

Preface

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Praise be to Him, to Whom alone belong the East and the West, Whose face is to be found wherever one turns, and Who guides whom He likes along the straight path. And May His Peace and blessings be with Muhammad, the best of those who have been given wisdom and sound judgment, and with his Ahl al-Bayt, and those who have been firmly rooted in knowledge, all of them.

The essays that follow were written in Iran over a period of about ten years (1989–1999). Most of them have been appeared in journals and magazines, such as *The Echo of Islam*, *Tawhid*, *Hikmat* and *The Message of Thaqaalayn*, all of which are published in Iran and are intended for an English language Muslim audience.

Many of the essays have been translated into Farsi and have been published in Farsi language journals, especially *Naqd o Nazar*.

The title of the collection is not meant to suggest that these are the most important topics of contemporary Islamic thought, merely that they are some topics of current discussion among Muslims. These are semi-popular essays written with several purposes in mind.

First, I wanted to say something about the topics of discussion I have found current among Muslim intellectuals in Iran. The general line I try to take is to avoid extremes. Those who advocate reform sometimes go to the extreme of deviation, and this does more harm than good to general prospects for reform.

Those who would protect tradition, orthodoxy or orthopraxy from deviation sometimes go to the extreme of denying the need for reform, and this does more harm than good to conservative concerns. I think that accepted ideas and practices can always stand reform, but that the advocacy of reform requires the utmost caution to avoid going astray.

We cling to religion for guidance, and religion can only guide us if we are willing to approach it in a spirit of complete submission. We understand religion with the aid of current ideas and practice, so we cannot

advocate too radical a reform program without cutting ourselves off from the means of knowing about what we are submitting to.

Nevertheless, through attention to sources and reliance upon God given reason and insight, one can make out a path for reform.

Second, I wanted to show how elements of the Islamic intellectual tradition could be elaborated or drawn upon to address wider issues. Not only the Glorious Qur'an and ahadith, but also the intellectual cultures that have emerged in their shadows, provide a rich supply of ideas and attitudes eternally relevant to the most important problems that arise for man.

Third, I wanted to introduce Muslim intellectuals to books and ideas from Western intellectual culture that I believe would benefit them. If Muslims are to bring effective critical thought to bear against the global domination of certain widespread Western ideas, called the cultural invasion, they must become conversant with the kinds of criticisms these ideas have spawned in the West.

This can be beneficial, for example, in the case of liberalism, not only because Muslims might find common ground with Western critics of liberalism, but because attention to the differences between the Western and Muslim critiques can help to sharpen our understanding of what is distinctive about views that originate in Islamic cultures.

Fourth, as a convert to Islam, I have been attempting to come to grips with how the ideas and values I have acquired from Western culture must be sorted out in the context of my faith in Islam. To a certain extent these essays are indications of how I have sought to respond to Islam and the intellectual traditions it has inspired, given that I was brought up with and trained in a very different intellectual tradition.

Perhaps the approach I have taken may encourage others in similar circumstances, not only converts to Islam, but young Muslims caught in the swirl of modern cultures. I pray that my errors will be forgiven, and that the rest may be acceptable to Allah. Alhamdu li-Allah.

I would like to thank all those who have helped me, especially Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi and our many friends, colleagues and students at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, who have made me welcome in Qom and who have encouraged my studies.

I should also express my appreciation for the help and encouragement of Dr. Kamal Kharazi, Dr. Gholamriza Aavani, Muhammad 'Ilmi, 'Ali Quli Qara'i, Sayyid 'Ali Riga Furighi, Akbar Qanbari, Sa'id Edalat Nezhad, and, of course, the publishers.

Qom, Sha'ban 1420 Adhar 1378 December 1999

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