

THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM *UMMAH*: THE LOSS OF TAWHIDIC EPISTEMOLOGY AS ITS ROOT CAUSE

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Abstract: The author aims to show that the identity of the Muslim community (*ummah*) in the modern and contemporary period is in a state of crisis. The *ummah* is defined as a knowledge-community founded on, nourished and sustained by the qur'ānic *tawhidic* epistemology. The article presents an established concept and theory of crisis for the purpose of arguing that the *ummah* is facing a knowledge- and identity-crisis. It traces the roots of this crisis to the substantial loss of the *tawhidic* epistemology that has helped sustain this identity for the greater part of Islamic history before the modern era. It argues further that Muslim modern education in the colonial era based on secular epistemologies quickened the decline of *tawhidic* epistemology to the point of making it helpless to respond effectively to the challenges posed by those modern epistemologies. The author argues that an unresolved intellectual conflict between the surviving elements of *tawhidic* epistemology and modern epistemologies has resulted in an epistemological crisis of great consequences to Muslim life and thought. To help overcome this epistemological crisis, he argues for the renewal (*tajdīd*) of *tawhidic* epistemology in the light of contemporary human thought. Concrete measures are also suggested as to helping make this renewal a reality.

Introduction

To claim that the contemporary Muslim *ummah* has been undergoing an identity crisis for a considerable period of time, it is first necessary to present a clear and sound definition of both identity and crisis.¹ The first part of the requirement, namely defining identity, has been fulfilled in my previous article. The second part of the requirement is to be fulfilled in this article. The next requirement is to show that in accordance with the definition of crisis given, the *ummah*'s identity is indeed in a state of crisis. This article attempts to depict the state of the crisis in question. Moreover, the depiction would be the better if we also present the root causes of the crisis and the various dimensions of its manifestations as well as the important stages

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in the historical development of the crisis. Since the crisis still prevails today despite progress made towards its resolution, this article also deals briefly with measures that need to be taken to help resolve the crisis.

Defining Crisis: Its Nature and Characteristics

The word ‘crisis’ is hotly contested in meaning, mainly as a result of its lax usage. Accordingly, I will try to provide a more reasonable definition of the word as well as concrete criteria and indicators in justification of its usage. According to one dictionary the word ‘crisis’ has three meanings. First, the word means “the turning point of a disease for better or worse” or “an intensely painful attack of a disease.” Second, the word means “a turning point in the course of anything; decisive or crucial time, stage or event.” And third, the word means “a time of great danger or trouble, often one which threatens to result in unpleasant consequences,” such as when we speak of “an economic crisis.”²

In my view, the three meanings taken together may serve as a useful guide in our task of determining whether or not the *ummah* can be said to be in a state of epistemological crisis and thus an identity crisis according to our definition. It is in the light of this understanding of crisis as well that I will be using the term ‘knowledge crisis.’ Moreover, I will argue that the above given meanings of ‘crisis’ can easily be accepted as true depictions of the present state of the *ummah* by any Muslim familiar with its identity and characteristics, and knowledgeable about the history of its ups and downs and its trials and tribulations that have landed it in its present state of affairs.

There are two key ideas in the definitions, namely the idea of “a turning point” and the idea of “time of great danger or trouble.” Since the idea of a turning point is applicable to the course of anything, it is to the historical development of *tawhidic* epistemology that we wish to direct our focus in this article. We are interested to know when the major turning point actually happened in the history of the *ummah*’s *tawhidic* epistemology. Taking the two ideas together in reference to the historical development of this epistemology would help us to identify both the origin and the duration of the epistemological crisis in question. We could also examine whether it is possible for us to speak of a particular period in the modern history of *tawhidic* epistemology that has witnessed its turning points both for worse and for better.

In fact, my argument is that, intellectually speaking, the “time of great danger or trouble” for the *ummah* which turned for the worse was during the colonial period when the surviving elements of *tawhidic* epistemology were further marginalised in Muslim education in favour of modern secular education based on such Western-originated epistemologies as positivism and evolutionism, without these epistemologies, however, being mentioned and explained to the Muslims, particularly in regard to

their implications for Islamic thought. The development of *tawhidic* epistemology only turned for the better during the post-colonial period. To be more precise, it was in the 1970s that the *ummah* saw a turning point for the better for *tawhidic* epistemology in the modern period. The 1970s was indeed an exceptionally eventful decade for the global Muslim *ummah* both in the religious and political sense. The decade saw among other things the emergence of an international organisation of Muslim nations known as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the 1975 First Islamic World Conference on Science and Technology in Riyadh, the 1977 First World Conference on Islamic Education in Mecca, and the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. The Conference on Islamic Education, which developed into a series of annual conferences, was more instrumental than any other event of the decade in helping to generate new interest in Islamic epistemology and revive some of the till then neglected or forgotten dimensions of *tawhidic* epistemology.

