment equality, helping, market, needs, one world, participation, planni population, poverty, progress, production, resources, science, socialis standards of living, state, technology.”<sup>1</sup>

All these words are part of the sacred vocabulary of the modern world. They share the characteristic of being what has been called “amoeba words.” This is to say that they are constantly changing shape according to the needs of the speaker. They have no denotations but many connotations. They can mean anything their speaker wants them to mean, because in themselves they are empty of meaning. However, these words are sacred. To question their legitimacy is to rebel against the gods of modernity and to become an outcast from the religion of progress.

The authors of The Development Dictionary have analyzed the history and changing status of each of these words in detail. Let one make a few remarks about the term “development” itself, even though each of the mentioned terms, and many others that are currently in use, deserves detailed analysis.

First of all, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that there is no word corresponding to “development” in the traditional Islamic languages, just as the modern meaning of the term only appears in Western languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The use of this word itself, or the redefinition of words in Islamic languages so that they carry its meaning, shows that the idea of development was originally conceptualized by Western thinkers. Moreover, the late date of the term shows that the new meanings given to it were intimately connected with the breakdown of Christian civilization and the industrial revolution.

The moment the word development is employed, especially outside the West, those who employ it have surrendered to the presuppositions of modern Western thought. To speak of development is to acknowledge “underdevelopment”. Hence, it is to accept that programs, modeled on those devised in the “developed” countries, must be put into effect. As Wolfgang Sachs, the editor of The Development Dictionary puts it, the use of the word has “converted history into a programme: a necessary and inevitable destiny’.[2](#)

The industrial mode of development has thereby been christened as the one and only legitimate form of social life. “The metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing peoples of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life”.[3](#) By speaking of development, Muslims have already given up the idea of understanding their own history in Islamic terms, since the term has been drawn from outside the Islamic conceptual universe.

Most people will object that nevertheless, we need development in our world. But what is development? Any study of the use of the word shows that, like other amoeba words, it has no precise significance. It is what you want it to be. The problem is that, although no one knows

exactly what it is, everyone thinks that we must have it. As Gustavo Esteva writes, “The word always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better... But for two-thirds of the people on earth, this positive meaning of the word is a reminder of what they are not. It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition. To escape from it, they need to be enslaved by others’ experiences and dreams”.[4](#) No one seems to doubt that the concept does not allude to real phenomena. They do not realize that it is a comparative adjective whose base of support is the assumption, very Western but unacceptable and undemonstrable, of the oneness, homogeneity and linear evolution of the world”.[5](#)

In order for “development” to be conceived of, God had to be forgotten, or at least to be relegated to the background. Since no religion had ever envisaged development .as understood in scientific and industrial terms, religious categories either had to be abandoned, or to be redefined to fit the new circumstances. Suddenly, we had to discover that religion, all along, had been encouraging “development” in the modern sense.

## [The Divine Names](#)

Let me now turn to a brief review of the Islamic perspective on knowledge, science, and human nature. The fundamental point that must always be kept in mind when considering Islamic views of things is that Muslim thinkers have always put God at the head of their concerns. The fact that God plays a fundamental role in every human endeavor has been perfectly obvious. Hence Muslims focused upon understanding God and then, on the basis of this understanding, upon the role of human beings in the universe. Those who wanted to understand what it meant to be human had to understand what it meant to be God. “Theology” was utterly central to the Islamic enterprise. And I mean theology not in the sense

of the discipline of *Kalam*, but in the widest sense of the term—the Qur’anic sense. In the Qur’anic view of things, “theology” can only mean knowing God, and knowing God means knowing the meaning of His *Ayat*, His “signs.”

The signs of God appear in three primary domains: First, in the revelations that God gives to the prophets, the Prophet of Islam in particular, second, in natural phenomena; and third, in the human self. Hence knowledge of God demands knowledge of revelation, knowledge of the cosmos, and knowledge of the self. What makes this knowledge “Islamic” knowledge and not some other kind of knowledge is that the significance of things is understood in accordance with the principles established by the Qur’an and the Sunnah. The natural world signifies God, and the human self also signifies God. But the exact mode of this signification is rooted in the Islamic revelation and the conclusions that are drawn there for human activity and destiny.

I am not suggesting that Muslim intellectuals considered it sufficient to know things in the terms established by the Qur’an. Rather, for a great many of them and for the greatest of them, it was necessary to know God Himself in the terms established by the Qur’an, and also to know God Himself by knowing the world and by knowing the self. Without the living knowledge of God, the whole Islamic enterprise is deprived of its lifeblood. After all, anyone can memorize the Qur’an, but if the person does not know the meaning of what he has memorized and cannot grasp how the Qur’an signifies God, he has not known the Qur’an as it should be known. In the same way, anyone can know certain things about the natural world and the self, but if he does not know God through the natural world and the self, this is not Islamic knowledge. Or rather, this is plain ignorance, because God is in fact the reality that is revealed through the signs which are scripture, the world, and the self.

