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Modern Science and the Eclipse of Tawhîd

William C. Chittick

My purpose today is to suggest some of the issues that need to be raised from the side of Islamic thinking in any discussion of “religion and science.” For “religion,” I will keep in view the Islamic intellectual tradition, especially in its later stages, when it achieved a synthetic view of the many schools of Islamic learning. As for “science,” I want to look at it in two respects: First, science in the modern meaning of the word; and second, science as the designation for the tradition of Islamic learning that addressed issues having to do with the study of the natural world in something like the modern sense. In fact, it is precisely the just-mentioned “intellectual tradition” that produced a number of great scholars who studied the natural world in what has often been called a “scientific” manner.

In order to understand the nature of the scientific learning that was produced by the intellectual tradition, we need to situate this tradition in the broad context of Islamic learning as a whole. The word intellectual (ʿaqlî) was given to this tradition partly to distinguish it from another tradition of learning that is called “transmitted” (naqlî). It is important to grasp the difference between these two sorts of learning. Too often nowadays, Muslims discuss modern science while drawing exclusively from the transmitted learning and without having any awareness that great Muslim thinkers of the past carried out profound investigations into the nature of scientific knowledge.

In the Islamic tradition, a clear distinction has always been drawn between transmitted and intellectual learning. Transmitted learning is knowledge that has been passed on from generation to generation. In contrast, intellectual learning cannot really be passed on, though it is easy enough to speak and to write about it. Intellectual learning must be recovered anew by each generation.

Typical examples of transmitted learning are language, Koran, and Hadith, all of which need to be accepted as they are. For example, nothing can be known about the Koran without the text, and once the text has been received, it cannot be changed, though it certainly can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Intellectual learning is of a different sort. The most common example is mathematics. Although mathematics is transmitted to us, we do not say, “Two plus two equals four because my teacher said so.” The human mind is able to discover and understand mathematical truth on its own, and books and teachers are there in order to help us to understand for ourselves. Once the mind discovers this knowledge, it does not depend upon outside sources. The knowledge is accepted because it is true. It is known to be true because, once it is understood, it is self-evident. In other words, once understood, it cannot be denied, any more than one can deny one’s own self-awareness.

The whole body of intellectual learning is understood to be of the same sort as mathematics. It can only be discovered within oneself, which is to say that texts and teachers function to help the student develop the capacity to understand. Once students have actualized and realized intellectual knowledge within themselves, they have no need for texts and teachers.

In theory, intellectual knowledge can be discovered by the mind working alone, so there is no need for transmission. In other words, human beings are sufficiently endowed by the nature of things to discover intellectual truth on their own. In practice, however, intellectual knowledge needs transmission in order to be grasped. Very few people can make any real progress toward intellectual understanding without the help of those who have already achieved it.

One of the most obvious examples of transmitted, religious learning is knowledge of the Shariah, which provides the framework for Islamic praxis. Why, for example, must Muslims perform the ritual prayer five times a day? The only real answer to this question is “because God said so.” The mind cannot discover what God said without having heard the Koran and the prophetic reports, which have been transmitted from earlier generations. Once the transmitted learning is gained, it is still not clear why God said “five” and not “three” or “six.” Any sort of explanation is after-the-fact and serves only to enhance the authority of the teaching and to make it easier to accept.

In short, in transmitted religious learning, the basic proof of a statement’s truth is “God said so.” In intellectual learning, the basic proof of the statement is that it goes back to self-evident truths.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, let me stress the fact that the two types of learning intermix in the human soul. Their relationship is complementary, not antagonistic. Most of the Muslim intellectuals took it for granted that faith in the transmitted learning along with practice of the transmitted rituals were necessary aids to intellectual understanding. In some branches of the intellectual tradition, it was even held that faith in transmitted knowledge was indispensable for the full actualization of the human intellect.¹

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The best way to understand the difference between intellectual and transmitted learning is perhaps in terms of the words taqlîd and tahqîq. Taqlîd means “imitation” or “following authority.” It is the proper way to acquire transmitted knowledge. Tahqîq means “verification” or “realization.” It is the proper way to reach intellectual understanding.

People learn language from their elders by imitation, and they learn the Koran and proper Islamic activity by imitating the Prophet and his worthy followers. In contrast, the only possible way to master the intellectual sciences is by verification and realization. In other words, no one can know the truth of an intellectual issue without discovering it for himself in himself. You can learn a mathematical formula by rote, but until you understand it thoroughly and it becomes second nature to you, it is not yours. You are simply imitating others in your knowledge.

Muslim intellectuals maintain that it is necessary to imitate the Koran and the Prophet in transmitted issues. As for intellectual issues, although it is normal to accept such issues on authority from the great Muslims of the past, it is by no means sufficient. In this domain, imitation is simply the first stage. The human intellect has the potential to know for itself, without the intermediary of the transmitted learning, and it is the duty of those who have the capacity to understand intellectual issues to actualize that understanding for themselves, not simply to depend upon the views of others.

