

# Islam and Inter-civilizational Dialogue<sup>\*</sup>

*Shuja ul Haq*<sup>\*\*</sup>

*He is God, besides Whom there is no God, the Knower of the world of the invisible and the world of the visible, He is the Compassionate, the Merciful.*

Quran<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Islam in the present day world is finding it difficult to enter into a meaningful dialogue with other civilizations, especially those originated with the Christian and Hindu religious traditions. In an attempt to locate the sources of this problem, the paper seeks the solution through a new reading of the Quran, and the discovery of its methodology and epistemology which has hitherto remained oblivious to its modern Muslim and non-Muslim commentators. The key idea of this epistemology is derived from the pluralist vision of the Quran which in its turn originates from its conception of reality. Presently the *ulema*, the official representatives of Islam, see the Quran as pre-eminently a book of law, *Sharia*, with its absolute or unchanging character. This perception of the Quran leads to a dogmatic worldview that inevitably comes into conflict with the people of other civilizations. In this paper we question the prevalent perception to argue that absolute nature of *Sharia* is derived from the understanding that for the Quran only the non-physical world (*alim al-ghaib*) is real while the physical world (*alim ash-shahada*), the world of time and space, which is marked by perpetual change, is reduced to a peripheral sphere. Through a study of the premodern religious traditions, it is argued, first, that religion visualizes a two-sphere structure of reality where physical and non-physical spheres or aspects of reality are interwoven in a dialectical relationship and, second, the Quran manifests this relationship perhaps more succinctly than any other text. In the end it is shown that science, after the scientific revolution of the early twentieth century (SReTC), has rediscovered the premodern, two-sphere structure of reality.

---

<sup>\*</sup> Slightly shorter version of this paper was delivered at a conference on Islam and Inter-civilizational Dialogue held at Islamic University of Kazan, Russia, in November 2011.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Dr. Shuja ul Haq, Foreign Professor, Department of Philosophy, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

<sup>1</sup> Quran, 9:22, also 62:8, 64:18.

## The problem

Islam today is generally perceived as the *enfant terrible* of the modern world. Correctly so, I believe. Why correctly? You will ask. So let me try to explain.

If we enter the Internet through Google and ask: what is *enfant terrible*?, this is the definition of it that we get:

- a: a child whose inopportune remarks cause embarrassment.
- b: a person known for shocking remarks or outrageous behavior.

Now even before we read the second variation of the meaning of the phrase, you would have guessed what I mean when I said that Islam is *correctly* perceived as the *enfant terrible* of the modern world. In fiction, *enfant terrible* is sometimes seen as an extra-terrestrial, a child who has accidentally landed on earth from outer space, and who has powers to cause immense trouble to the humans ostensibly due to a complete loss of communication between them. This again makes complete sense only if we remember that our *enfant terrible* has not landed from our projected future but from our lived past. The loss of communication between our present and our past is as apparent in this case as is between our present and our future in fiction. And the destruction that it can cause is also evident in that if it brought down the one half of our present, or of the modern world just over two decades ago, now it is threatening to down the other half, or the other self of modernity.

The bombing of the twin towers on 11 September 2001 can thus be seen as a symbolic event. If, as the official version goes, the twin towers in Manhattan fell at the hands of this *enfant terrible* in a space of few minutes, the fall of the Soviet and the American empires as the twin towers of modernity, or of modern world, at its hands took nearly four decades, as it would be most likely seen by the future historians.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Rarely a few years ago, it would have been simply impossible to speak of 'American Empire' in academic discourse. The word empire, or 'evil empire', was once used by Ronald Reagan, as the leader of the democratic, Free World, to describe the USSR. And it was also equally unthinkable (to speak) of the fall of the American empire as many years ago. To suggest that America would face the same fate as the USSR in Afghanistan would have seemed preposterous, but not any more. See Niall Ferguson's article 'Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos', in the *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2010, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article24874.htm>). His argument is summarized at the beginning in these words: Imperial collapse may come much more suddenly than many historians imagine. A combination of fiscal

Now, there are currently two incompatible responses to this scenario. The common consensus of the western academy, in both its liberal and Marxist wings, is that resurgent Islam is a threat from the lingering past that must be crushed. Needless to say, it makes violence and war inevitable. On the other hand, the resurgent Islamist forces see modernity as a threat to religion that must be defeated. It makes violence and war as inevitable as the first one. In this sense, the clash of civilizations, especially between the West and Islam, is a clash of two perspectives or worldviews. Looking from each side, the other side looks dark.