Like any other phenomenon in the universe, human society is a sign of God. If we want to know human society in Islamic terms, we need to know it in as much as it signifies God. And if human beings are to devise a policy that is going to be an Islamic policy, it has to be a policy in harmony with those Islamic teachings that focus on achieving the proper human destiny. Hence, in speaking about Islamic “civilization” or “culture” and notice that neither of these words has an equivalent in pre-modern Islamic languages. What we are talking about, or should be talking about, is the community of Muslims (the *Ummah*) in terms of certain qualities and characteristics.

This *Ummah* can be viewed from two different points of view; what it is in fact, and what it should be. If we look at the *Ummah* in fact, then Islamic knowledge of the *Ummah* tells us about God’s actual relationship with the *Ummah*. If we look at the *Ummah* in terms of what it should be, then Islamic knowledge tells us what sort of human activity is pleasing to God. This second sort of knowledge focuses on what God desires for human beings in order for them to reach felicity (*Sa’ada*), that is, a happy state in the next life. All Qur’anic teaching is focused on the ultimate destiny of human beings, not their destiny in this world. The situation in this world must be shaped with a view toward the absolute importance of the next world.

After all, *ma 'ad*, or the “return to God,” is the third principle of Islamic faith and provides the orientation for the first two principles. Hence the Qur'an and the Sunnah reveal God in terms of His guidance (*Huda*) for human beings, guidance that takes to paradise in the next world, not this world. Knowledge of God involves knowing what God wants from people. The Shari'ah focuses on this kind of knowledge. An ideal Islamic *Ummah*; that is, an Islamic civilization and culture must be molded by this type of knowledge, failing which, it no longer conforms to God's guidance and hence is not “submitted” to His will, which is to say that it is not Islamic.

Presumably, this conference is concerned with what an Islamic society should be. But it makes no sense to speak of goals if you do not know where you are. What I want to do is look at where human society in general and Islamic society in particular is now in terms of the categories of traditional Islamic knowledge. What does the present state of the *Ummah* tell us about the relationship of Muslims to God? And given that the world is made up of many Ummahs, what does the present state of world society in general tell us about its relationship to God? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what does the situation of the modern West tell us about God?

In the Qur'anic perspective, the world is a grand collection of God's signs. God knows all things, and His knowledge is not conditioned by the temporal limitations that govern human knowledge. Hence, He knows the world for all eternity, and He creates it on the basis of what He knows. As one God who knows all things, He is the principle of both unity and multiplicity.

God's unity can be related to the diversity of things by describing the attributes or qualities that are shared by God and the many things. These attributes are designated by the divine names, such as Living, Knowing, Powerful, Desiring, Speaking, Hearing, Seeing, Merciful, Compassionate, Creator, Sustainer. These names apply to God, who is one, and they also apply to the many things in the world though not in exactly the same sense, of course. In the unity of His Self, God possesses all these names. And His relationship with the diverse creatures that are prefigured in His knowledge can be described in terms of these names. Thus, whenever we mention a name or attribute of God, we are mentioning a quality that relates God to some or all of creation.

In as much as created things are many, they dwell in distance from God. God is the Far (*al-ba'id*). He is distant from the world not in a spatial sense, but in the sense that He possesses, in infinite intensity, the attributes that are ascribed both to Him and to creatures. Compared to God, the creatures possess nothing of those attributes. God is Great, Majestic, Powerful, King, while the world and everything within it is small, puny, weak, a slave. This understanding of God's relationship with the world is known theologically as the assertion of God's incomparability or transcendence (*Tanzih*), and it is the classic position of *Kalam*. God alone is Real in the true sense, and everything other than God is unreal and vanishing.

***“Everything is perishing except His Face” (28:88).***

From the point of view of God's incomparability, unity pertains to God, while multiplicity pertains to the world. The world is totally other than God, and it possesses none of God's attributes. God's incomparable greatness makes all creatures His servants not because of their free choice, but because they gain all their reality from Him. Thus, the Qur'an tells us that everything in the heavens and earth has submitted itself to God<sup>6</sup>. Islam is a fact of existence for all things.

Although God is incomparably great and powerful, He has given His creatures some share, however small, of His own attributes, and He has given the greatest share to human beings, to whom He taught all the names<sup>7</sup>. Hence human beings know the name and reality of freedom to some degree, and this explains why, even though they are servants of God because of their creation, they are not necessarily free servants of God. They are in fact compulsory Muslims through their creation, but they should be, in addition, voluntary Muslims in order to reach the fullness of their human possibilities. That is why God sent the prophets, to call His servants to the free acceptance of His sovereignty over them and to rejoice in it.