In short, there are two basic kinds of knowledge, and each kind has a method proper to it. The method proper to transmitted learning is taqlîd, or imitation, and the method proper to intellectual learning is tahqîq, or verification and realization. Someone who becomes a master of the discipline of fiqh, or jurisprudence, which is one of the transmitted sciences, may reach the degree of ijtihâd. But, a mujtahid should not be confused with a muhaqqiq, that is, one who has achieved tahqîq.

The knowledge of a mujtahid pertains to the interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith in matters having to do with the Shariah, and he cannot acquire it without the transmission of the revealed sources. By contrast, a muhaqqiq’s knowledge pertains not to the legal sciences, but to the intellectual sciences.² He knows what he knows because it has become self-evident for him, which is to say that his knowledge carries its own proof within the very act of understanding it. The knowledge does not depend for its truth on the Koran and the Hadith.

Given that these are two different routes to knowledge, and given that imitation is proper to the transmitted sciences and verification to the intellectual sciences, it follows that when people learn intellectual knowledge that they have not verified for themselves, they do not in fact

know what they think they know. This is called “compound ignorance” (*jahl murakkab*). In other words, they do not know it, and their ignorance is compounded by the fact that they do not know that they do not know it.

Compound ignorance is considered a blight on the human soul, because it closes the door to learning and understanding. If people think that they already know, why would they try to achieve understanding? The only way to cure compound ignorance is to wake up to one’s ignorance. Then the ignorance will be “simple” (*basît*) rather than compound. The cure for simple ignorance is the search for knowledge.

In short, if nothing else is remembered about the intellectual tradition, this should be kept in mind: The first goal of intellectual learning is *tahqîq*, and *tahqîq* is to know things by verifying and realizing their truth for oneself. One cannot verify the truth and reality of something without knowing it first hand, for oneself, in one’s own soul. If knowledge is simply the memorization of the views of the “authorities” or the “experts,” it is not verified knowledge. Rather, it is transmitted and imitative knowledge.

From what I have just said, it should be clear that the vast majority of people hold practically all their opinions on the basis of transmitted knowledge, not intellectual knowledge. In other words, most people take their opinions from what they have learned in school, or read in books, or seen on television, or heard from people whom they respect. They have not verified their knowledge. No matter what they think they know, they do not know it for certain. Rather they take it on the basis of belief in the authority of its source.

It should also be clear that imitative knowledge may be derived from a variety of sources. It may come from a religious tradition going back to a prophet like Moses, Jesus, or the Buddha. Or, it may be derived from modern traditions of learning that have their own quasi-prophets, people like Darwin, Freud, and Einstein. If one is to be sure that one has chosen the right authority in one’s imitation, one certainly needs to ask about the validity and the truthfulness of the transmitted knowledge.

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Before continuing with this discussion of the relation between the Islamic intellectual tradition and modern science, I need to say something about the word “science” itself. In its etymological sense, this word can refer to any sort of knowledge. But when it is contrasted with “religion,” we understand that it means the modern endeavor of scientists in fields like physics, biology, and geology. Science, in other words, is understood as an empirical knowledge that has been obtained through the “scientific method.”

While acknowledging this meaning of the word science, we also need to keep in mind the fact of “scientism.” Scientism, as the physicist and social critic Rustom Roy would say, is to take science as your theology and technology as your day-to-day religion. Scientism is a way of looking at the world that gives to science the type of truth value that used to be given to revealed scripture. Despite the fact that many modern-day philosophers, scientists, and writers have criticized scientism, it remains true that most people in the modern world, even educated people who should know better, take scientific knowledge as possessing a unique sort of reliability. Western popular culture—and today the same is largely true of Islamic popular culture—is based on a view of the universe, human life, and human destiny that accepts scientific theories as “fact.” Science is understood as providing the only reliable answers to questions about the world. In this view of things, the role of religion can at best be to supply belief systems and ritual practices, which in turn give people solace and contribute to social stability.

One result of scientism has been that the Islamic intellectual tradition has been totally eclipsed by science and the disciplines of the modern academy, such as philosophy, political science, and sociology. This means that contemporary Muslim thinkers have been trained in the modern disciplines and typically discuss science and religion in Western terms. Religion is given a small if usually respected place in life, but the tradition of intellectual learning—if there is any

awareness of it—is looked upon as the long-dead ancestor of modern science, an ancestor whose often fanciful teachings have now been displaced by “facts.”

In the Islamic context, the basis for thinking that religion does not concern itself with scientific questions is the notion that “religion” deals exclusively with the transmission of beliefs and practices. However, the moment we look at the Islamic intellectual tradition, we see that Islam has always embraced every sort of knowledge. What we call “scientific” knowledge was one form of learning that was included among the intellectual disciplines. But to understand the significance of its inclusion, we must first understand what Muslim intellectuals were trying to do.