Our task in this paper would be to introduce a fresh perspective that we would call the third or the middle perspective while arguing that this is the only perspective that opens the way for a creative dialogue between Islam and the West on the one hand and modernity and tradition, religion and science, on the other. And, above all, it alone, of the three perspectives, ensures a non-violent, peaceful means of social change and progress. The term middle perspective reminds us of the Buddha's discovery of the Middle Path, as he called it. Avoiding the extremes and treading in the middle was also the ideal of Lao Tzu and Confucian teachings in contemporary China. What we mean to say is that the third or middle perspective that we seek to introduce in this paper is not a new perspective in the sense that it is not historically unprecedented. Rather it is an ancient perspective which got lost under the rising edifice of modernity especially since the Enlightenment.

This paper, as an exercise in archeology of knowledge, discovers, or attempts to decipher a lost language of discourse, or a lost perception of the world, which under the present reign of the two perspectives would appear as new. Some would detest it for its apparent lack of historicity, while to others, especially the young, it most likely will appeal as a new legacy of their ancestors, giving them a new bonding with the past which is the necessary condition to create sustainable societies and social structures.

Now what we are suggesting is that rather than seeing Islam as the problem we would be much better off if we see it as the problem it is pointing at in the inter-civilizational conflict and dialogue. The former Pope, in his last visit to Germany, was closer to the point when in meeting the Islamic religious leaders of the country he acknowledged resurgent Islam's contribution in bringing to the world's attention the religious dimension of human life and society. Christianity, in other

---

deficits and military overstretch suggests that the United States may be the next empire on the precipice.

words, had succumbed some centuries ago to the onslaught of modernity, conceding the marginalization of religion.

It has, then, fallen to Islam's lot to question the established relation between modernity and religion, or between the present and past, and, asking for a new equation between them, present it as the primary intellectual question, or, to use a phrase from Marxist phraseology, as the principal contradiction of our times seeking our attention. On the way, the western academy and modern mind will have to adjust itself with some very uncomfortable hypotheses, some of which I have formulated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

One such hypothesis to which we have just referred is that Christianity, against the still widely held belief in the West, was not the most developed or highest religion in the world when it fell to the forces of modernity. Rather it was the least developed in relation to the other three contemporary great religious traditions of Islam, India and China. Thus it was the weakest link that broke in the chain of religious civilizations and which means that modernity did not derive from the highest but from the lowest point of religious civilizations. This was, above all, the key factor in modern man's seriously mistaken perception of the past and therefore of religion.

Since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the rise of modernity with it as the universal civilizational discourse, we have been made to believe it as the self-evident truth that modernity, as the scientific and rational way of thought and behaviour, is incompatible with religion. Since the one stands for enlightenment and knowledge while the other for superstition and ignorance, their co-existence has been believed to be impossible. Even by the later half of the nineteenth century it was held by both the right and left wing heirs of the Enlightenment that religion had been relegated to the dustbin of history.

In the closing decades of the last century, however, this consensus was challenged by Islam. Still there were few who were prepared to take it seriously. When Samuel Huntington spoke of the imminent clash of civilizations in his famous, or infamous, book of the same title,<sup>4</sup> it was received with a deep skepticism if not outright

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Religious Extremism in South Asia: A Sufi Perspective,' paper given at the 26<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the British Association of South Asian Studies, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, in April 2012. (Unpublished).

<sup>4</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996). The book followed his article 'The Clash of Civilizations?' published three years earlier in the *Foreign*

rejection by the modernists all over the world. And yet the book was published in the same year as the establishment of Taliban power in Afghanistan that led, five years later, to the attacks on twin towers and the beginning of the clash of civilizations, renamed by George Bush as the ‘war on terror,’ of which there seems no end in sight.

But Huntington spoke from the perspective of international relations, or the dominant tradition in this discipline which perceives the world from the perspective of competition between the states for power, and his motive was to influence the public policy of the US and its allied western states. We are, on the other hand, pointing to the contradiction underlying the clash of civilizations which the resurgent Islam has brought to the surface. We have also emphasized that this is the principal question of our times facing the global Islamic social scientific community presently, as on its resolution hangs the fate and future of civilization and perhaps of humanity itself.

The relation between modernity or science and tradition or religion, as noted above, also reflects the relation between the present and the past, new and old. It can also be translated in terms of the following binary opposites:

- a). Modernity and tradition
- b). New and old
- c). Present and past
- d). Science and religion
- e). Matter and mind
- f). Body and spirit
- g). Nature and man
- h). Man and God
- i). State and church
- j). Sensory or perceptible and the non-sensory or imperceptible world

You will note the great span and scope of the problem that Islam has posed by asking for a new equation between these binary opposites that define our reality. But an equation, by its definition, as Farmelo has put it, ‘is fundamentally an expression of perfect balance’,<sup>5</sup> or, to use Heaney’s words, ‘a work of creative imagination...in which conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order’.<sup>6</sup> In the language of

---

*Affairs*. ‘That article’, he noted in the preface to his book, ‘according to the *Foreign Affairs* editors, stirred up more discussion in three years than any other article they had published since the 1940s’ (p.13).