If we look more closely at the relationship between God and human beings, we find other reasons for the sending of the prophets. For example, in as much as human beings are distant from God, the divine attributes that rule over their situation such as majesty, inaccessibility, wrath, severity, and justice tell us about the consequences of His distance. Notice that these attributes are the same attributes that rule over hell whose basic, defining characteristic is to be veiled from God, to be distant from God. God is the source of all good and all that gives joy and pleasure. To be distant from God is to be distant from good, joy, and pleasure. In hell, to be distant from God is also to suffer the pain of regret for not having accepted God's offer to come out of distance and enter into nearness.

The prophetic message demands observance of commands and prohibitions. The goal of these commands and prohibitions is to bring human beings into harmony with the divine reality, or to establish nearness to God. To be near to God entails knowing Him. You cannot be near to God and remain heedless and ignorant of Him. After all, the worship and the service of God that mark the acceptance of God's call demand knowing God as He has revealed Himself. Coming to know God is a life-long enterprise, or rather, it is an eternal, never-ending journey, because it continues in the next world. The Infinite can never be fully known by the finite, and that is the secret of everlasting felicity in the next world. Each moment of existence in paradise establishes a new relationship with God's reality and a new knowledge of Him, and these newly bestowed gifts increase the servant's joy.

The universe is a grand collection of signs, but things do not signify God in the same way. In Islamic cosmology, certain classes of creatures are closer to God, and others are further away. For example, angels are close to God, but inanimate things are relatively distant from God. Nearness and distance are judged by the attributes that rule over the creatures. Angels are luminous and partake directly of the unity of God. Each angel is a whole without parts. In contrast, inanimate things are relatively dark and are dominated by multiplicity.

In the cosmos as a whole, there is a great chain of created things ranging from those that are closest to God and completely dominated by unity to those that are furthest from God so that multiplicity is the ruling factor. Among human beings, the same range of attributes is found. Those people who are closest to God, the prophets, are dominated by *Tawhid* and hence they find God everywhere and do whatever they do for God's sake. On the other extreme are found unbelievers in all their diverse kinds.

They are dominated by shirk, association of other realities with God. People who are dominated by shirk have a multiplicity of diverse and disparate concerns that keep them in forgetfulness of God. Between the prophets and unbelievers are found those who submit themselves to God's will by following the prophets. They are not completely dominated by unity nor are they completely lost in multiplicity. They struggle in between sometimes moving toward God and sometimes drifting away from Him.

Human beings can choose to turn toward God or they can choose to turn away from Him. To the extent that people sincerely turn toward God, they come to be dominated by the attributes that grow up from nearness to God. These include unity, balance, harmony, permanence, comprehensiveness, luminosity, and realness. In such people, the beautiful attributes of God – such as gentleness, mercy, compassion, and love come to dominate the personality, and the majestic attributes play a role only in function of the beautiful attributes.

To the extent that people turn away from God, they become dominated by the opposite attributes: multiplicity, imbalance, disequilibrium, evanescence, particularity, darkness, and unrealness. In such people, the majestic attributes of God dominate over beautiful attributes by keeping the person distant from God.

The message of the prophets is designed to alert people to their natural distance from God and to invite them to overcome that distance. People should become God's voluntary servants. Then, if they follow God's instructions, God will bring them into His presence. For many Muslim authorities, this is the significance of human "vicegerency" (*khilafa*). Man becomes a khalifa or representative of God by being His perfect servant. God chooses as His favorites only those who gain worthiness to enter His presence through obedience and service.

If we ask what this way of looking at things has to do with the contemporary world, it is not too difficult to see the answer. The world is always made up of two fundamental tendencies that become manifest on the natural, social, and individual levels. One tendency is that of *Tawhid*, which ties things together and establishes unity: harmony, balance, and equilibrium. The other tendency is that of shirk, which allows things to drift apart and become confused and disconnected. People dominated by shirk fail to see that all things are interrelated because they are rooted in God.

The result of following up on the tendency toward *Tawhid* is oneness, harmony, wholeness, and nearness to God. The result of following up on the tendency toward shirk is manyness, dispersion, disequilibrium, disintegration, and distance from God. On the social level, the Qur'an sometimes refers to

these two tendencies by the terms *salah* and *fasad*, or “wholesomeness” and “corruption”. Hence, wholesomeness is the social manifestation of balance and harmony, while corruption is the appearance of disequilibrium, dispersion, and disintegration.

*Tawhid* and wholesomeness are connected to the divine attributes of beauty and mercy, while shirk and corruption bring about the predominance of the attributes of majesty and wrath. God is happy with those who follow His commands, and hence He brings them near to Himself, but He is angry with those who refuse His guidance, so He drives them far away from himself [as indicated by the Qur’anic expression *bu’d an*, as in ***bu’d an li’l-qawm al-zalimin (11:44)***].

To cling to *Tawhid* yields wholesomeness, wholeness, harmony, happiness, and joy in both this world and the next world. To cling to shirk yields corruption, partiality, disequilibrium, suffering, and estrangement in this world and the next. Of course, these qualities are sometimes difficult to perceive in people, because they are internal qualities. But what is internal in this world, all the qualities that make up our personalities will be external in the next world. The resurrection, as the Qur’an indicates, is the place where veils are lifted, and secrets are bared.