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If we want to understand the purposes and goals of Muslim intellectuals, we need to remember that their methodology was *tahqîq*, “verification” and “realization.” Having remembered this, we can ask ourselves, “What sorts of knowledge can be verified and realized? What were Muslim intellectuals trying to know by themselves and for themselves without depending upon outside authority? What sorts of understanding did they think could not be supplied by the words of the prophets, the theologians, and the jurists?”

Note first that the purpose of the intellectual quest was not to gather information or what we call “facts.” It was not to contribute to the “progress of science,” much less to build up a “data base.” Rather, its purpose was to refine human understanding. In other words, seekers of this knowledge were trying to train their minds and polish their hearts so that they could understand everything that can properly be understood by the human mind, everything about which it is possible to have certain, sure, and verified knowledge. Each seeker of knowledge was expected to find his knowledge for himself. He was expected to know his subject with first-hand, unmediated knowledge. If he took the word of a teacher or a book instead of realizing the truth for himself, he was an imitator. Imitation cannot provide intellectual knowledge, only transmitted knowledge.

Generally speaking, four major areas were considered the proper domains of *tahqîq*. These can be called “metaphysics,” “cosmology,” “psychology,” and “ethics.”

Metaphysics is the study of the original and final reality that underlies all the phenomena of the universe. The topic of discussion is God, though God is often called by impersonal names such as “Existence,” or “the Necessary,” or “the First.”

Cosmology is the study of the appearance and disappearance of the world. Where does the universe come from, and where does it go? Naturally, it comes from the First and goes back to the First. But, how exactly does it get here, and how exactly does it return? The intellectual tradition maintained that it was possible to verify the actual route of both the coming and the going.³

Psychology is the domain of the human soul or self. What is a human being? Where do human beings come from, and where do they go? Why are people so different from each other? How can people develop the potentialities given to them by God? How can they become everything that they should and must become if they are to be fully human?

Finally, ethics is the domain of practical wisdom. How does one train one’s soul to obey the dictates of intelligence, follow the guidelines of God, and carry out one’s everyday activities in harmony with God, the cosmos, and other human beings? What are the virtues of a healthy and wholesome soul? How can these virtues become the soul’s second nature?

It should be noted that the center of attention in all four domains of investigation was *nafs*—the self or soul. The human self is the key issue because only the self can come to know God and the cosmos. The way it does this is by developing and refining its own inner power, which is called “intellect” or “heart.” In order to develop this power, people need to know what sort of self they are dealing with. But, you cannot know your own self by having the authorities or the experts tell you who you are. You do not reach knowledge of self from the outside, but rather

from the inside. Until you know yourself from within, your self-knowledge will be based on imitation, not verification. It will not be intellectual knowledge, but rather transmitted knowledge.

In the intellectual tradition all knowledge, whether intellectual or transmitted, was considered an aid in the process of coming to know oneself. The fully aware soul is the soul that has become fully itself. In other words, through full consciousness of its own reality, the soul becomes fully conscious of what God created it to be. The philosophers frequently called such a soul *al-`aql bi'l-fi'l*, “the actualized intellect.” This actualized intellect is the transformed and transmuted soul that has perfected both its theoretical and its practical powers. Having become such an intellect, the self lives in harmony with God, the universe, and other human beings.

When the great masters of the tradition wrote about these four topics, they were writing about what they had verified, not simply what they had heard from someone else. They were highly critical of anyone who tried to understand these issues merely on the basis of transmission, imitation, or consensus. Intellectual questions demand intellectual answers, and the place to pose the questions and to understand the answers is the human soul.

It needs to be kept in mind that most people do not have the ability or the energy or the urge to refine their own souls and to strive to know themselves. It was generally agreed that such people should be satisfied with accepting transmitted knowledge. They should believe in the theological teachings and follow the practical instructions of the prophets. Faith was looked upon as a mode of participating passively in intellectual understanding. As a well-known saying of the Prophet puts it, faith is a divine light that is thrown into the heart. It allows people to grasp intuitively what they do not understand in any articulate fashion, and it entails a firm commitment to its objects, which are primarily God, the Koran, the Prophet, and the Day of Resurrection.

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From what I have said, it should be clear that the key to the Islamic *intellectual* tradition is precisely the “intellect.” It was understood that the fully actualized intellect is achieved only by the prophets and those rare individuals who follow in their footsteps. This intellect is nothing but the soul that has come to know itself as it was created by God. In Koranic language, this is the God-given reality of human nature that is often called *fitra* or “innate disposition.” It is the very self of Adam, to whom God “taught all the names” (Koran 2:31). It is the primordial Adam present in every human being. At root, this innate human disposition is good and wise, because it inclines naturally toward *tawhîd*, which is the assertion of God’s unity that stands at the heart of every prophetic revelation and forms the basis for acquiring true knowledge of all things.

The problem that people face with their own innate nature is that they are overcome by ignorance and forgetfulness. As long as the soul stays ignorant and forgetful of God, it cannot know itself and it cannot properly be called an “intellect.” To the extent that people fail to actualize their innate disposition, they remain ignorant of who they are and of the nature of the cosmos. To the degree that they achieve its actualization, they come to understand things in their principles, or in their roots and realities. In other words, they grasp the universe and the soul as these are related to God. They do not remain staring at surface phenomena and appearances.