<sup>5</sup> G. Farmelo (ed.), *It Must be Beautiful: Great Equations of Modern Science* (London: Granta, 2003), p.xi.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *ibid*, p.258, fn 1.

mathematics and physics,  $E=mc^2$  is a perfect illustration of an equation which states the equivalence of matter and energy.

If an equation, then, unifies the two opposites, the existing relation between modernity and tradition, science and religion, or for that matter any of the other pairs of opposites just stated, hardly qualifies to be called an equation, for in each (relation between any pair of opposites) the second member of the pair is reduced into the first, the one subjected, marginalized or negated in relation to the other. Historically, the problem of finding an equation between them, we may remember, was first posed in the Abrahamic tradition by Jesus when he said: 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'.<sup>7</sup>

The increasing failure of his followers to establish a balance between the opposing realities signified by Caesar or Mammon and God was the leading factor that led to the descent of the Quran. But within the European Christian tradition the failure contributed in the fall of Christianity, earlier than the other contemporary religious traditions. It culminated in the growth of modern consensus that religion must be subjugated to the state until, however, the later decades of the last century when it was once again questioned by Islam.

Now problematizing the given relation between the opposites is one thing, coming up with the solution of the problem is quite the other, and if the resurgent Islam has succeeded in the first, it has so far failed in the second. Ironically, it presently looks very much like the Christianity that fell to modernity. The relation that its leading ideologues have tried to assert is no more than inversion of the existing relation where modernity is negated in favour of the tradition while the state is reduced into handmaiden of religion. Since it is clearly the position taken by the Church all the way during the European middle ages until it was defeated by the forces of modernity, the resurgence of Islam is perceived by the world as the resurgence of decadent forces of religion in a new dressing.

In short, if the Islamic intelligentsia of the *madrassa* has undermined the modern consensus that subjugates religion to science, privileges the present and the new in relation to the past and the old, reduces the mind to matter and so forth, it is the historic task of the enlightened Islamic intelligentsia of the school and the university to develop an equation in which these 'conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order'. The primary tools for this equation, needless to say, are to be sought in a new reading of the Quran in particular and of the other religious texts in general in order to rediscover the epistemology, or the conception of reality underlying religion that

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 22:21.

lies buried under the domineering legacy of modern thought since the Enlightenment.

### **The legacy of modern thought**

When a task of such magnitude is at hand, we cannot expect that it can be achieved in the terms we are familiar with. Therefore it is hoped that you will excuse me if at times I seem to be difficult or obscure. What we cannot deny is that in the last three or so decades the world has changed beyond recognition. If some one from the 1960s would visit the world today, he would surely think he were on another planet. Well, those of us who have seen those years are indeed on another planet. The problem, however, is that the modes of our thinking and the ways of organizing our lives have been unable to match the pace of change. This gives the feeling of being caught up in a whirlwind where we are no more the creators of the events that define our lives but their victims. Surprisingly, this seemed already the condition in 1990 when the sociologist Anthony Giddens observed that:

The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organization cannot be obtained...results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part out of our control.<sup>8</sup>

Never before was impotence of knowledge more evident, but the irony is that this is happening when hundreds and thousands of books are produced every day and ever new specializations are popping up in the universities, mountains of pages emerging on cyberspace notwithstanding. Relativism, as enshrined in postmodernism, emerged in this context to announce the demise of the 'Enlightenment project' and with it the end of emancipatory knowledge, even to identify knowledge with manipulation, deception, domination and (political) power.

Paradoxically, if postmodernism began with challenging the division of knowledge into ever increasing specializations, it ended up suspecting every attempt at grasping the totality of human condition as another meta-narrative aiming at mass deception. This has come to such a pass that the western academy is now inhabited by two kinds of people, those who are postmodernists and call themselves so, and those in majority, the likes of Michel Foucault and John Gray, who are postmodernists but do not like that name for themselves, even making fun of it in the case of the latter. One wonders how some one with such

---

<sup>8</sup> A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1991), p.2.

loss of hope with knowledge, as expressed in the following words, can consider himself an intellectual, let alone public intellectual and what is he doing in the academy which is ostensibly meant to promote the power of knowledge.

The lesson of the century that has just ended is that humans use the power of science not to make a new world but to reproduce the old one – sometimes in newly hideous ways. This is only to confirm a truth known in the past, but forbidden today: that knowledge does not make us free.

We inherit from Greek philosophy the belief that knowledge is liberating, but the biblical myth of the Fall is closer to the truth. The increase of knowledge brings many benefits; but it is not an unmixed good. Tempting humanity with the promise of magnifying its power, it ends by enslaving us.

