

Islamic Thought: An Approach to Reform – An Introduction to the Structures of Discourse in Islamic Thought, Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, Trans. Nancy Riberts, The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), London-Washington, 2006.

Reviewed by: Jasser Auda,

Director, Al-Maqasid Research Centre in the Philosophy of Islamic Law,

London, UK director@al-maqasid.net

An important book is finally translated and added to the growing literature on Islamic thought in the English language. It is Professor Taha Jabir al-Alwani's '*Islamic Thought: An Approach to Reform*.' The book was first published in Arabic in 1991 by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in Washington, and since then, re-published in a number of editions. Readers familiar with literature on reform of Islamic thought in the Arabic language know that the Arabic book, especially the 'Islamisation of knowledge' project, had left an obvious impact on various projects of reform in Islamic Thought, proposed by IIIT and many other scholars in the past two decades.

The book is a 'work paper' for a major groundwork project for 'Islamic Knowledge.' It addresses the project from various angles, its purposes, addressed 'crises,' features, audience, and hindrances. 'Islamisation of knowledge' is the name given to the project that aims to renew 'Islamic modes of understanding and behaviour.' The proposed renewal is achieved by means of ideas rooted in the Islamic heritage and culture, rather than the renewal of 'Islam' itself. Thus, the project is concerned with the epistemological and methodological basis of Islamic thought, discourse and cultural paradigm. Sheikh al-Alwani criticises the dichotomy in the Islamic 'borrowing' of western technology on one hand, while 'clinging to the heritage' in rather literal ways on the other hand. He also criticised the identification of the concept of 'modernization' with a blind 'imitation of the west' in the 'Islamic world.'

What is actually criticised here is the euro-centricity of the concepts of modernisation and development, a criticism that the Sheikh shares with postmodern postcolonial critiques of western civilisation. However, instead of calling for a 'deconstruction' of western civilisation, in a Heideggerian or a Derridean style, the Sheikh is calling for the 'reconstruction' and 'reformation' of mind based on the Book of God, while being opened to all forms of knowledge everywhere on earth. He further describes post-modern deconstruction, which ended up deconstructing humanity itself, as an indication of the depth of the 'modernism crisis.' What the Sheikh means by the 'Book of God' is both, 'the revealed book' (the Quran) and 'the visual book' (the universe).

The crisis of modernism has another side of it, according to Sheikh Taha, which is the incapability of 'Islamic discourse' to face the 'tyranny of the western enterprise' on the intellectual level. For example, the Sheikh criticises a 'deception' of claiming to practice the Islamic heritage and culture by following pure western models. This 'deception,' in the Sheikh's words, claims that the thought of al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, or Ibn Khaldoun are essentially identical to the thought of the Greeks, Darwinists, Freudians, Marxists, Socialists, or Liberals.

Thus, the Islamization of knowledge project – via a new understanding of the 'Book of God' – is proposed in order to accomplish the desired philosophical reformation of modern civilization for the benefit of all humankind.

Then, the Sheikh outlines the main features of his reform project, in order to reach an Islamic enterprise that is contemporary and united, which has 'sound thought without crisis, clear method without deviation, and constant action without hindrances.' The means that this intellectual project would take could be summarised in two points; deriving 'inspiration' from 'traditional authenticity' and 'digesting' modernism. The above goals and means will enable the project to deal with the dual challenge of 'the tyranny of the western enterprise' and 'the decline of the contemporary Muslim situation.' The project's priorities that the Sheikh set were to arouse the interest of the

Ummah, prepare competent workers, and present epistemological material in a way that the *Ummah* can deal with.

Then, the suggested 'discourse' is presented in terms of an extensive analysis of a number of categories of 'audiences,' each category is further analysed in terms of its desired characteristics, reasons for prominence, attitudes towards renewal, entry points for communication, as well as the forms and aims of the discourse addressing it. These categories of audiences are officials, secularists, members of Islamic movements, graduates of religion schools, 'those who approach matters from a suspicious perspective,' 'proponents of compromise,' the general populace, university students, and academics. A careful analysis of each category of audience is presented in terms of how the proposed project could make significant changes in their attitudes.

Finally, hindrances and impediments of the IIIT project are presented and analyzed. Ways of 'turning them into possibilities' are outlined.

The book, or rather 'work paper,' with its extensive and complex analysis and especially its appendix of highly illustrative charts, which is a remarkable addition to the book made by the IIIT team for this English language edition, presents a heavy meal for thought and a very mature proposal for every scholar concerned with Islamic reform on an intellectual level.

Despite its criticism of 'western civilization' and 'modernism,' Sheikh al-Alwani makes clear that his proposed philosophical reform of modern civilization is 'for the benefit of all humankind, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.'