In short, the goal of the intellectual tradition was to help people come to know themselves so that they could achieve human perfection. To achieve perfection, one had to perfect the “theoretical intellect,” which is the human self that knows all the realities and all the names taught by God, and the “practical intellect,” which is the human self that knows how to act correctly on the basis of true theoretical knowledge.

From the perspective of the intellectual tradition, to know a thing truly is to know it in the context of the divine spirit God blew into Adam after having molded his body of clay, a spirit that is also called “the intellect.” If we know things outside the divine context, we do not in fact know them. If we think that we know them, we are afflicted by the disease of compound ignorance. The more confident we are about the truth of our knowledge, the more difficult it will be to cure the disease. Moreover, it should be obvious that any activity done on the basis of ignorance—not to

mention compound ignorance— will lead to ill consequences, whether for the individual, society, or humanity itself.

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I repeat that, according to the masters of the intellectual tradition, no one can actualize intellectual knowledge by listening to others or reading books. It cannot be learned by forming committees or downloading it from the Internet. It has to be found for oneself in oneself. Nonetheless, it remains necessary to listen to what the great teachers have said in order to understand the nature of the quest. When we do listen to the great teachers, we find that they agree on a large number of points, though they tend to use a great diversity of words and expressions to make these points. Mentioning a few of these points can help us grasp what exactly pre-modern Muslim intellectuals were trying to understand and to verify. Let me list ten of them:

First is tawhîd, the assertion of the unity of God. Tawhîd means that all of reality is unified in its principle. In other words, everything in the universe comes from God and returns to God. Moreover, tawhîd is always in effect, which is to say that everything in the universe is utterly and absolutely dependent upon God here and now, always and forever.

Second is that within the created order of reality, there is a permanent presence known as “intellect” or “spirit” or “heart,” and this permanent presence is the eternal light of God. All things are known to this intellect, because it embraces globally the pattern in terms of which both the universe and human beings were created.

Third, the universe is a grand hierarchy of levels in which every domain of reality is present simultaneously. This hierarchy is ordered in an intelligent way, according to the wisdom of God, and it begins and ends in intellect, which is the shining light of God.

Fourth, the universe is divided into two basic realms, one visible and the other invisible. The invisible realm is the domain of spirit, light, intelligence, and awareness. The visible realm is the domain of body, darkness, ignorance, and unconsciousness. The invisible realm is closer to God and more real than the visible world. The visible, physical realm is the most amorphous, least intelligible, and least substantial of all real domains. Given that the physical realm is relatively unreal, it has no control over the spiritual realm, just as created things have no control over God. This is not to deny, however, that the two realms interact with each other in various ways.

Fifth, human beings have a unique role to play in the universe. God created them in his own image and taught them all the names. Because of their innate knowledge of the names, everything found in the external universe is also found, in essence and reality, in the primordial human selfhood known as fitra.

Sixth, the final goal of religion and indeed, of all human endeavor, is to awaken the intellect in the heart. All human awareness of whatever sort is nothing but a glimmer of intellect, and there are infinite degrees of awakening. People are diverse in their aptitudes for finding the divine light within themselves. The prophetic teachings are addressed to all people and are meant to guide everyone to the divine light—if not in this world, then in the next. The intellectual tradition is designed to guide those who have the capacity to develop their self-awareness through verification and realization, here and now.

Seventh, our selves are identical with our awareness of things. We are what we know. The only way to achieve the fullness of our original, innate disposition is to achieve the fullness of understanding. The more we understand, the more human we are. The more forgetful we are, the less human we are. The perfection of our humanity is not found in our individual uniqueness and our personal foibles, but in our shared fitra, created in the image of God, whose full realization can be called the “actualized intellect.”

Eighth, the theoretical and practical intellects need to be developed in harmony. The role of the theoretical intellect is to know things as they truly are, and the role of the practical intellect

is to guide human beings in proper activity and correct behavior. The two can only be developed on the model of fully actualized human beings, and the best examples of such human beings are the prophets, Muhammad in particular. Without imitating the prophets on the level of transmitted learning, one cannot achieve perfection.

Ninth, seekers of knowledge should spend as little time as possible upon what is nowadays called the “real world,” because this world is in fact the least real of all cosmic domains. Seekers should busy themselves minimally with physical needs and concentrate on training their souls in self-knowledge. Everything more than what is necessary to secure one’s bodily welfare—a modicum of food, clothing, and shelter—is excessive and dangerous to human aspirations.

Tenth, the domain of mechanical contrivances—not to mention electronic devices—distracts people from their proper goals and can quickly become harmful to the soul. At its least harmful, this domain provides frivolous entertainment. At its most harmful, it can lead not only to catastrophe for the earth but also to the desolation of human spirits.