## **Two Modes Of Understanding**

*Tawhid* is the correct understanding of the actual nature of things. It is to understand the universe and everything within it in terms of the one God. In contrast, shirk is a false understanding of the nature of things, because it is to understand things in terms of a diversity of unconnected principles. There is nothing wrong with a diversity of principles, as long as they are tied back to the one, ultimate Principle. The divine names, after all, are diverse principles whereby we understand God. But if the diverse principles are not integrated by God’s unity, that is shirk.

*Tawhid* is a human attribute that needs to be established and made continuous. People establish it by following the guidance of the prophets. Guidance, in turn, is directed toward two fundamental modes of human understanding that many Muslim thinkers have called “reason” (*‘Aql*) and “imagination” (*Khayal*).

A rational understanding of *Tawhid* leads to the assertion that God is absolutely other than all things. There is only one God, and He governs the universe with absolute and total control. This is *Tanzih* and, as mentioned, it is a normative perspective for the school of *Kalam*.

In contrast, imaginal understanding which plays almost no role in the school of *Kalam*, has the power to see God present in all things. When God says in the Qur’an,

***“Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (2: 115)***

Reason provides clever interpretations to prove that does not mean what He says. Imagination, awakened by the Qur’an, sees God wherever it looks. When the Prophet said, “*Ihsan* is to worship God as if you see Him,” he was addressing imagination, reason. Reason knows nothing about “as if”.

When imagination is inspired by God's revelation, it provides mode of understanding that is complementary to *Tanzih*. This mode of understanding is sometimes called *tashbih*, seeing God as similar to things. For Ibn al-'Arabi and his followers, to see God from the point of view of reason alone, or to see Him from the point of view of imagination alone, is to see with one eye, like Iblis. True knowledge of God demands that people see God with both eyes. Then they will be able to understand that God is both distant and near, both absent and present.

The point of view of *Tanzih* or incomparability is supported by all Muslim thinkers, especially the authorities in *Kalam*. Sufi authorities, following the Qur'an and the Hadith, add *tashbih*, while never denying *Tanzih*. The perspective of *tashbih*, rooted in a vision of God's presence in all things, gives life and power to Islamic poetry. After all, it is poetry that inspires people's faith in God's mercy and gentleness, not *Kalam*.

Ibn al-'Arabi tells us that if religious matters were left in the hands of the *Kalam* authorities, no one would ever have loved God (fortunately, however, few Muslims took *Kalam* very seriously), so love for God is a primary characteristic of Muslims throughout the centuries and it helps explain the tremendous popularity of the ghazal.

*Kalam* can find no room for the love of God because it pushes God beyond human reach and describes Him almost exclusively in terms of attributes of majesty and severity. The God of *Kalam* intimidates people and frightens them. Of course, it is good for people to be frightened, because they will then be more careful about observing the *Shari'ah*. Nevertheless, people also need to love. The God of poetry attracts people because He is described in human terms that anyone can understand. He is a God who loves His servants and attracts love in return. And this also encourages people to be more careful about observing His expectations of them, as set down in the *Shari'ah*.

## Scientific Rationality

One of the most pernicious errors of the contemporary world is that modern scientific knowledge and the technology that comes along with it are legitimate and neutral. This error is especially surprising among Muslims, who have plenty of intellectual resources in their own tradition to grasp the fallacies implicit in the scientific world view. In any case, there are numerous philosophers, historians, and social critics in the West who have shown that scientific neutrality is a myth. One of the major focuses of the intellectual movement known as 'postmodernism' is to bring out the contradictions in the claim to the neutrality of any form of rational knowledge. Nevertheless, the idea of scientific neutrality continues to have powerful supporters.

In the Islamic world, it is often met in the idea that people can have both Islam and technological development without any contradictions. Somehow Islam is going to protect people from the moral bankruptcy of much of Western society. Yet there is no evidence that Muslims are in fact being protected.

It has often been pointed out that however much scientists pretend that modern scientific knowledge is disinterested, it is essentially a form of knowledge for control. In contrast, knowledge in the premodern world has been called “knowledge for understanding.” In order to have knowledge for control, it was necessary to do away with any connection between knowledge of the world and knowledge of right activity, or ethics.

This was done in Western thought by subverting the connection between reality and the Good, the “Good”, being, of course, a primary name of God. The end result of this sort of thinking was that scientific rationality allows for no moral distinctions whatsoever. Postmodern observers of this situation, however, do not conclude that anything is wrong. On the contrary, they have simply concluded that there is no such thing as right and wrong.