A good illustration of the meaning of crisis as “a turning point or as a decisive or crucial time and stage in the course of anything” was provided by Fritjof Capra, a quantum physicist who authored the best seller, *The Tao of Physics*, in his sequel *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*.³ Capra studied in detail the crisis of modern civilisation, which he described as “a crisis of intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions; a crisis of a scale and urgency unprecedented in recorded human history.”⁴ To emphasise the other meaning of crisis as “a time of great danger or trouble, often one which threatens to result in unpleasant consequences,” Capra advanced the claim that “for the first time we have to face the very real threat of extinction of the human race and of all life on this planet.”⁵ To Capra, this crisis of modern civilisation is essentially “a crisis of perceptions”⁶ and “a crisis of ideas.”⁷ It results “from the fact that we are trying to apply the concepts of an outdated world view – the mechanistic world view of Cartesian-Newtonian science – to a reality that can no longer be understood in terms of these concepts.”⁸

However, Capra discerns “a turning point” in the development of modern civilisation in the 1960s and 1970s, which he also calls the “turning of the tide.” As evidence of the turning point in modern civilisational tide – which he says is for the better – Capra refers to the new “paradigm shifts” in various academic disciplines and areas of human thought,⁹ which his book, *The Turning Point*, seeks to describe, analyse, and interpret in some detail. He believes that these paradigm shifts, which are all actually epistemological in nature and signifying a change “from the mechanistic to the holistic conception of reality,” are likely to result in “a transformation of unprecedented dimensions, a turning point for the planet as a whole.”¹⁰

Regardless of whether we agree or not with Capra’s analysis of the state of health of modern civilisation, we have to admit that in attributing a deep crisis to this civilisation he has approached the issue in a scientific way on the basis of a sound theory of crisis. He observed in the modern world major symptoms of a civilisation

suffering from chronic and degenerative diseases, which he called “the diseases of civilisation,”¹¹ and discussed each of them. These diseases viewed together led him to posit the thesis that modern civilisation is plunged into a deep crisis. He undertook the task of explaining the nature of this modern civilisational crisis and identifying its root cause. He also observed the historical development of the crisis, which convinced him that “as individuals, as a society, as a civilisation, and as a planetary ecosystem, we are reaching the turning point” for the better.¹² Finally, to fully escape from the crisis loop, Capra argues for a thorough “re-examination of the main premises and values of our culture, a rejection of those conceptual models that have outlived their usefulness, and a new recognition of some of the values discarded in previous periods of our cultural history.”¹³

My discussion of the contemporary *ummah*'s identity crisis is based on the same conception of crisis as used by Capra. However, the relevance of Capra's treatment of the modern civilisational crisis to my own treatment of the *ummah*'s identity crisis is not confined to similarities in conception and approaches on the methodological plane. There is a close relation between the two crises, not least from the civilisational point of view and, at a deeper level, from the point of view of epistemological considerations. There is a wide acknowledgment that the epistemological foundation of modern civilisation has brought about a major impact on the historical development of *tawhidic* epistemology, thereby contributing significantly to the *ummah*'s identity crisis. Details of the impact are, however, yet to be explored and documented. Moreover, by virtue of the pervasive nature of the global impact of modern civilisation, the crisis of this civilisation can no longer be viewed as simply that of the Western world alone even though it was there that it was born. As a result of certain historical relationships that existed between the West and the global *ummah* in the modern era, this crisis has also become that of the *ummah*. Whether Muslims like it or not, the solutions to the *ummah*'s identity crisis and the *ummah*'s future well-being have become closely bound to the outcome of the modern civilisational crisis. Accordingly, in the discussion that follows, I will be making further references to Capra's views on this civilisational crisis.

Identity Crisis as a Special Kind of Crisis: Contemporary Muslim Discourses

Thus far, names of various types of crisis have cropped up in the discussion. Capra speaks of such crises as crises of perceptions and ideas, and cultural, economic, energy, and existential crises. These crises are seen as components of a bigger and more fundamental crisis, namely civilisational crisis. To speak of crisis on a civilisational scale, as Capra has done, one would have to address its various dimensions or components – cultural, economic, political, scientific, and so on – which have also been referred to as crises in their own right, though occurring on a smaller scale. My

usage of the word crisis in relation to the *ummah*'s identity likewise necessitates me to make references to such of its component or related crises as epistemological, knowledge, and thinking-culture crises.

My use of the term 'identity crisis,' however, needs further explanation. Identity crisis is not to be viewed as of being the same kind as the cultural, economic, energy, environmental, and other crises that are usually treated as components of civilisational crisis. It is a far more fundamental and all-embracing crisis than any of them. In fact, it is even more fundamental in nature than civilisational crisis to the extent that the identity of a civilisation is its core element, which is its individuality, and its core qualities and characteristics that manifest themselves in all sectors of human life. Thus, we may speak of the identity crisis of a civilisation in the same manner and breath that we are speaking of the identity crisis of the Muslim *ummah*. Further, insofar as identity of a cultural organism such as *ummah* and civilisation is multi-dimensional in the manifestation of its qualities and characteristics, and itself admits of components with some being more essential than others, its crisis, if and when it happens, would also have to be multi-dimensional in nature.