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I have probably said enough to suggest what sort of enterprise Muslim intellectuals were busy with for well over a thousand years. Let me now tell you a strange occurrence that happened to me as I was trying to decide how to bring home the significance of the intellectual tradition for people who live in modern times. I was sitting in my garden in Mt. Sinai, New York, gazing on the early August flowers. All at once an old man appeared in a place where there is no gate, and he began walking toward me. I was surprised, to say the least. Then, however, I looked closely at his face and saw a luminosity that could not be mistaken. I immediately recognized that he had to be an apparition from what the intellectual tradition calls “the world of imagination.”⁴

The old man came straight up to me and said to me in Arabic, “My name is Ibn Yaqzân, and I believe that I may be able to help you with your difficulty.” Without giving me a chance to reply, he began speaking. Afterwards, I wondered at the name, Ibn Yaqzân, “The Son of the Awake.” Could this be the same Hayy ibn Yaqzân about whom Avicenna and Abubacer (Ibn Tufayl) had written accounts? To be honest, I doubt it very much, but perhaps my Ibn Yaqzân was a family relative of sorts. In any case, let me give you the gist of what he said:

He told me that he had thoroughly surveyed the modern world, and that he was truly astonished by what he had seen. Back in his times, when Islamic civilization was vibrantly alive, he had never imagined that things would come to this. Science and learning have clearly reached an incredible fever pitch. But, what is really astonishing is not the ready availability of an enormous amount of information. Rather, what is totally mind-boggling is the fact that people have no idea that all this information and learning is useless. It is completely irrelevant to the purpose of human life. Their understanding of their real situation has decreased in inverse proportion to the amount of information that they gather. The more “facts” people know, the less they understand about themselves and the world around them.

Ibn Yaqzân was appalled at the loss of any sense of what knowledge is for. People think that they should gain knowledge so that they can control their social and natural surroundings and make their physical lives more comfortable. But, he pointed out, the “quest for knowledge” that the Prophet made incumbent upon all believers is not a quest for information or a “better life.” Rather, it is a quest to understand the Koran and the Hadith, and then, on the basis of this understanding, it is a quest for self-knowledge, self-awareness, and the understanding of God’s signs (*âyat*) in the universe and the soul. It is a search for wisdom and mastery of oneself, not for control and manipulation of the world and society.

Ibn Yaqzân was struck by the misuse of words like “scientist” and “intellectual.” He saw that people use the word “scientist” to designate experts in a knowledge that is supposed to be

uniquely true and reliable. In fact, however, scientific knowledge is simply a means to understand appearances so that they can be manipulated to achieve the desires of human egos. He said that what people call “science” today is almost identical to what in his times was called “sorcery.” Certainly, the goal is exactly the same: To control God’s creation for short-sighted and egoistic goals, if not for demonic ends, by recourse to means that escape ordinary human comprehension.

Then there is the word “intellectual.” In his time, an intellectual was someone who knew God, the world, and the human soul on the basis of verification, not imitation. An intellectual was someone who claimed to know only what he had verified for himself. Otherwise, he admitted his ignorance or the fact that he was simply quoting someone else’s opinion. In modern times, however, all those to whom that word “intellectual” is applied have received practically all their knowledge by imitation, not verification. They take what they call “facts” from others, without verifying their truth. Then they build their own theories and practices on the basis of the facts, producing an endless proliferation of new theories and new facts that go back to no foundation in reality. The experts in the modern scientific and critical disciplines, whether or not they are considered intellectuals, do not know things as they are, but only in terms of the consensus of their colleagues, mathematical constructs, theoretical fantasies, and ideological presuppositions.

Ibn Yaqqân saw that wherever imitation is necessary—that is, in following the transmitted learning that goes back to the prophets—people act as if they themselves know what is best for human happiness. In contrast, wherever verification and realization are necessary, people take everything by way of imitation. Instead of trying to verify what they would like to know about the world and themselves, they revel in compound ignorance. They blindly and obediently accept current opinions, which have been learned from the mass media and educational institutions. Whenever anyone says “Scientists agree that. . .”, they believe that it must be the truth, because it is the consensus of the intellectual elite. The great scientists and technologists of the day are idolized as the heroes of popular imagination and the divine guides to a bright new age.

Ibn Yaqqân was amazed at the blatant polytheism that drives mental and social endeavor. A “god,” after all, is that to which someone turns his hopes and aspirations. Tawhîd or the assertion of God’s Unity is to acknowledge that there is only one proper object of aspiration. But Ibn Yaqqân saw that the modern world asserts a great multiplicity of gods. Of course, they are not called “gods,” because people consider themselves far beyond primitive superstition. Rather, the gods have respectable, scientific-sounding names—like Democracy, Development, Education, Equality, Evolution, Health, Management, Modernization, Planning, Progress, Standard of Living, System, Welfare. Whatever the gods may be called—and they have many, many names—they are sacred to modern society and worshiped everywhere.