In modern times nothing is more heretical than the idea that knowledge can be a sin, and it is this thought that inspires the essays that are collected here.<sup>9</sup>

Such sceptics are the current occupants of Plato's academy. At the moment, in our current state of disarray and intellectual confusion, especially since we have yet to define our independence from the ideologues of resurgent Islam, it might seem preposterous to think of the liberation of Plato's academy from its present occupiers. But when we remember that these occupants are not the descendents of Plato but of his and his master, Socrates' adversaries, the Sophists, we might think throwing away the restraints of sobriety.

The Sophists were routed under the Socratic attack, duly completed by Plato and Antisthenes. However the skeptics did not disappear and resurfaced at the demise of the Greek city state and in the upheaval thus caused went on a century or so later to occupy Plato's academy itself where they reigned for over a century. Their descendents reappeared with the advent of the modern era and took it over again, this time capitalizing on the collapse of Christianity and so far they think they are unassailable. But you would have sensed the hidden irony in what we have said, for what follows is that modern thought, being the continuation of the skepticism of the Sophists, is indeed the continuation of Greek thought, but as represented by the Sophists, not Socrates or Plato or Antisthenes. So it has fallen to the enlightened intelligentsia of

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London, 2004), p.15.



the Islamic tradition to dig up the forgotten Greek legacy of these masters for the benefit of larger humanity.

It needs to be emphasized then that the resurgence of religion as a form of absolute knowledge in almost all contemporary civilizations is a direct consequence of the loss of faith in knowledge perpetuated by the skepticism and relativism of modernity. But, as pointed out above, it would be a mistake to see the resurgent religion, whether it be Islam, Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism, as the one that founded the premodern civilizations. On the contrary, it carries the indelible stamp of modernity which shows more a caricature than the real face of religion that produced and sustained human society for thousands of years. What are religions now, as Trevor Ling put it insightfully, were once the civilizations that they founded. They are really the remains of those civilizations and the religions that founded them.<sup>10</sup> What follows is that they are not realities themselves but representations, like all other remains of the extinct cultures, which need to be interpreted or reconstructed. The problem with the two perspectives is that they see them as realities and not remaining representations or images of them.

Now we have argued that the clash of civilizations is actually a clash of two worldviews or perspectives, or paradigms, to use a term popularized by the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn in his monumental *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>11</sup> To carry the discussion further, we will call the modern, or scientific perspective which has been the dominant one since the last two or three centuries the first perspective while the religious or traditional perspective which has arisen in opposition to the dominant one we will call the second perspective.

We have also argued that the modern resurgent Islam is not the Islam that it claims to be, that is, the one that created the Islamic civilization, for it bears on all its persona, or thought and character, the indelible stamp of modernity, which denies the very legitimacy of religion and itself being the worshipper of Mammon, detests religion as the worshipper of God. The problem with the modern Islamic worshipper is indeed curious. Basically it is a problem of ignorance. We have called him modern because he has developed this heretical idea that he can be both a worshipper of Mammon (world) and of God. On this account he takes great pride for modernizing religion or reconciling Islam and

---

<sup>10</sup> T. Ling, *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon* (London: Temple Smith, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1932, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

modernity. What he does not know is that when religion asserted that one cannot serve the world and the other world at the same time,<sup>12</sup> it was not because it was unable to reconcile them. Rather serving both is hypocrisy, for it inevitably implies the service to the Mammon.

But if this is the state of the common Muslim worshipper, Islamist scholars and those who control the mosque in most of the Islamic world suffer from a higher level of hypocrisy. By all means they are moderns, worshipping both Mammon and God, but at the same time believing that they represent the civilization that worshipped God alone.

They are at war with modernity for the triumph of Islam, but actually engaged in an imperial power struggle of world conquest, which is the worship of Mammon, believing that the conquest was driven by their worship of God. In short, it is their representation of Islam and religion that we are questioning. The problem however is that it is this representation, quite apparently primitive since it is characterized by such notions as the absolute *Sharia* or law which is beyond space and time, which modernity cites for its disparaging and rejection of the pre-modern civilizations and their religions.

We also noted the philosophical dispute between the two perspectives in that if for the first perspective the sensory or visible world alone is real, or the ultimate source of knowledge, for the second perspective the non-sensory or invisible world alone is real, the ultimate source of knowledge. And both concur that the second perspective is the true representation of pre-modern civilizations and their religions. The hypothesis that we have proposed is that since modern Islam or religion, or the picture of Islam and religion constructed by its modern day ideologues, has grown in the shadow of modernity, it is a far cry from the one that produced and sustained the Islamic civilization for over a millennium.

Now, you will ask, if both perspectives are wrong in thinking that the second perspective is the perspective of premodern civilizations and their religions, then what was their perspective anyway? Obviously they did not believe in the primacy of matter or of the sensory world. To say that they did not believe in the primacy of mind or non-sensory world either is clearly illogical.