It is not easy to define the identity of modern civilisation, since this civilisation itself was born in seventeenth-century Europe following a series of civilisational crises the continent had previously undergone. But this issue need not detain us here. Our concern is rather with the identity crisis of the *ummah* of which the most essential component is its epistemological crisis. Unlike in the case of modern civilisation, the identity of the *ummah* has been well-defined. There remains the task of demonstrating that this identity is indeed afflicted with a crisis. References to Capra's analysis of modern civilisational crisis are for the purpose of helping us through comparison to better understand the epistemological roots of the *ummah*'s identity crisis, since he has also traced the modern civilisational crisis to its epistemological roots.

The term identity crisis was first coined by Eric Erikson,¹⁴ a developmental psychologist. He defines identity crisis as "a psychosocial state or condition of disorientation and role confusion occurring especially in adolescents as a result of conflicting internal and external experiences, pressures, and expectations and often producing acute anxiety."¹⁵ By analogy, he extends the idea of identity crisis of the self to such socio-cultural organisms as institutions and corporations, since a similar state of disorientation and confusion can also occur in a complex organism constituted of multiple selves. Concerning the idea of identity itself, Erikson maintains that it deals with a process that is located both in the core of the individual and in the core of the communal culture. His understanding of identity appears to go well with the idea of Muslim identity as displayed both at the individual level and the collective level of the *ummah*, provided that by the process to which he refers is meant the actualisation of the potential real self planted in every human individual and the actualisation of the potential ideal society as ordained by God Himself.

My definition of the Muslim identity, both individual and communal, as the witness of divine unity and Muhammadan apostleship can easily be related to the process of actualisation in question, since the perfect witness is a product of this process. In principle, and in practice as in the best of times, there is complete convergence and unity between the Muslim individual identity and the Muslim communal identity. Just as it is possible to give an Islamic content to Erikson's characterisation of identity, it is possible to adjust his definition of identity crisis to suit the requirements of Islamic teachings. However, while the concepts of a state of disorientation, role confusion, conflicting internal and external experiences, and anxiety that he presented as the key elements in the identification of identity crisis are relevant to the understanding of Muslim identity crisis, they appear as ideas and as criteria too general and even vague for the purpose. These elemental concepts of crisis or identity crisis indicators need to be further strengthened and refined with concrete Islamic ideas concerning the meanings of both identity and crisis if we are to arrive at an authentic Islamic theory of identity crisis.

The subject of a Muslim identity crisis has been much talked about in modern times. If we go through the existing literature on the subject, we notice first of all that the discussions taken together cover all possible components or dimensions of identity. Some deal with issues of individual identity crisis, others with collective identity crisis. There are those who discourse on the identity crisis both of individual Muslim nations such as of Pakistan,¹⁶ Iran,¹⁷ and Tunisia¹⁸ and within the modern Muslim nation-states viewed as a collective group,¹⁹ and yet others on the identity crises of Muslim communities generated by tensions and conflicts between the ethnic and religious dimensions of their respective identities.²⁰ Also to be mentioned are studies on identity crisis among Muslim women²¹ and general treatments of Muslim or Islamic identity crisis in various contemporary Muslim communities.²²

Sad to say, however, these studies generally fail to provide careful definitions of Muslim identity, whether individual or communal, and sufficient explanations of its main components and dimensions. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no attempt has been made before to define and characterise the identity of the global Muslim *ummah* in the manner I have done in this and previous articles on the issue and to define the identity crisis of the *ummah* in terms of a crisis in its *tawhidic* epistemology. Knowledge of the *ummah's* identity and characteristics, especially its epistemological dimension, is essential to a good understanding of the rise and decline of Islamic civilisation of which the *ummah* is the main torchbearer. But it only goes to prove my point concerning the glaring neglect of scholarly studies on the *ummah's* identity and its civilisational impact when a scholar of the stature of Umer Chapra, the distinguished scholar of Islamic economics, hardly touches on the identity issue in his study on the decline of Islamic civilisation.²³

Knowledge Crisis as an *Ummatic* Crisis

In the light of the concept and theory of crisis that has been explained, it is possible to claim that contemporary Muslim societies are facing a knowledge crisis, by which is meant a crisis in the domain of knowledge in all its branches, aspects, and dimensions, especially education. The multi-dimensional nature of contemporary Muslim societal problems, encompassing the spiritual-moral, intellectual, political, and socio-cultural, stems from the fact that this knowledge crisis is at once fundamental and comprehensive in nature. This knowledge crisis deserves to be treated as an *ummatic*²⁴ crisis by virtue of the fact that it is of an *ummatic* scale affecting not just one or two of the *umma*'s geo-cultural branches but rather the whole of them. Quite clearly, it has impacted in various ways the *umma*'s identity and character as the many studies on Muslim identity crisis seem to indicate. In the opinion of some scholars, so pervasive has been the impact of the knowledge crisis on the *umma*'s identity that they view this identity as having been lost.²⁵