Ibn Yaqqân was astonished by the degree to which people, and especially Muslims, have lost sight of tawhîd. Instead of a worldview of tawhîd, he saw a worldview of takthîr. Takthîr is the opposite of tawhîd. Tawhîd means literally “to make one,” and takthîr means “to make many.”

Tawhîd is to declare unity by asserting the truth of the One, who is the Absolute Reality. It is to recognize the primacy and ultimacy of the Unique Reality that rules the universe. Tawhîd is a way of seeing things that establishes correlation, balance, harmony, and coherence.

In contrast, takthîr is to declare the primacy of many gods and many goals. It is a way of seeing things that brings about dispersion, separation, partition, multiplicity, disconnected facts, incoherence, and confusion. It is the primary characteristic of the Information Age. Ibn Yaqqân quickly saw that all the technical, scientific, social, and political solutions that are offered to bring peace and harmony to the world simply intensify the reign of confusion.

Along with a multiplicity of gods called by abstract, respectable names, Ibn Yaqqân saw ranks upon ranks of priests serving the many gods and encouraging their followers to immerse themselves in dispersion and confusion. He saw that each priesthood jealously guards its own

private and empowering knowledge. He saw that the common people—who consider themselves among the enlightened few in history, because they live in the era of scientific knowledge—no longer believe in priests. Hence they call the priests by names like doctors, surgeons, physicists, biologists, engineers, sociologists, political scientists, programmers, lawyers, professors, and experts. Ibn Yaqzân was astonished that everyone thinks that these priests have a sacred knowledge that is worthy of imitation and blind obedience.

Of course, Ibn Yaqzân came into the modern world from a religious tradition that has a dim view of priests in the first place. So, he was not surprised to see that each contingent of priests contends with the others for a greater share of wealth, prestige, power, and social control. Nonetheless, he was surprised that people surrender their free will to the priests and think that they are following the path of enlightened and progressive knowledge. He was sure that no priest in the Middle Ages could have wanted a more subservient flock of sheep.

Ibn Yaqzân was impressed by the engineering feats accomplished by the modern priests. He told me that some of these temples to the gods of *takthîr*, in their own strange way, are almost as impressive as the pyramids. But, at least he could understand why the ancient Egyptians built monuments to gods who promised eternal life. What he could not understand was why modern people build temples to gods like Medicine, Technology, and Scholarship, gods whose promises are constantly shown to be false. Moreover, he was utterly horrified by the unspeakable rituals that some of the priests perform in these great modern temples. As far as he knew, ancient peoples had never performed such bloodthirsty rituals. Especially shocking to him were the “last rites” reserved for believers in the powers of the god Medicine, rites that are carried out in chapels called “intensive care units.”

To make a long story short, Ibn Yaqzân was appalled not only by the situation of the common people, but also by the situation of the learned classes. In both cases, he saw that people have lost any sense of what is real. He was shocked by the way people immerse themselves in meaningless hopes and illusory endeavors. He was dismayed by the willful blindness toward the permanent, everlasting, omnipresent reality that is called “spirit”—the intelligent and intelligible light of God. He was aghast at the loss of any sense of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos and the soul, at the flattening of the world that makes material appearance seem to be the only reality. He was astonished that people have surrendered their freedom to the private and esoteric knowledge of priests. He was amazed that a class known as “intellectuals” thinks that *tawhîd* and everything considered worthy of veneration and aspiration in past times were nothing but misguided delusions, self-serving fantasies, epiphenomena of psychological contingencies, and rationales for social injustice.

Having taken a good look at our modern world, Ibn Yaqzân was anxious to go back to sanity. However, I told him that I could not report his diagnosis of the modern situation without some instruction from him as to how a cure might be accomplished. His first reaction was one of surprise. “Don’t you know,” he said, “that the cure is implicit in the diagnosis? If you have paid attention to what I have said, the road to good health is clear.”

Well, it was not clear to me, so I begged him to leave me with explicit instructions. He replied that anyone who does not have the wits to see that the cure is implicit in the diagnosis will not be helped by more explicit guidelines. Anyone who is simply looking for another priest to imitate, or another belief-system to follow, does not have the necessary qualifications for intellectual understanding.

I pleaded with him, and finally he relented. “But,” he said, “I am afraid that anyone you speak to will be like Moses in his relationship with Khizr.⁵ I tell you right now that practically no one will listen to advice, because people are too immersed in the illusion of ‘real life’ brought about by intoxication with technology.”

Ibn Yaqzân then dictated to me a testament that I have translated as an appendix to this talk. In brief, he said that goal of every seeker of knowledge must be to verify his own knowledge

of things and to actualize the intellect within. The only hope for any society and any individual is to strive, as best they can, in the path of true and verified knowledge. There are three basic stages to this quest. The first stage is to purify the soul of compound ignorance and ugly character traits. The second stage is to learn true knowledge and to acquire beautiful character traits and virtues by way of imitating the prophets, the saints, and the sages. The third stage is to understand the truth of what has been learned by finding its principles in the very depths of the soul. This involves plumbing the depths of the human substance through rigorous training of the mind and intellect. To the extent that one achieves the goal, one will recover the original human substance, the radiance of the divine light.