The problem, then, is arising from our modern mindset which dictates that reality must be *either* physical *or* non-physical. It is this dictate that the modern Islamists accept and answer the question from modern perspective, though differing with it at the same time, by

---

<sup>12</sup> 'You seek the chance gain of this world, but God desires for you the world to come. God is mighty and wise'. Quran 8:67.

attributing reality to the non-sensory world alone. For the pre-modern mind, however, the modern question whether matter or mind, perceptible or non-perceptible world is real, the question to which both reigning perspectives succumb, is nonsensical and meaningless.

The idea that the pre-modern man was lost in the heavenly world is in reality a modern prejudice which cannot stand in the face of even the glimpse of physical achievements of the pre-modern man, from the food that we eat to the greatest marvels of art and architecture that we still wonder at. As Gordon Childe, the foremost archeologist of the last century noted, 'In jungle lore lie the roots of botany and zoology, of astronomy and climatology, while the control of fire and the manufacture of tools initiate the traditions that emerge as physics and chemistry'.<sup>13</sup> And further, 'Our debt to preliterate barbarians is heavy. Every single cultivated food plant of any importance has been discovered by some barbarian society'.<sup>14</sup> In short, for pre-modern man both worlds together constitute his experience. So the problem for him is not to determine which came first and which after, but what is the relation between the two realities and how he could unify them both in his life and culture. All the great achievements of pre-modern man, especially in art and architecture, are signatures of this endeavour to create a perfect equation or balance between the two realities. This is what we call the third perspective.

### **The Quran's conception of reality**

It is one thing to recite the Quran, which is an art in itself, but quite another to destructure it as a text. It is indeed the problem with all revelation, though, for the moment, we would focus on the Quran.

The Quran presents itself as a complex structure which makes its claim to be the greatest wonder or miracle, as the Islamic tradition knows it, of the pre-modern civilizations worth considering. It does not imply belittling of the other wonders of the genre, for it repeatedly claims to be the inheritor of them all.

The hypothesis that we wish to suggest in this regard may be stated thus.<sup>15</sup> The structure of the Quran is a mirror image of pre-modern

---

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Penguin Books, 1964), p.40.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>15</sup> The hypothesis presented here originates in my study of the Quran initiated nearly two decades ago while I was working on my Ph.D. thesis, which was incorporated in the work subsequently published as *A Forgotten Vision: A Study of Human Spirituality in the Light of Islamic Tradition* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1996), also published in 2 Vols by Vikas, New Delhi, 1997.

civilizations, on the one hand, and of the nature of reality as conceived by these civilizations, on the other. To put it in other words, the structure of the one, that is, of the Quran is the same as that of pre-modern civilizations, more particularly of the Islamic civilization of pre-modern times, and of the nature of reality to which they adhered. The Quran, it needs to be emphasized, claims to be the final text or book of the revelation which began with the creation of Adam, or the appearance of the human in the universe. This means that while the revelation prior to the Quran, or the texts/books of it, such as those which it mentions (e.g. the Torah, the Psalms of David and the Gospels) and those which it does not, each created its own civilization or community, the Quran not only created its own civilization but, being the final chapter of the Book that began with Adam, it presents the most succinct and clear statement of reality of which the pre-modern civilizations as a whole were the embodiment.

Now the immediate point that needs to be clarified here is the notion of pre-modern civilizations, or, let us say, pre-modern Islamic civilization.<sup>16</sup> For we are seeking to make a distinction between the pre-modern and modern Islamic civilization (a distinction applicable to all non-Western civilizations), that is, the one prior to the rise of modernity and the other which was subjugated by modernity, a subjugation that continues to the present day. What we are suggesting, then, to put it succinctly, is that the prevalent idea that the present day, or the modern Islamic world is a continuation of the pre-modern Islamic civilization is an illusion. What implies is that while the structure of the pre-modern Islamic civilization was the mirror image of the structure of the Quran, the modern Islamic world is not. We are not positing an absolute discontinuity between the pre-modern and modern Islamic world. But what we intend to argue presently is that the discontinuity between them is as important as the continuity between them and it is only by a full view of these opposite aspects of our history that we can make sense of it, or truly interpret the event that we call Islamic history. We would soon turn to the continuity between them, but presently we are emphasizing the discontinuity that separates them. What follows is that while it is not a mistake to say that the contemporary Islamic world is a continuation of the pre-modern world, it is also equally important to see that there is a difference or discontinuity between them. The difference is so

---

<sup>16</sup> The terms modernity and tradition are discussed in some length in S. Alhaq, 'Islam and Modernity: Towards a New Paradigm', *The Historian*, 2:3 (2006). appeared elsewhere for the clarification of the terms such as modernity.

pronounced that, as just noted, while the structure of pre-modern Islamic world reflected the structure of the Quran, the contemporary Islamic world does not.

