IN SEARCH OF THE MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL

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Introduction

What is an intellectual? Who is an intellectual? Is there such a thing as a Muslim intellectual? The word "intellectual" is often bandied about without due reflection as to what it really means. Who is a Muslim intellectual? Where, after all, does the word come from? It has not hitherto been asked if this concept has any place in the lexicon of Islamic civilisation, and thus it will be our aim to examine the concept "intellectual" and shed some light on its compatibility with Islamic thought and civilisation.

This article is an attempt to present the sociology of Muslim intellectuals. Instead of pursuing their biographies, we shall concentrate on certain general societal and institutional characteristics gleaned from the available literature that uniquely characterizes. Muslim intellectuals. We point out below the common group characteristics and commonalties which distinguish the so-called intellectuals from non-intellectuals. An historical approach has generally been adhered to because of its appropriateness to our sociological analysis in which milieu and cultural settings provide conduciveness for the growth of intellectuals.

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A Brief History and Origin of the Concept

The concept "intellectual" is mainly from the lexicon of Western civilisation and is inextricably bound up with the history and thought of this civilisation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a number of definitions for "intellectual," all of which, are obviously related to the word "intellect". The definition we have in mind, describing a particular type of a person, is given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an intellectual being; a person possessing or supposed to possess superior powers of intellect", first appeared in 1652. However, the modern notion of "intellectual" unmistakably refers to a very particular category of person, namely, one who is involved in "working" with the mind as opposed to physical work, engaged in mental labours characterised as "intellectual pursuits". The modern intellectual is often a "writer" or an academic who almost invariably subscribes to some particular facet or aspect of secular humanism-and frequently plays the role of social critic, cultural commentator, political activist, or all of these in combination. The latter notion is of relatively recent provenance. It first came into use in nineteenth-century France with the *Manifesto des intelectuels*, in which it designated a group of writers proclaiming their solidarity with the French writer Emile Zola, a defender and supporter of one Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Frenchman of Jewish descent who was convicted of treason in 1894.[1]

Hence, we see that the concept in its modern connotation, has its origins in the political and cultural climate of late nineteenth century France. Moreover, in modern usage the concept "intellectual" has become entirely divorced from the "intellect" through the debasement of the latter notion. Originally it denoted "that faculty, or sum of faculties, of the mind or soul by which one knows and reasons (excluding sensation, and sometimes imagination; distinguished from *feeling* and *will*); power of

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[1] Mariateresa Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, "The Intellectual" in Jacques Le Goff, ed., *The Medieval World*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, (London: Parkgate Books, 1997), 181.