The Muslim intelligentsia has addressed various aspects of this knowledge crisis over the last four decades. The nature of this crisis that has engulfed the whole modern world has been well described by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the leading Malaysian scholar and philosopher, who appears to have dealt with this issue more extensively than any other Muslim scholar. Al-Attas did not use the term 'knowledge crisis' but rather 'challenge of knowledge.' However, the nature and substance of the challenge of knowledge that he has described²⁶ sufficiently conform to the criteria of crisis already given, that we can infer that he was indeed discoursing on the modern world's knowledge crisis. He identifies the modern West as the source of this challenge, which he sees as arising from several major drawbacks in its conception and application of knowledge. These drawbacks include the neglect of the true purpose of knowledge, defective epistemological tools in the pursuit of truth, and the affirmation of knowledge as neutral or value-free.²⁷

Al-Attas discusses not only these drawbacks but also the issue of the globalisation of this Western-originated problematic vision of knowledge. Moreover, in a concrete response to this "challenge of knowledge," which he calls "the greatest challenge in our age," in the early 1970s he came up with an intellectual agenda known as "Islamisation of knowledge" that was to influence a whole generation of Muslims throughout the world and also to generate decades-long controversies on Islamisation between its advocates and its opponents or critics. Notwithstanding its significant achievements in the field of knowledge and education, this intellectual movement has practically come to a halt, as a result of having lost its earlier zeal and fervour and also much of its original appeal, well before the turn of the twenty-first century.

Notwithstanding its turning point for the better in the 1970s, in which scholars like al-Attas and others had a contributory role, the *umma*'s knowledge crisis is far from over. There is still the need to have a clear picture of the crisis and a good

understanding of its root causes, its manifestations at various stages of its historical development, especially its present ones, and its implications for the *ummah's* identity. Only after this need is fulfilled, can we proceed to undertake the necessary and effective steps towards the resolution of the crisis. Within the limited scope of this article, I would like to address the issue of the epistemological dimension of this knowledge crisis and the *ummah's* identity crisis that it generated, which in my view was not sufficiently addressed by the earlier scholars. I wish to further strengthen the claim that epistemological crisis constitutes the core component of any knowledge crisis, and in the case of the *ummah*, a knowledge or epistemological crisis would have major repercussions on its identity for the obvious reason that its identity as a knowledge-community depends on the fate of *tawhidic* epistemology that sustains it.

The Root Cause of the *Ummah's* Knowledge Crisis and Identity Crisis

There is an interesting analogy between Capra's understanding of the modern civilisational crisis and my understanding of the *ummah's* knowledge crisis and identity crisis. He has described the crisis of modern civilisation in epistemological terms, although the word epistemology was never used. When he referred to this crisis as essentially a crisis of perceptions and of ideas, he was basically speaking of an epistemological crisis. He argued that the root cause of the crisis of modern civilisation is the outdated mechanistic worldview of Cartesian-Newtonian science that has nourished and sustained it for the last few hundred years but that can no longer perform that role. This claim of his is equivalent to saying that its root cause is the inherent limitations of the epistemology of modern science to serve the role of the foundation and sustainer of a holistically healthy human civilisation. In continuing to serve this civilisational role for which it is not fit, the epistemology of modern science in its various forms and its diverse applications to human life and thought has made modern civilisation develop along unhealthy and dangerous lines to the point of it becoming self-destructive. As quoted earlier, Capra depicted this point of grave danger as the time when the human race is facing "the very real threat of its extinction and of all life on this planet."

In the case of the Muslim *ummatic* identity crisis, I argue that its root cause is the loss of many key elements of traditional *tawhidic* epistemology that used to nourish and sustain the best centuries of the *ummah's* knowledge culture in the past, thereby helping to clearly project its identity as a knowledge-community that was characteristically creative and dynamic, and yet holistic, balanced, and moderate in its societal and developmental orientations. The loss in question was substantial but gradual, beginning with intra-Islamic intellectual feuds in the pre-colonial era that with the progressive weakening of authoritative defences of epistemological unity led eventually to epistemological sectarianism and exclusivism, and subsequently

led to its crisis with modern Western epistemologies. The identification of the root cause in question would require sufficient familiarity with the history of Islamic epistemology. For the task at hand it would be sufficient, however, to identify the beginning of the branching out of *tawhidic* epistemology into its various schools and its role as the principle of division as well as unification of the sciences, and then sketch out its subsequent path of development.

The late Fazlur Rahman, one of the leading Muslim scholars of the twentieth century, attempted in his book *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, to trace the roots of Muslim epistemological crisis to the beginning of the distinction made in Islam between the ‘religious sciences’ (*al-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyyah*) or ‘traditional sciences’ (*al-ʿulūm al-naqliyyah*) and the ‘rational or secular sciences’ (*al-ʿulūm al-aqliyyah* or *ghayr sharʿiyyah*).²⁸ Rahman did not mention who the originator of this “historic” distinction was, but regardless of who he was, he felt the division of the sciences in question was “the most fateful distinction that came to be made” in the intellectual history of Islam. Actually, based on present knowledge, Ibn Sīnā, known to the medieval West as Avicenna (d. 1035), may be regarded as the originator. He is known to have made the distinction in his short treatise entitled *Fī aqsām al-ʿulūm al-aqliyyah* (On the Divisions of the Intellectual-Rational Sciences), and in this regard he had no known predecessor.