If the contemporary Islamic world is not the reflection of the Quranic conception of reality, what follows is that the vision of pre-modern Islam as expounded by the modern or contemporary Islamic intelligentsia is seriously modern, that is, seriously flawed and therefore does not accord with or correspond to the pre-modern Islam and the Islamic world. Therefore their contention that they represent and are fighting for the original Islam is mistaken. Their vision of the structure of the Quran and of their ideal Islam and Islamic world of pre-modern times has been constructed under the influence of and the tools provided by modernity and the modern mind that emerged with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Thus, in spite of their much proclaimed hostility to modernity, they (the modern or contemporary Islamic intelligentsia) tend to see the pre-modern world and the supreme knowledge of it as embodied in the revelation and the Quran, the last book of it, with essentially the same eyes as do the modern intelligentsia (both western and non-western).<sup>17</sup>

What follows from this is that the conception of reality that the modern intelligentsia and the modern Islamic intelligentsia adhere to is essentially same and, therefore, essentially different from the conception of reality of the Quran and the pre-modern world. The conception of the pre-modern world, of religion, of tradition, or of the pre-modern knowledge or conception of reality as embodied supremely in the revelation, as perceived by the modern mind, is a modern construction, that does not correspond with the fact or the event that it purports to be describing. And the modern Muslim mind has succumbed to it.

### **The challenge to the modern conception of reality**

Let us first recapitulate the core hypothesis of this paper at the pain of a little repetition. The whole difference between the pre-modern and modern conception of reality arises in response to the ultimate philosophical problem and which is: what is there? Or what kind of a world is it in which we live? For the modern mind it is matter that alone is real, for nothing else exists but matter and its varied variations or forms such as the plant, the animal, or the human mind. There are various philosophies of social science in vogue presently, from

---

<sup>17</sup> Some of their commonalities are pointed out in Khalid Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

empiricism or positivism to (Marxist) materialism, realism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory and so forth.<sup>18</sup> But all their much trumpeted differences fail to conceal their common, founding premise, and which is that nothing exists beside the material. In order to account for their differences, let us say that for all of them only that is real which can be reduced to the human sensory experience. Any human experience that cannot be traced back to sensory impressions is false at the best and illusion at the worst. Thus the modern mind defines knowledge as the formulation of human experience furnished ultimately through the sensory organs, or that can be reduced to the activity of human senses. Since the natural sciences, so the argument goes, adhere to this principle most faithfully, they constitute the highest form of knowledge, to which the social sciences and philosophy must also aspire.

Since the experience underlying the revelation, the ultimate embodiment of pre-modern knowledge, cannot be reduced to the sensory experience, it is an illusory experience for the modern mind. Therefore the knowledge constructed on this experience must also be false knowledge. We will investigate this claim, for what is apparent is that the modern mind has only changed the definition of knowledge and by thus doing relegated the knowledge of the pre-modern civilizations to the dustbin of history.

The chief problem with this claim is that it is founded on a premise proclaimed as self-evident by the modern mind, but which is neither self-evident nor true. It is purely a construction of the modern mind. And this is that, as Marx and Engels famously put it, reality is either material or non-material, either matter or mind. So whereas the modern, or scientific mind adheres to the reality of the former, the pre-modern mind adhered to the reality of the latter. Common sense, it was argued, shows that mind, or the human came long after the appearance of the material world, so the reality must be accorded to the material sphere alone. The pre-modern perception of the reality of the non-material sphere was therefore an illusory perception.

It is apparent that the whole support of this argument is common sense. We will see, however, that this is the same common sense which once supported the geo-centric world. Einstein too, who was called the new Copernicus by Max Planck, the founder of the quantum theory, when he came up with his theory of relativity, found this common sense in staunch opposition to his vision of reality. The mention of these two giants of the SReTC has been made advisedly. For if Planck destroyed

---

<sup>18</sup> W. Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

the absolute opposition or separation between the particle and wave natures of light (thus unifying the two contraries), Einstein demolished the absolute world or standard of perception which could be visualized to exist independent of the human observer. With the further evolution in the quantum theory, with which Einstein himself became uneasy, the so-called common sense view, which continues to be the chief dogma of modern science and of the mind built on it, that there is an objective world existing independently of human experience of it, was undermined. Though quite many books have been written on the revolutionary implications of relativity theory we still find an early philosophical study of relativity by H. W. Carr very instructive. In his opening pages he aptly observes:

The study of nature has revealed to us that the nature we study is not independent of the mind which studies it. There is no absolute physical reality which a mind may contemplate in its pure independence of the contemplator and the conditions of his contemplation. The new principle is that every observer is himself the absolute, and not, as has been hitherto supposed, the relative, centre of the universe. There is no universe common to all observers and private to none.<sup>19</sup>

In his concluding pages he writes:

The principle of relativity declares that there is no absolute magnitude, that there exists nothing whatever which can claim to be great or small in its own nature, and also there is no absolute duration, nothing whatever which in its own nature is short or long. *I coordinate my universe from my own standpoint of rest in a system of reference in relation to which all else is moving.*<sup>20</sup>

The idea that the world is inseparable from human experience of it, let us remember, is the founding premise of the (knowledge of the) pre-modern civilizations. And if the knowledge revolution of the twentieth century, spearheaded by the SReTC, reached to the same premise, so much the worse for the modern mind.