As one historian observes; The premoderns said that without an identity of reality and the Good, there would be no right and wrong, and the postmoderns say that there is neither Good nor right nor wrong... For only a brief period in the history of the West, the period of modern times did anyone seriously suppose that human beings could hold knowledge without God.[8](#)

In short, because of the triumph of science, knowledge without God, which is knowledge for control and power, few people have questioned whether or not science and the technology that puts it into practice are legitimate in themselves. Those who do question it are ignored because, after all, they have little power, and power rules.[9](#)

But let us get back to the connections that were just made between two ways of looking at God, as incomparable or distant and as similar or near, and two ways of understanding God; the way of reason and the way of imagination. Modern science and technology are both rooted in rationality, even if imagination plays a certain minor role. Reason operates by analysis and differentiation, that is, by limiting and defining things. If we go back far enough in history, we find that modern science is deeply rooted in the rationalistic theology of Christianity on the one hand, and in the will to control found among magicians and sorcerers on the other hand.

Christian theology, like *Kalam*, tended to establish distance between God and His creatures. By using abstract language cut off from the concrete concerns of everyday life, theologians contributed to the separation of God from the world. Mainstream Western thought came to be so thoroughly dominated by the perspective of *Tanzih* that eventually God was abstracted completely out of the picture. God is His inaccessible heaven became the exclusive concern of theologians, who were peripheral players in Western thought. And the world became the exclusive concern of the scientists, who established the mainstream of Western intellectual life.

As long as a world view finds God present in the world, in society, and in the human self, God’s concerns will be taken into account. In such a world view, people know that they have to observe God’s instructions in everything they do, because God can never be absent from them. In practically, every

world view except that of the post-Christian West, God (or the gods, as the case may be) is constantly present with things as well as with people. God makes demands on human beings in respect of the things of the world, and He express people to interact with others and even with inanimate objects on the basis of His demands. Failure to do so leads to the corruption not only of society, but also of the natural world. As the Qur'an puts it:

***“Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea because of what peoples’ hands have earned” (30:41).***

Imagination, which is typically voiced in accounts of origins or in “myth” in the positive sense of this term, reminds people that God and His activity are present in all things. With the eye of imagination, it is not difficult to look at things “as if” God were present. Rationalistic theologies always devalue myth, at least by interpreting it and telling us that it does not mean what it says. Pushed to the extreme, rationalism attempts to eliminate imaginal understanding altogether.

Modern, scientific rationality is much more severe in its attacks on myth and imagination than rationalistic theology. Science presents myth as superstition. To the extent that scientific rationality dominates over a world view, the religious imagination is no longer able to find God in the world or in the self. Hence the world and the self become devoid of God. Decisions about the world and the self are left not to God, but to the scientists and technocrats, who take over the role of ulama and priests. In the modern West, this has led to the cult of experts, who must be consulted in all affairs. Dependence upon experts is obvious on the governmental level, but it is also obvious on the personal level, where people give up their own autonomy to the scientific and technological ulama, who are now doctors, engineers, mechanics, and specialists in a thousand other fields. Even mothers can no longer raise their children without consulting the experts.

The fundamental characteristic of modern scientific knowledge is to be empty of unifying principles. The modern social and humanistic sciences, rooted in the scientific world view, have the same characteristic. In other words, modern knowledge is rooted in shirk, not *Tawhid*. There is no unity in modern thought because unity is strictly a divine quality, and without knowledge of God, it is impossible to understand the nature of unity, much less establish it. Not being able to perceive the divine, unifying qualities in things, science necessarily yields ever-increasing multiplicity and dispersion, mountains of information that cannot possibly be known by any individual, much less integrated. Rationality has built a new Tower ‘of Babel. Scientists and scholars cannot communicate with each other because they have no common language.

In their concern for establishing God’s incomparability, rational theologians abstract God out of the cosmos. Reason functions by dividing, separating, and analyzing. It is essentially reductive, because it takes wholes and explains them in terms of parts. It cannot see wholes, because it divides and analyzes by its very nature. “In its very essence the analytic, scientific method is reductive without limit. Applied to man, it is the universal solvent.”<sup>10</sup> What it dissolves is interconnectedness and meaning.

The typical tool of science is mathematics, which eliminates all qualitative distinctions among things, except those that can be described mathematically. These qualitative distinctions are precisely what carries the meaning of the things, that is, their meaning in terms of ultimate principles, that is, *Tawhid*. In other words, qualification of understanding drives the divine qualities from created things, but God's names and attributes cannot be described in mathematical terms.

One of the best recent analyses of the results of following an exclusively rational methodology in human affairs is provided by the historian John Ralston Saul in *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*.<sup>11</sup> This broad-ranging study brings out the appalling consequences of making reason the principle upon which to build a civilization. Reason, after all, is simply a method of analysis. It provides no basis for understanding wholes from within itself. It has no means to perceive the good and the beautiful. It only provides a method for dividing, dissolving, taking apart, and reducing. The good and the beautiful cannot be perceived without a myth, and mythical thinking is beyond the range of reason.