However, in the course of discussing the distinction, Rahman made references to the intellectual feud between Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) over the relative merits of the two competing categories of sciences. His intention was to show through the feud that in the distinction made were sown the seeds of epistemological conflicts in Islam and more particularly of the decline of its science and philosophy. Rahman believed that the distinction has resulted in the adoption by religious scholars of “a gradually stiffening and stifling attitude” towards the intellectual-rational sciences, beginning with al-Ghazālī himself. He granted the fact that al-Ghazālī was not against science per se, but he considered some of al-Ghazālī’s views about science and philosophy as not helpful to their healthy growth. He detected in al-Ghazālī’s critique of Ibn Sīnā and his Peripatetic (*mashshāʿī*) school of philosophy (*falsafah*) the former’s depreciation and devaluation of science and philosophy and conflicting positions between the two thinkers on the issue of relationship between *al-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyyah* or *al-ʿulūm al-naqliyyah* and *al-ʿulum al-aqliyyah*. Al-Ghazālī’s critique was undertaken in his capacity as a representative of the school of *kalām* (‘speculative or dialectical theology’) and on its behalf. The intellectual feud discussed by Rahman was therefore a feud between two intellectual schools that have existed well before Ibn Sīnā. It may also be described as a feud between two schools of epistemology, since each school has its own epistemology.

With al-Ghazālī being born just twenty-five years after Ibn Sīnā’s death, the two thinkers were almost contemporaries. Their lives shared a common century, namely

the eleventh century. Postulating this century in the times of Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī as the beginning of a new phase in the intellectual history of Islam, as Rahman has done, seems justified if we go by the many intellectual developments going on in the century and the major changes which these developments have in store for the *ummah*'s future for better or for worse. The tenth and eleventh centuries CE have been described by many historians of Islam as the golden age of its intellectual life, in particular the golden age of its science and philosophy. In his influential work on the history of science in various civilisations, including the Islamic, published in the first half of the last century, George Sarton provided a long list of Islam's notable scientists and we noted that the majority of them, including the greatest and the most famous, flourished during the two centuries.²⁹

The period witnessed the crystallisation and the flowering of Islam's major intellectual schools and also their dynamic interactions that, no doubt, generated debates, tensions, and sometimes even conflicts, but these were largely creative rather than destructive. I would also add that the existence of the various intellectual schools in theology, philosophy, and science means, in fact, the existence of the corresponding schools of epistemology, since each intellectual school is identified with a particular school of epistemology. We may infer epistemological significance from the historical development of Islamic epistemology and its various schools. The tree of *tawhidic* epistemology that centuries earlier grew with a few major branches grew further during the two centuries with yet more branches. This epistemology plays an important role in the history of Muslim categorisations of knowledge and the sciences as well as their divisions and classifications of the sciences as illustriously shown by al-Fārābī (d. 950) in his work *Iḥṣā' al-ʿulūm* (The Enumeration of the Sciences).

Categorisations and classifications of the sciences both are intellectual activities of great epistemological significance. These activities are meant to particularise and diversify knowledge and the sciences in accordance with both the nature and growth process of human knowledge, but since they are based on one or more principles of *tawhidic* epistemology, their products in the form of particularised knowledge and sciences always find themselves interrelated and displaying intellectually appealing unity of concepts, methods, and objectives. Classical categorisations and classifications of the sciences presupposed the validity of the epistemological principles of the hierarchy and unity of knowledge and the principle of order, balance, and harmony in the domain of knowledge.

While the distinction between *al-ʿulum al-sharʿiyyah* (religious sciences) and *al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah* (intellectual-rational sciences) was first made by Ibn Sīnā, the categorisation of both these sciences was not. His predecessor, al-Fārābī, has used the term *al-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyyah* when he sought to distinguish it from the philosophical sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-falsafiyah*). We know that, according to Ibn Sīnā himself, he

composed the treatise *Fī aqsām al-ʿulūm* at the request of someone who wanted him to present a summary account of *al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah*.³⁰ This information means that Ibn Sīnā made a distinction between the two categories of sciences, because though people before him used them, their distinguishing features were not clearly spelt out. We may therefore assert that Ibn Sīnā made the distinction out of necessity arising not only from someone's personal request but also from the confusion in the public mind.

As I explained in detail in one of my works,³¹ *tawhidic* epistemology was applied by classical Muslim scholars to their classifications of the sciences from al-Fārābī's time right up to the late Ottoman period in Turkey and the Mughal period in the Indian subcontinent. Al-Fārābī's classification illustrates the application of *tawhidic* epistemology in its fullness, because it emphasises the unity of the sciences in an explicit manner rather than bringing into focus the distinction between the philosophical sciences and the religious sciences, although he included the science of jurisprudence (*ʿilm al-fiqh*) and dialectical theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) in his classification. Ibn Sīnā's classification projects the distinction between the religious sciences (*al-ʿulum al-sharʿiyyah*) and the intellectual-rational sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah*), but his holistic understanding of *tawhidic* epistemology helps to guarantee a vision of unity of the two categories of sciences.