---

<sup>19</sup> H.W. Carr, *The General Principle of Relativity in its Philosophical and Historical Aspect* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920), pp.22-3. For a brief and very succinct appreciation of the groundbreaking implications of the quantum worldview see the author's introduction in W. Moore *Schrodinger, Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.155-56. Emphasis added.

The human is the centre of the universe in the pre-modern world and so is it for the world as envisioned by the relativity and quantum theories. The latter perception thus unifies the two contraries: the geo-centric and helio-centric worlds in so far as the former implied the human as the centre of the world. One of the chief arguments furnished by the modern mind to debunk the pre-modern vision of the human-centered world is that it allegedly was based on the geo-centric view of the world. So, since the geo-centric world was discovered to be an illusion, the human centered world, a world invariably tied with the human experience of it, must also be an illusion. But the point is that the pre-modern mind did not base its vision of the human-centered world on the physical fact of a geo-centric world. The 20<sup>th</sup> century knowledge revolution has demonstrated that the world is indeed inseparable from human experience of it even though it takes place in a helio-centric world.

So now we come to the structure of reality as envisioned by the Quran, briefly though for the shortage of space. There is a refrain that appears recurrently in the Quran such as 'God speaks in parables to mankind so that they may reflect.'<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the best parable that the Quran employs for itself is the one where a good word is compared to a good tree whose roots are firmly fixed in the earth while its branches are spread in the heavens.<sup>22</sup> If we reflect a little, here in nutshell is the Quranic conception of reality, or the vision of reality which the pre-modern civilizations adhered to. We can call it *two-sphere structure of reality*, in which man and God, the temporal and the transcendent, the ephemeral and the eternal, the earth and the heavens, the material and the non-material worlds, the sensory and the non-sensory spheres, form a unity of opposites.<sup>23</sup> Thus, continually mediating between the two opposites, if it decries modern vision of reality which is attained by eliminating one part from each pair of opposites, it immediately recalls

---

<sup>21</sup> 14:25. 'In this Quran we have set forth for mankind all manner of parables. But man is exceedingly contentious.' 18:54

<sup>22</sup> 14:24-5

<sup>23</sup> Socrates, Plato, and indeed the whole of Greek thought adhered to the two sphere structure of reality. The significance of this observation can hardly be overestimated, for it takes away the ground from underneath the feet of the modern man that traces its ancestry to ancient Greece. That is, if Greek thought shared its vision of reality with the contemporary civilizations, modern thought loses all its past thus appearing as an aberration of history. The point is discussed in S. Alhaq, 'Sufi Tradition and the Postcolonial Condition: A Report on Knowledge', *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 29:2 (2009).



the vision of reality, as a unity of particle and wave, of matter and energy, the observer and the observed, man and nature, as constructed by the twentieth century knowledge revolution unleashed by the relativity and quantum theories.

We noted above the modern mind's insistence that the core question of epistemology is whether we regard reality as material or non-material, sensory or non-sensory, rational or supra-rational, physical or mental, temporal or transcendental, natural or supra-natural. However, after choosing the material and the physical as the ultimate reality it went on to make another assumption, and which is that pre-modern mind stood on the opposite end, that is, it rejected the physical and the natural and accorded reality to the non-physical and supernatural alone. These two assumptions are intertwined. In the first a dichotomy of either/or is posited, whereby the two members of the binary pair of, say, physical and mental, are held to be mutually exclusive. It illustrates the modern mind's conception of unity in which one of the two members of the binary opposition must be eliminated or reduced to the other.

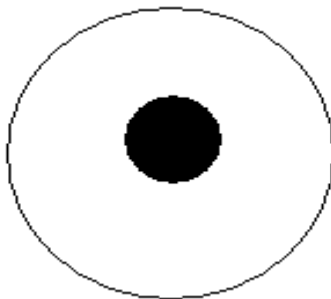
The second assumption follows from the first, and which is that if modern mind's conception of reality is material and physical, the pre-modern mind's conception of reality must be non-material and non-physical.<sup>24</sup> We have seen that both these assumptions are erroneous, a construction of the modern mind out of, as I have argued, its inheritance from Christianity. The truth is that reality cannot be reduced to either physical or mental, for it is *both* one and the same time, and, secondly, not only the pre-modern mind held to this dialectical conception of reality, the twentieth century advancement in science too has confirmed such vision of reality. Long before the emergence of the Quran, incidentally, this vision of the two sphere structure of reality was given a geometrical representation in an ancient Chinese yin-yang symbol which appears below:

---

<sup>24</sup> Modern Islamic intelligentsia adheres to this view, and, for which reason, we called them modern and their vision contradictory to the Quranic vision of reality. They might protest at this assertion, for they are apparently quite energetic in establishing a theocratic order on the earth, allegedly a kind of recreation of the model order established by the Prophet. But our assertion that they deny the reality of the physical world is based on the fact that when they claim *Sharia* as absolute and immutable, they are denying *change* as the essential attribute of the physical world.