In traditional civilization, reason had a limited sphere of influence on the basis of the civilization's founding myth, reason provided a method to differentiate and distinguish between the good and the evil the beautiful and the ugly. The grand mistake of Voltaire and other prophets of rationality was not to understand that reason itself cannot supply the principles of good and beauty. Once reason becomes sole principle of human affairs, it dissolves and destroys.

One of the many results of what Saul calls the "dictatorship of reason" is the modern world's enormously efficient machinery for destruction. This destruction is most obvious on the level of external human existence, where the fruit of rational methods has been the most war-filled century of history. As Saul writes, it is difficult to think of another era in which individuals have so carefully turned their backs upon the evidence of their own continuing violence by treating each dark event as if it were somehow unexpected or the last of its kind. And they have done so in the midst of our millenium's most violent century.

Never has savagery so dogged Western civilization and yet whatever it is that our mythology of scientific discoveries and philosophical arguments so actively pretend about the evolution of society, it is war which has led the way and continues to lead the way in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

On the level of meaning, however, scientific rationality has been even more destructive than on the level of human lives and institution because it effectively removes meaning and direction from human endeavors. As a perceptive contemporary psychologist has pointed out, the end point of "all scientific method applied to human behavior is appalling: the elimination of choice, meaning, and purpose in human existence".<sup>13</sup> The result is that "for the first time in Western history, our most respected institutions are preaching social anarchy".<sup>14</sup>

For the purposes of the experts and technocrats, no harm is done, because they have no concept of what it means to be human or where human beings should be going. As Saul points out, "The

technocrat has been actively, indeed, intensely trained. But by any standard comprehensible within the tradition of Western civilization, he is virtually illiterate”.<sup>15</sup> This illiteracy is intentional and willful. “It isn’t surprising that the modern manager has difficulty leading steadily in a specific direction over a long period of time. He has no idea where we are or where we’ve come from. What’s more, he doesn’t want to know, because that kind of knowledge hampers his kind of action. Instead, he has learned to disguise this inner void in ways which create a false impression of wisdom”.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, all the change done in the name of rationality is done without protest by the public. “The parliamentary systems demand that a government justify its actions in public. The scientific community has changed our life more in this century than any parliament, and yet it feels obliged to justify nothing”.<sup>17</sup>

The traditional function of myth and imaginal thinking was to allow unity to be seen permeating all levels of the universe, society, and the human soul. God was never absent, and through His presence He was constantly concerned for the welfare of His servants. The traditional function of reason was to prevent shirk, or the divinization of lesser realities. If God is present in natural phenomena, there is a danger that some people will identify Him with natural phenomena and lose sight of His incomparability and transcendence. Again, we come back to the two eyes of reason and imagination. Things cannot be seen correctly with one eye. God must be seen as both absent and present.

True myths are revealed by God by means of the prophets. They are rooted in *Tawhid*. and their function is to allow people to make contact with God in everyday life, in ritual, in nature, and in all things. When there are no longer true myths, myths rooted in *Tawhid*, there are false myths, rooted in shirk. People cannot live without myths, because myths provide concrete ways of understanding the meaning of life. Reason can never supply meaning from within itself. “Rational structures, with their enormous accumulations of power, produce no mythology”.<sup>18</sup> This helps explain the vast proliferation of false myth in modern society.

On the theoretical level, many of these false myths are connected with science and development. Any idea or ideology that is not rooted in *Tawhid* and that supplies a basis for interpreting human thought and activity is a false myth. And the most pervasive and influential of these false myths are the ones that we do not recognize as myths and which determine our natural and normal ways of thinking about things. These myths grow up largely from the popular perception of science and its promises of utopia. If you want a list of few of them, look again at the amoeba-words that animate the development discussion. But what is of fundamental importance is that all the myths of science and development share one thing in common, and that is ignorance of *Tawhid*, or rather denial of *Tawhid*, and this can only be shirk.<sup>19</sup>

## **Beauty**

Every civilization has myths that provide the starting point for rational understanding. The traditional myths are revealed by the 124,000 prophets of history with the aim of establishing *Tawhid*. Modern

myths are based largely on human dreams of a scientific and technological paradise, and they permeate the modern mentality through the omnipresence of the sacred amoeba words. If the discussion is to be carried out in Islamic terms, these words will have to be abandoned.

If Muslims are to remain Muslims and not become second-class Westerners, they have no choice but to return to the resources of their own tradition. There they will find all the standards they need for judging gods and myths. These standards can be summarized in terms of the key technical terms of Islamic discourse as established by the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Islamic intellectual tradition. The importance of the intellectual tradition needs to be stressed. If it is ignored, the central Qur'anic concepts will be redefined in terms of the modern myths of development, progress, revolution, and social change.

Only careful study of how Muslims have always understood the key terms of their own discourse can prevent false assimilations. Without recourse to the intellectual tradition, Islamic terms will themselves be turned into amoeba words that mean what their users want them to mean. They will become slogans employed in order to support an ideology. The word Islam itself is not immune, and a look at how it is used by every sort of political and ideological movement in the Islamic world shows that it has often employ of content.