Similarly, al-Ghazālī made the distinction in question the basis of his classification, but his *tawhidic* epistemology was also holistic enough to ensure that the ideas of the hierarchy and unity of knowledge still prevailed in his vision of knowledge as reflected in his classification. He emphasised that “the religious and intellectual sciences complement each other and are never contradictory.”³² Despite his acceptance of the distinction between the two categories of sciences, he spoke of a blurred line separating them. He said:

Most of the branches of religious knowledge are intellectual-rational in the opinion of him who knows them, and most of the branches of intellectual-rational knowledge belong to the religious code, in the opinion of him who understands them.³³

It was also his holistic understanding of *tawhidic* epistemology that enabled him to be an eminent representative of the jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) and the schools of speculative theology (*kalām*) and Sufism, successfully unifying their respective epistemological perspectives in his own being.

Rahman criticised the distinction between the religious sciences and the intellectual-rational sciences, because he was convinced that it has led to a decline of science and philosophy and the intellectual-rational sciences in general.³⁴ His book quoted earlier was aimed, among other things, at providing historical evidence to support that conviction through studies of the curricula made available at classical educational institutions in various periods of Islamic history. He noted the drift towards rejection of the intellectual-rational sciences as attested by their shrinking

content in the higher education curricula. As centuries went by, fewer and fewer educational institutions taught both categories of sciences and more and more were satisfied with just religious sciences.

Rahman was right in his claim about the drift, but to attribute it to the distinction made between the two categories of sciences is open to dispute. In my view, it was not the distinction itself that caused the drift towards the religious sciences but rather the progressive ascendancy of epistemological sectarianism and exclusivism at the expense of holistic *tawhidic* epistemology. The real issue is about the proper understanding of each category and their genuine differences. Correctly understood, there would be no conflict between them. Instead, their unity would be preserved. Wrongly understood, their differences and incompatibility would find more emphasis. Although Ibn Sīnā was an eminent representative of the intellectual-rational sciences and al-Ghazālī that of the religious sciences, both accepted a classification of the sciences based on the distinction between the two categories while affirming their unity. As exponents of *tawhidic* epistemology in its fullness, both stood against epistemological and intellectual sectarianism and exclusivism as attested by a number of their writings critical of such phenomena.

The diversity of intellectual schools with their respective epistemologies is either a blessing or a curse. It would be a blessing if it leads to their unity, meaning the affirmation of *tawhidic* epistemology. However, it would be a curse if it leads to sectarian conflicts when each school thinks it alone possesses the truth and it alone presents the true teachings of Islam and others do not. In a climate of intense epistemological sectarianism, it would be the universal elements of *tawhidic* epistemology that tend to suffer, because sectarianism tends to highlight differences at the expense of similarities and unifying elements. Sectarianism would only breed more sectarianism.

As to what actually happened in Islamic history, as Rahman has shown in his work, the sectarianism in question resulted in the decline and marginalisation of the intellectual-rational sciences and the misplaced dominance of the religious sciences. Of course, there were other societal factors that contributed to the shrinking of the intellectual-rational sciences in the educational curricula of Muslim institutions of learning towards the latter part of Islamic history. Ibn Khaldūn has observed that the advancement of higher education and learning is closely related to issues of political power and civilisational growth and development.³⁵ Centres of higher education, centres of civilisational development and progress, and centres of political power tend to converge in the same city. In the case of Islamic history, studies have shown that the existence of these combined centres also meant the availability of educational institutions that offered a balanced curriculum of *al-ʿulūm al-naqliyyah* and *al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah*.

A decline and marginalisation of the intellectual-rational sciences in society would mean a loss of some of the best elements of *tawhidic* epistemology from its knowledge culture, not to mention the loss of societal balance. It is the unity of *al-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyyah* or *al-ʿulūm al-naqliyyah* and *al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah* and the balance between them alone that could guarantee the preservation of *tawhidic* epistemology in its totality and fullness. Without the intellectual-rational sciences, the *umma*’s identity would be impaired, since the full meaning of divine unity and Muhammadan apostleship can only be realised through these sciences. In particular, it is the social sciences that help to give a fuller societal expression to the meaning of Muhammadan apostleship. Moreover, the moment a major category of sciences is excluded from educational purview and a society’s knowledge culture, the epistemological role of the principle of unity of the sciences is lost.

It is important to emphasise that the decline of *tawhidic* epistemology originated from intra-Islamic epistemological feuds long before the colonial era. These feuds led to more intensified epistemological sectarianism which progressively weakened the bond of unity of the religious and intellectual-rational sciences, resulting in the loss of balance between the two categories of sciences. Despite al-Ghazālī’s reminder that in reality “religious sciences are intellectual-rational in nature” and conversely “intellectual-rational sciences are religious in nature,” the teaching curricula of Muslim higher educational institutions during the modern era has shown a declining religious appreciation of the intellectual-rational sciences.