The interactive relation between the two opposing forces of nature was succinctly described by Lao Tzu thus: 'The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two'.<sup>25</sup> Now if this figure is one way of showing the relationship or unity between the two opposing spheres of reality, we would like to put it in the following way:



If it looks like the structure of the seed, or of the atom discovered at the scientific revolution of the early twentieth century, so much the better. The transition from the billiard ball model of atom to the one with a core and an exterior, then, marks the radical change within science of its view of reality. And, secondly, as we have tried to show, science's new view of reality is the same as the pre-modern man's view of reality which underlies the Quran and, varyingly, the other religious texts, and which also reflects the underlying structure of premodern civilizations.

Neils Bohr, we may well recall here, was the one who saved the new atomic model after Rutherford's redrawing of it following his discovery of the core of the atom. But that was only the beginning of his illustrious career. Soon he emerged as a giant who confronted Einstein when the latter turned into a kind of renegade and made every effort to resist and stem the advance of quantum vision of reality. For this reason some people regard him as a greater scientist than Einstein. To keep the

---

<sup>25</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, translated by D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1963), p.103.

story short, when his country (Denmark) decided to honour him for his achievements he chose the above yin-yang symbol for his coat of arms with an inscription engraved above which read: *Contraria sunt complimenta* (Contraries compliment each other).<sup>26</sup> This was in fact the motto of his beloved theory of complementarity which has been received with little enthusiasm by the modern mind.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this is apparent: the modern mind has simply exhausted the potential to appreciate the new, let alone create it.

*'In-na fii zaalika la- 'aayaa-til-lil-muta-was-simiin.*<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Our job, in this context, as the enlightened representatives of the Islamic tradition, is to articulate the middle or third perspective by way of criticizing the two reigning perspectives that currently define our intellectual landscape. The reigning perspectives, needless to say, are the blueprints, or the maps defining the social structures evolved or intended to be evolved on them by their adherents. The third perspective, therefore, aims to provide a new model for a social structure which takes elements from the reigning models by a critical view of them while establishing its autonomy by way of introducing new concepts and their corresponding social institutions.

We may compare our work with that of the architects, for the social orders, even the physical ones are not created in the battlefields or the workshops, but on the tables. As intellectuals, if we do not believe in this truth, that it is knowledge that drives human beings, we would have little to distinguish ourselves from the generals who are pleased in making wars. And the contempt for the latter was well expressed by Crates, a follower of Socrates, when he said:

That a man ought to study philosophy, up to the point of looking generals and donkey-drivers in the same light.<sup>29</sup>

As intellectuals we are under oath that we would always uphold the independence of knowledge and mind from the sensory world of tangible objects. In this way we believe in the reality of *ghaib*, the

---

<sup>26</sup> S. Rosental (ed.), *Niels Bohr: His Life and Work as Seen by His Friends and Colleagues* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1967), p.305.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief introduction to complementarity see Bryan Register's article cited above.

<sup>28</sup> Lo! Therein verily are portents for those who read the signs. 15:75.

<sup>29</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. (London, 1853) [reprint]. p.252.

invisible world, which the Quran affirms at the outset, and we also believe that the words such as spirit, gods or God, and even mind are only the images, symbols, representations or close approximations of the invisible reality. We are well aware of the conflict and confusion still being caused by the confusion of taking the signifier as the signified. Dispensing of these images, clearing them from our perception of the invisible reality, is the goal that every intellectual, especially a teacher, must set before oneself. Being free from the confusion between the signifier and the signified, we thus distinguish ourselves from both the modern and religious intelligentsia, as both take the representations as real, or, to be more precise, absolute, as if they had reality in themselves. This is like mistaking the scarecrow for the crow.

The only difference between them is that from the first perspective they are illusion because they are unverifiable by sensory perception. But if they knew that these were only representations of the invisible reality produced by peoples of a particular time and space, they would also know *their* own illusion, of seeing something (signified) which is not there. This is the illusion which both perspectives share, for the religious intelligentsia too sees the representations as real and thus ends up in hidden infidelity. Walking on the middle or straight path, as the Quran puts it, we are respectful of these representations while being mindful all the time that they must not be associated with the reality they are meant to represent, the chief act of ignorance or sin in the language of the Quran.