To conclude these very brief and incomplete thoughts on the theological roots of development, let me suggest a single example of a traditional Islamic standard of judgment, one that is easy to apply to the contemporary situation. That is the already mentioned concept of *Ihsan*. I would translate this word as "doing what is beautiful". The implication is that things should be done exactly as God wants them to be done, in keeping with divinely revealed norms, and this demands constant awareness of the presence of God. As soon as you forget that God is with you, you will not be doing things as He wants you to do them. Hence, the famous Hadith of *Ihsan* can be rendered as, "Doing what is beautiful' is that you worship God as if you see Him".

Beauty is a divine attribute. Although this Hadith alludes to *husn* rather than *jamal*, the sense of the two words is close. The dictionaries tell us that *husn* refers to beauty of the eyes, and *jamal* refers to beauty of the nose. The importance of beauty is suggested by another well-known Hadith that employs the words *jamal*: "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." The principle of *Tawhid* allows us to see that this means that all true beauty belongs to God alone, and that anything other than God is not beautiful. Or rather, everything other than God is beautiful only to the extent that it is "wholesome" (*Salih*) and avoids corruption, or only to the extent that it acts as a vehicle for the beauty of God.

Beauty is the name given to the whole category of attributes that are contrasted with the attributes of Majesty. As already mentioned, the divine attributes of beauty, mercy, and gentleness are oriented toward establishing nearness with the creatures. Every beautiful thing is attractive and lovable. The only truly beautiful thing is God, so only God is truly attractive and lovable. To the extent that one recognizes God's beauty, one is drawn toward God. In contrast, to the extent that one sees God's majesty, one falls back away from Him in fear and awe. But majesty is complementary to Beauty, not contradictory.

Moreover, beauty has the last say, because “God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath”. The attributes of beauty and mercy are the fundamental determinants of reality.

The opposite of beauty is ugliness. Ugliness, of course, is not a divine attribute, nor is it an attribute of God’s creation in as much as God’s commandments are observed. Ugliness is a human attribute that rises up out of ignorance and forgetfulness of God and disobedience toward His commandments.

As an attribute of mercy and nearness, beauty is closely allied with unity, balance, harmony, proportion, equilibrium, and realness. In contrast, majesty has a strong connection with multiplicity, disequilibrium, and distance from God, but this is a distance from what is worthy and appropriate for God’s servant. Beauty’s opposite, ugliness, is not worthy for anything. Hence it is intimately connected with everything related to nonexistence, dispersion, dissolution, destruction, corruption, ruin, and evil.

The divine beauty is reflected in the cosmos, in revelation, nature, the self, and human productions and institutions. In revelation, beauty is found in the Arabic text of the Qur’an and in the life and character traits of the Prophet. Beauty is found throughout nature, wherever the hands of human beings have not interfered. Even the grand catastrophes of nature have an awesome beauty. In the human self beauty is found in noble character traits that reflect the nobility of the prophetic model. In social institutions, beauty is found in interpersonal love and in healthy and wholesome relationships. It is especially obvious in art on all levels, calligraphy, recitation of Qur’an and poetry, music, architecture, clothing, carpets, utensils, so on.

In traditional Islamic civilization, art and artifacts are beautiful as a matter of course, but this is not the case in the modern world. On the contrary, today ugliness has become the rule in human productions, because beauty can only be found through the manifestation of divine qualities and perception of these qualities is not supported by typically modern knowledge and praxis. Hence the typical artifacts, institutions, character traits, and objects of the modern world are ugly. This is to say that God does not love them, because He loves beauty, not ugliness. It is also to say that they dwell in distance from God, and hence in multiplicity, dispersion, dissolution, disharmony, and corruption.

Let us come back to *Ihsan* or “doing what is beautiful”. It is of course an essential element of Islam. The Prophet cited it as one of the three basic components of religion, along with Islam and Iman. The Qur’an establishes *Ihsan* as a divine attribute and praises *Ihsan* in those human beings who possess it, the *Muhsinun*. Note that of sixteen Qur’anic verses that tell us which people God loves, five mention the *Muhsinun*. (In three, God is said to love the *Muttaqun*, in two the *Muqsitun*, and in six more verses, people defined by various other praiseworthy attributes.) Just as God loves beauty, so also, He has a special love for those who do what is beautiful.

The implications of *Ihsan* for judging concrete situations in the world is suggested by another Hadith that is mentioned in most of the standard sources:

God has prescribed doing what is beautiful for everything. When you kill, do the killing beautifully, and

when you slaughter, do the slaughtering beautifully. You should sharpen your blade so that the victim is relieved.

The first sentence of this Hadith is of special importance, because it sets down a universal rule. Just as God has created the cosmos as beautiful, so also human activity, which must follow the divine model, has to be performed beautifully. Doing what is beautiful has been prescribed for all things.