There is no doubt that Western colonial rule quickened the process of decline of *tawhidic* epistemology that was generated by factors internal to the *umma*. A steeper decline occurred during the colonial era as a result of the introduction of modern secular education among Muslims. The epistemological foundations of this secular education were many and these varied from one part of the Islamic world to another depending on who their colonial ruler was, since the dominant epistemology in each European country was different. However, all the modern Western epistemological currents were branches of what Capra referred to as the Cartesian-Newtonian mechanistic worldview. Major epistemological branches such as positivism, evolutionism and scientism were common to the whole modern West. Under the impact of these various epistemologies, mainly through modern education, *al-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyyah* became transformed into the so-called “religious sciences,” which underwent a further shrinking in their scope of epistemological concern. What Muslims traditionally called *al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyyah* were ‘reintroduced’ to them through their modern curriculum but presented in secular garb. Thus, these sciences have been collectively referred to as ‘secular knowledge’. Consequently, what survived of *tawhidic* epistemology at the end of colonial rule was limited to its components that were needed to serve the surviving religious sciences.

The Still Prevailing Epistemological Crisis

Despite the turning point for the better in the *ummah's* knowledge crisis in the 1970s and the subsequent few decades, the crisis still prevails in our present time. The *ummah's* total vision of knowledge is presently blurred and confused due to the multiple and conflicting visions it has experienced and which it is still experiencing. It continues to be trapped in the centuries-old clash between the shrinking *tawhidic* epistemology and modern secular epistemologies.

Nothing better illustrates this clash of epistemologies than the still unresolved tension and conflict between so-called 'religious knowledge' and 'secular knowledge.' Intra-Muslim controversies surrounding the use of the terms 'religious' and 'secular' to categorise knowledge are still raging in practically every part of the Muslim world, with many Muslims viewing their usage as illegitimate in the eyes of Islamic epistemology. Muslim critics of this terminological usage argue that to admit the validity and practice of 'secular knowledge' as this word is usually understood, as a category distinct from and opposed to 'religious knowledge,' would amount to acknowledging that there is a domain in the realm of knowledge that is completely cut off from God. Such an admission, however, would be contrary to the categorical position maintained in *tawhidic* epistemology, that all true human knowledge ought to be ultimately related to the unity of God, inasmuch as all things are ontologically related to their divine origin.

The issue of the dichotomy between the two categories of knowledge, which is perhaps the most noteworthy and fateful component of the Western intellectual legacy in the Islamic world, is not confined to the realm of theoretical discussions and debates. It even has practical consequences of great significance to the Muslim conduct of state and societal affairs. It influences the way Muslims conceive of and organise their knowledge culture. It serves as a basis of their organisation of educational systems and knowledge and management in the educational institutions. Those who understand the nature of the dichotomy in question cannot fail to see its traces in practically all sectors of contemporary Muslim life and thought. In particular, the tension inherent in the dichotomy has generated societal conflicts and problems that have become the lot of Muslims ever since they were confronted with this clash of epistemologies.

An epistemological crisis continues to prevail in the Muslim *ummah*, because this clash of epistemologies remains unresolved despite the numerous attempts made to bridge the epistemological gap between 'religious' and 'secular' knowledge. In my view, Muslims as a community have failed to present a lasting solution to the crisis because they do not have in their hands a total Islamic epistemology that comprehends the inadequacy of their current understanding of Islamic epistemology as well as the limitations and dangers inherent in the prevailing Western-originated

secular epistemologies. They have not decisively settled which vision of knowledge they need to guide them in societal life and civilisation-making. In addition, a Muslim neglect of or indifference to *tawhidic* epistemology in its fullness has deprived their minds of precious ideas that would render them capable of discriminating between the contending epistemologies and discerning the true ones from the false.

Accordingly, the 'lost' or forgotten dimension of *tawhidic* epistemology, which is a very precious one, needs to be fully rediscovered and recovered, because this epistemology in its fullness has the power and the capacity to serve as a source of abiding guiding principles for man's thinking and knowledge activities. Rediscovering this forgotten heritage in modern times has been an ongoing exercise for some Muslim scholars and academics as well as for a small number of non-Muslim scholars. Admittedly, the exercise has produced some positive results, but these are not sufficient to help restore order and harmony in a crisis-ridden domain of knowledge. Among the most precious of the lost or forgotten elements of *tawhidic* epistemology were the idea of the hierarchy and unity of knowledge and the idea of order, balance, and harmony in the domain of knowledge. The loss of these fundamental ideas was to have major consequences on the Muslim vision of knowledge and on the health of the Muslim knowledge culture.