What surprised me most about Ibn Yaqzân's advice is that, despite having seen how the modern world works, he made no mention of government, group effort, solidarity, technology, or the Internet. It seems that he saw all of these as veils that simply serve to increase the darkness of compound ignorance. They need to be peeled back and tossed away before one can begin the serious work of uncovering one's own original substance. Unless individuals can recover wisdom within their own selves, which are nothing but the radiance of the divine spirit, society can have no hope that wisdom will play a role in its governance. When wisdom is lost, the doors to true happiness will be shut.

Appendix

The Testament of Ibn Yaqzan

Translated by
William C. Chittick

In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful

Praise belongs to God, the Wise, the All-Knowing. Gratitude be to Him for teaching us, for “He who has been given wisdom has been given much good” [Koran 2:269].

Blessings be upon the Seal of the Sages, the Guide of the Intelligent, the locus of manifestation for the Fully Actualized Intellect in this world and the next, Muhammad, and upon his Companions and Followers.

Now to begin: O seekers of wisdom! When I came into your world so unexpectedly, I was shocked by your social, political, and intellectual situation. Your world is mired in superstition of a most ineradicable sort. The leaders of modern learning have lived too long in the shadows of compound ignorance to realize that they have turned away from knowledge and intelligence, not toward it. If you want to move against the reign of confusion, you have an enormous task ahead of you. Since you have insisted that I leave you a testament, I say this:

You must undertake three basic tasks. First, you must clear the ground by eliminating compound ignorance and ugly character traits. Second, you must acquire true teachings by way of imitation of the prophets, the saints, and the sages, and you must struggle to acquire praiseworthy character traits. Third, you must verify your understanding of the truths that you have learned and actualize the beautiful character traits such that they appear from you spontaneously, without any volition on your part.

The method of eliminating ugly character traits and gaining beautiful character traits is sufficiently explained in the transmitted teachings. There is no need for me to go into detail.

The real problem you face is not that you do not know the nature of proper activity. Rather, you can no longer find the cognitive resources to support proper activity without splitting your mind into compartments—one for religious faith and practice, another for scientific and ideological beliefs, another for professional expertise. You have been inundated by the compound ignorance of modern learning, and you have taken the ever-changing opinions of the modern-day priests as if they were the true teachings revealed to the prophets and transmitted by the ulama. You must find the intellectual grounding that will let you see the errors of modern thought, understand the truths of pre-modern wisdom, and live an intellectual life pleasing to God, not simply a practical life in obedience to the Shariah.

O seekers of wisdom! You must first understand that the search for understanding will be exceedingly lonesome. You will be swimming against a riptide. The consensus of the modern-day priests and experts rejects absolutely the possibility of achieving wisdom. If you need the approval of family and friends, you will have lost the struggle before you begin. You cannot expect your community to support you, much less the educational institutions of modern society. The Prophet said, “Islam began as a stranger, and it will return whence it began. How blessed are the strangers!” You must accept the fact that the way to knowledge is the way of strangers, and that you will remain a stranger for the rest of your life. Embrace the wisdom of strangers, and avoid every path to success and well-being that is urged upon you by family, friends, and society.

You must learn to understand the difference between ignorance and knowledge. The worst disease that has stricken the community today is compound ignorance. People do not

understand that what passes for “knowledge” today has nothing to do with the knowledge urged upon them by God and the Prophet. Any knowledge that is not based on transmission from the prophets and the great ulama or that is not explicitly rooted in tawhîd is ignorance in the dress of knowledge.

At all cost, search first for knowledge of the Eternal and Everlasting. That will be found in four places: In scripture, in the consensus of the great masters of the transmitted learning, in the verified wisdom of the saints and sages, and in your own soul.

Do not imagine that knowledge of scripture and of the consensus of the modern-day ulama are sufficient to preserve your faith, much less actualize your spiritual and intellectual potential. Scientism and ideology dominate modern thinking, and in the Islamic world these have taken the form of new and original interpretations of the Koran. Without recovering the wisdom of the sages and verifying that wisdom for yourself, you will never be able to live an intelligent life pleasing to God.

Do not imagine that God has spoken only in Arabic. The great religions of the world are your allies, not your enemies. All human beings were created by God’s mercy and for God’s mercy. He guides people in many tongues and on many paths.

Avoid religious nationalism. God does not distinguish among the prophets, for they all taught tawhîd, and their sincere followers are devoted to Him alone. Remember that the thought “I am better than he” [Koran 7:12] is an inheritance from Iblis. So also is its corollary, “My religion is better than his.” Other paths to God are not your concern. Your business is to do your best with what God has given you.