Then the Hadith turns to the specific instance which perhaps occasioned the saying in the first place. The Prophet is telling his Companions that the Qur'an has commanded doing the beautiful. They should not think that acts that are normally considered ugly are in any way excepted. Killing is ordinarily an ugly act, and killing a human being without just cause is sufficient reason to end up in hell. In the same way, slaughtering animals for food is not an act that most people find pleasant and attractive, and with good reason. Nevertheless, God has allowed it, and hence it should be done in the most beautiful way possible.

In the third sentence of the Hadith, the Prophet gives a specific example of what doing the beautiful involves on this level, where a certain ugliness is inevitable. The knife should be sharp so that the animal's throat can be slit quickly and it will not suffer. Likewise, if it is a question of killing a human being, whether in war or as retaliation, it should be done with a sharp sword. This command is not unrelated to a large number of prohibitions found in the *Shari'ah* concerning war when it must be waged.

In short, doing what is beautiful is mandatory for Muslims in everything they do. The reason for this is obvious as soon as we remember that *Ihsan* is to worship God as if you see Him. Every act of a Muslim must be done in service and worship of God. God must be seen in every situation and every act. As soon as people do things while forgetting God, they are doing what is ugly, and God does not love those who do what is ugly. "Doing what is ugly" is not a bad translation for *zulm*, which is traditionally defined as putting something where it does not belong. Thus, the Qur'an tells us that

***"God does not love the ugly-doers [al-zalimin]" (3:57; 3:140; 42:40).***

In the same way, it says that:

***"God does not love corruption" (2:205).***

And:

***"God does not love the workers of corruption" (28:77).***

In order to do things beautifully and to avoid corruption people must have an understanding of what beauty and wholesomeness are. This understanding does not come easily to rational understanding, because reason works by abstracting and divesting things of their qualities. Seeing beauty is a characteristic of imagination. This is obvious as soon as we think of the beauty of poetry or music, in which the power of producing images is utterly central to the art. The beauty that we see can only be the

beauty of God, since “none is beautiful but God”. Hence, when imagination sees beauty in things, it is seeing God’s beauty.

This comes back to what I said earlier: imagination is the faculty that perceives the presence of God. Those who do not see beauty do not see the presence of God, and those who do not understand beauty do not understand how God can be present in things. They do not worship God “as if” they see Him, that is, with the power of imagination.

I will not go any further in drawing conclusions. I think my line of reasoning is clear.

Anyone who wishes can follow it through and apply it to numerous concrete situations in the contemporary world. Let me simply state openly what I feel to be the general conclusion that one must reach: Islamic activity in the modern world, at least on the social and political levels, has known little about beauty. Until beauty is recovered by Muslims, until they do what they do in a beautiful manner as established by principles laid down by God and the nature of things, there can be no revival of any culture and civilization that deserves the name “Islamic”.

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[1.](#) Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

[2.](#) Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 9.

[3.](#) Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 9.

[4.](#) Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 10.

[5.](#) Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 11–12.

[6.](#) Refer to verse 3:83.

[7.](#) Refer to verse 2:30.

[8.](#) J. Bottum, "Christians and Postmoderns," *First Things*, No. 40, Feb. 1994, p. 29.

[9.](#) The underlying issue in talk of development is the desire for power and control. Perhaps, in the modern world, there is no escape from this desire. Perhaps countries must have power in order to preserve their own identities. But this does not mean that we should then say that power is good, and that the Qur'an urges Muslims to establish modern nation states on the basis of an ideology of power. It does not mean that we can ignore the theological implications of claiming for oneself or for a country or for any contemporary organization and attribute that belongs by right only to God. And this of course is why such conferences as this are held: Muslims instinctively understand that the wish to establish dominating control over others is not necessarily sanctioned by God, quite the contrary. One must face a fundamental issue, and that is whether or not it is possible to have a modern political entity that is "Islamic". Not, I think, if we take the adjectives modern and Islamic seriously. As long as we define them loosely, however, then various degrees of compromise are possible. But it is incumbent upon Muslims to know that they are compromising, and that God is not necessarily pleased with those compromises.

[10.](#) Jeffrey Burke Satinover, "Psychology and the Abolition of Meaning," *First Things*, No. 40, Feb. 1994, p. 15.

[11.](#) New York: Free Press, 1992.

[12.](#) Saul, p. 178.

[13.](#) Satinover, p. 16.

[14.](#) Satinover, p. 122.

[15.](#) Saul, p. 110.

[16.](#) Saul, p. 111.

[17.](#) Saul, p. 315.

[18.](#) Saul, p. 512.

[19.](#) On the popular level, meanings provided for great masses of modern people by the ritual dramas of television. As Saul remarks, "The most accurate context in which to place television programming is that of general religious ritual. Television, both drama and public affairs consists largely of stylized popular mythology" (Saul, p. 454). For a thorough critique of the mind destroying power of television, see Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, New York: Quill, 1978.

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