Conclusion: The Need for *Tajdīd* in Epistemology

There is a need for a veritable *tajdīd* ('renewal') in epistemology in the twenty-first century. The main objective of this *tajdīd* is to create a new *tawhidic* epistemology for the Muslim *ummah* and humanity out of a synthesis of traditional *tawhidic* epistemology and the best of modern and postmodern epistemologies. In the pursuit of this objective, the following courses of actions are recommended:

- More studies need to be done on the epistemological roots of the *ummah's* knowledge crisis in modern times and the implications of this crisis for the *ummah's* identity.
- *Tawhidic* epistemology needs to be made better known to the present generation of Muslim scholars because of the important role that it can play in overcoming the *ummah's* knowledge crisis and contributing to the development of a healthy knowledge culture.
- Existing research centres and groups dedicated to the rediscovery and recovery of classical Islamic ideas of perennial value that have been lost or forgotten need to be further strengthened with material and moral support.
- The recovered precious epistemological ideas need to be reformulated and intellectually 're-packaged' in contemporary language so that they would be easily understood, digested and internalised by the present generation of Muslims.

- These repackaged ideas need to be given a proper place in the present treasury of Muslim thought by being translated into educational programs in various areas of knowledge and at various levels of learning.

Notes

1. The meaning of this identity has been established and its key elements and characteristics have been described in Osman Bakar, "The Qur'anic Identity of the Muslim *Ummah*: *Tawhidic* Epistemology as Its Foundation and Sustainer," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 3, no. 3 (April 2012), 438-454.
2. Michael Agnes (ed.), *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan USA, 1999, 4th ed.), 344.
3. See Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).
4. *Ibid.*, 21.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 25: "None of them [i.e. the intellectuals]...identified the real problem that underlies our crisis of ideas: the fact that most academics subscribe to narrow perceptions of reality which are inadequate for dealing with the major problems of our time."
8. *Ibid.*, 15-16.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. *Ibid.* 16.
11. *Ibid.* 24.
12. *Ibid.* 33.
13. *Ibid.*
14. For his psychosocial theory of identity crisis, see Eric Homburger Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994). For a psychoanalytical approach to the study of 'crises of the self' see Stephen Frosh, *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and the Self* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
15. Erikson, *Identity*.
16. There have been claims that Pakistan founded as an 'Islamic state' that has been grappling with an ideological and identity crisis since its inception; see Akbar S. Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan, and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997); see also D. Ashgar, "The Identity Crisis of Pakistan," *Pak Tea House*, 25 August 2010, available online at <http://pakteahouse.net/2010/08/25/the-identity-crisis-of-pakistan/> (accessed on 21 May 2012).
17. See John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 62.
18. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 3rd ed.).
19. See, for example, Abd Allah Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation? Identity Crisis within the Modern Nation States* (Leicester UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1992).
20. As an example, see Vasundhara Mohan, *The Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987). Like many other communal Muslim identities in the world having ethnic identity or consciousness as a major component, the Sri Lankan Muslim community, as a result of becoming more religious following the worldwide Islamic revival of the 1970s, has to face the crucial issue of whether ethnicity or religion should prevail in the makeup of its identity.

21. Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 2000).
22. See, for example, Mohd Kamal Hassan, *Islamic Identity Crisis in the Muslim Community in Contemporary Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Ilmu Raya, 1981), 44-50; and Rashid Shaz, *Understanding the Muslim Malaise: A Conceptual approach in the Indian Context* (New Delhi: Milli Publications, 2001).
23. M. Umer Chapra, *Muslim Civilisation: The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform* (Leicester UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2008). None of the factors of rise and decline of Islamic civilisation that he cited pertains to its epistemological foundation and the *ummah's* identity.
24. More than any other Muslim scholar it was the late Palestinian-American scholar, Ismail R. al-Faruqi who tried to popularize the term 'ummatic' in his discourse on the plight and inner malaise of the *ummah*. Among his contemporaries it was also he who gave more attention to the *ummatic* dimension of the Muslims' knowledge crisis.
25. According to Taha Jābir al-ʿAlwānī, a leading contemporary Muslim scholar in Islamic law and a former president of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), the Muslim *ummah* has already lost its identity; see his foreword to Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*, trans. Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo (Herndon VA: IIIT, 1994, 2nd ed.), ix.
26. For his detailed discussion of what he means by 'challenge of knowledge', see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), especially Chapter V.
27. *Ibid.*, 127.
28. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 33. This book is helpful to anyone interested in tracing the epistemological roots of the *ummah's* contemporary knowledge crisis.
29. George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Baltimore MD: Williams & Wilkins, 1927-48).
30. See Ralph Learner and Muhsin Mahdi (eds.), *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 96.
31. See Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998).
32. See M. A. Sherif, *Al-Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1975), p. 8.
33. Bakar, *Classification*, 213.
34. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 34.
35. For my response to this observation made by Ibn Khaldūn, see Osman Bakar, "The Role of Islam in Higher Education Policies of Muslim Countries," in: Osman Bakar, Eric Winkel, and Airulamri Amran (eds.), *Contemporary Higher Education Needs in Muslim Countries: Defining the Role of Islam in 21st Century Higher Education* (Kuala Lumpur: IAIS Malaysia and IKIP International College, 2011), 25-28.