

Muslim Ummah : Vision And Hope

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It is almost a decade since this university was established as an instrument to fulfil the highest hopes and aspirations of the *ummah*. These dawned upon us amidst a global environment that promised a significant role for the *ummah* in world affairs. It was an opportunity to move from a position of marginality to centre stage. A new consciousness began to take root amongst the youth. There was a new sense of confidence and a reassertion of our identity. This was the coming of the 15th century of Islam.

Nonetheless, hopes alone are not enough. Unsupported by diligence, dedication, clarity of thought, and a sense of realism, they often dissipate into bitter disillusionment. Our hopes are sometimes mixed with a simplistic outlook or a tendency to underestimate the magnitude and enormity of the challenges before us. Indeed, events and developments within the *ummah* in the intervening years had been a sobering reminder that our aspirations must go beyond naive optimism. The establishment of this university was inspired by an ideal but its life must be guided by efforts and commitment to confront the stubborn realities within the *ummah*.

After many decades of independence, the debilitating residual effects of colonialism still run deep. There seems to linger an overriding sense, not so much of failure, but more of non-fulfilment; not so much of the futility of our endeavour but more of being bound by the mediocrity of

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our achievements. The weight of conservatism remains a burden that slows down the pace of social progress. Mass poverty is still a fact of life for hundreds of millions. We have been able to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of foreign domination, but for some only to be replaced by even more repressive national regimes.

Intellectually and culturally, we have not been able to regain the creativity so characteristic of the *ummah* at the height of its glory as the dominant civilisation of the world. We cannot deny the works of a handful of courageous scholars and thinkers. One could easily cite the thought - provoking theses of *al-marhum* Ismail al-Faruqi and *al-marhum* Fazlur Rahman on the nature of tradition and the development of the *shari'ah* but again the *ummah* and even the community of Muslim scholars prefer to pass over their works in silence lest the *ummah* is awakened from its complacent conformity. For the more audacious ones, they must be ready to face the opprobrium more often than not instigated by the members of the educated class who live comfortably and securely in their narrow dogmatism.

This university therefore shoulders the enormous task of initiating internal reforms within our society. The *ummah* needs lawyers, economists, engineers and doctors. This university will do its fair share in that direction. More than that it will continuously expand its courses to respond to new needs. The coming of the information society will demand new expertise that we cannot ignore. But this university is not founded only to address the manpower needs of the *ummah*, crucial though they are no doubt. Because our participation in the international community requires a frame of mind that is open, bold and creative. This is the attitude of mind that will enable us to revitalise the *ummah* and revive it from its cultural and intellectual malaise.

Early this century, 'Allama Muhammad Iqbal sowed the seeds of intellectual reconstruction, but unfortunately his person received more attention than his works. His message fell on deaf ears, even while his greatness was glorified and extolled. Closer to us, Malek Bennabi advocated the idea of 'civilizational dialogue' as an imperative for human existence in a global village. Had the Muslims been more heedful of his writings, we would have been more prepared to take a meaningful role in the international scene and our voice would have had a greater chance of being heard in world forums.

For this university to carry out its mission it must continue where Iqbal and Bennabi left off. As Iqbal engaged himself in critical discourse with his Western contemporaries, so too must we engage in dialogue with the leaders of contemporary thought. He attempted to find meeting points between modern philosophy and the spirit of the Qur'an and classical

Muslim thought, and thus bring those great Islamic philosophers of the classical age of Islam and the message of the Qur'an to the fore of contemporary consciousness.

As Western philosophy has undergone a series of transformations since then, it would not be in the spirit of Iqbal to confine ourselves to the past, to the very same philosophers that he himself confronted. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* we perceive his boldness and witness the spirit of adventure, so characteristic of him, in exploring and subjecting to critical analysis the thoughts of al-Ghazali and Kant, al-Ash'ari and Russell, Rumi and Bergson. For our part, we should rather look closer to our own time and face the current representatives of Western thought. The challenge today comes not from Russell or Bergson, but from Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida. The challenge is no longer from the arrogance of Science taking for itself the role as the arbiter of Truth, but from Feyerabend, who denies any method in science and ends up with an anarchist theory of knowledge in which science is not superior to witch-craft. We no longer face the stubbornness of an A. J. Ayer, who reduces philosophy to logic, but Richard Rorty, who downgrades philosophy itself to the same level as any other literary endeavour, like poetry and the novel.

The *ummah* has addressed the issue of politics and economics but we have not begun to think seriously about the state of our culture. In the same way that we have considered and attempted strategies to resolve our political and economic problems so too must we nurture the growth and flowering of the arts.

If we take culture as the arts and other manifestations of human achievements looked upon collectively, then the position of the *ummah* in this regard is marginal. It cannot be poverty and underdevelopment which is the cause of this cultural and artistic sterility. Other communities, notwithstanding their economic circumstances, have demonstrated their cultural vigour on the world stage. Their dramatists, novelists and poets have lent their voices to the store of universal human experience and they are heard in the far corners of the globe. They have produced a Marquez, a Soyinka, a Milosz. Yet Muslim society as a whole has produced few works of universal significance since Iqbal. The presence of Naguib Mahfouz is an exception to the rule. And even in this case, his works have been received with some reservations. This state of affairs reflects a community without a voice. And for that we are ignored. All our protestations to the world at large become confused and incoherent.

For these reasons, the International Islamic University must allow an atmosphere of openness to thrive and provide forums for the convergence and interaction of, not only the diverse schools of thought within our society,

but also of ideas and currents of the contemporary global community. It must promote tolerance and appreciation of diversity in thought within the ummah. This university must never allow sectarianism and conformism to take root and strangle the spirit of inquiry, be it amongst students or amongst teachers. We must learn to discuss differences of opinions and viewpoints openly and rationally. It is certainly deplorable and a betrayal of the ideas of this university if teachers and students do not make a serious effort to enhance the image of the university as a vibrant and enlightened centre of learning. As such, teachers of this university must guide the students through the labyrinths of contemporary philosophical currents, the social and human ramifications of scientific discoveries, and the debates in the humanities and the arts. The students, on their part, should not be content to remain passive, but strive to become partners in dialogue and discovery.

In conclusion, let us constantly be reminded of the mission of the university, and I cannot do better than borrow and paraphrase the words of Iqbal:

That we may lead home the wanderer
And imbue the idle looker-on
with restless impatience.
And advance hotly on a new quest,
And become known as the champion
of a new spirit.