Remember what God said to your Prophet Muhammad, who was sent as a mercy to the whole world: “You do not guide whom you like, but God guides whomsoever He will. And He knows better who are the guided” [Koran 28:56]. You do not know who are the guided, and you do not know if you yourself are guided. “No one feels secure from God’s deception save the folk who are losers” [Koran 7:99]. Worry about the fate of your own soul, not the soul of those who are outside your immediate responsibility. Busy yourself with searching for the knowledge of God that you yourself can find, not with the illusion that you can guide others on the path to God. If the Prophet could not guide those whom he wished to guide, how will you guide them?

Avoid politics absolutely. There will always be ignorant idealists who think that they can reform the nation or the world without reforming themselves, and there will always be those who jump at every opportunity to seize social and political power. Let them throw themselves and their world into destruction, it is no concern of yours. The world is in God’s hands, not yours or theirs. God will not ask you about their acts, for no soul carries the burden of another. He will ask you only about your acts.

Never forget that power without wisdom is wrongdoing, and that “God does not guide wrongdoing people” [Koran 3:86]. You have before you the task of bringing your own spirit to life, and you will not succeed without struggling for a lifetime on the path to God.

In your search for knowledge of God, seek God for His Essence alone, not for any benefit. If you seek God for less than his full Self, you will never be able to actualize His image, which is your own fitra, the intellect latent in your soul.

Never devote yourself to a knowledge that does not make ethical and moral demands upon you through the very act of learning and understanding. The fruit of the tree of the transmitted tradition is to observe the Shariah, and the fruit of the tree of the intellectual tradition is to see things as they truly are and to acquire beautiful character traits.

Do not become engrossed with any of the modern academic disciplines, which at best can promise you success in this life. You will need to learn something about them to survive in your world, but always remember that your task is not to become a priest in the Church of Science or an acolyte in the Religion of Technology. Much less should you become a worshiper of one of the many ideological idols, such as Democracy, Equality, Freedom, Liberalism, Conservatism, or

Marxism. Do not imagine for a moment that by pasting the adjective “Islamic” on to an idol, you can transform it into an angel.

Make it your habit to study regularly the grand repositories of wisdom, which are the Koran and the Hadith. Do not think that you can begin to understand these texts without the help of those great lights of the tradition who were honored and respected in the Islamic world well into the nineteenth century. Their interpretations of this wisdom only came to be questioned in the nineteenth century with the adoption of Western philosophy and science by Muslim thinkers and ideologues.

Respect the ulama, for it is they who preserve the intellectual and transmitted traditions. Without their aid, you will find no salvation. Nonetheless, you should not follow those ulama who do not respect the transmitted and intellectual traditions. Keep in mind that nowadays most of the so-called “ulama” hardly qualify for the title. You should search for someone who does qualify, even though finding an oasis in the desert may be a difficult task indeed.

Do not imagine that true understanding will be achieved simply by learning the opinions of the prophets, the saints, and the sages. It is absolutely essential for you to seek their wisdom with all your effort, and this will demand a great deal of reading and study on your part. But the real task starts only when you begin to struggle to verify their teachings for yourself.

Never forget that the soul’s theoretical perfection cannot be achieved without its practical perfection. Theoretical understanding can be fully actualized only when you have verified your knowledge of God, the cosmos, and your own self. So also practical perfection can be achieved only when you have adopted as your own the virtues and character traits of the prophets.

You will not be able to verify and realize your knowledge without a living teacher. Certainly you need to study books in order to acquire transmitted and intellectual learning, but the door of the heart will not be opened without the actual presence of a sage who has already reached the goal. When you are ready, you will find the sage.

At all times and in all places, remember the wisdom that God recited to you in the chapter on Luqmân, the greatest sage of the Arabs: “He who submits his face to God while acting beautifully has seized hold of the firmest handle. And unto God belongs the outcome of all affairs” [Koran 31:22].

I entrust you to God, and I bid you to struggle mightily in His path. And praise belongs to Him alone.

¹ Here I have in mind the tradition of theoretical Sufism, which, in the later Islamic tradition, has sometimes been called *irfân* or “gnosis.” The great watershed in this tradition was Ibn al-`Arabî (d. 1240), who has been the most influential intellectual teacher in the Islamic world for the past seven hundred years, despite the relative eclipse of this tradition in the past two hundred years.

² Most of the Muslim intellectuals thought that prophetic guidance was necessary in order to achieve true intellectual understanding, but they also held that once someone actualized and realized intellectual learning, it became his own. Prophetic guidance is necessary because the prophets are the true masters not only of transmitted knowledge, but also of intellectual knowledge. Muhammad did not reach his understanding on the basis of imitation, but on the basis of verification and realization. For a clear explanation of this point, see Mullâ Sadrâ, *Iksîr al-`ârifîn*, part 4, chapter 7 (text and translation as *The Elixir of the Gnostics* by Chittick, Provo: Brigham Young University Press, forthcoming).

³ I am talking in general terms, and I am quite aware that there were many exceptions to the general rules, especially in the earlier period. Avicenna, for example, is well known to have questioned the transmitted teachings concerning life after death. He did not deny that a fully actualized human intellect lived on after death, because he could verify that. However, he did say that it is impossible to verify all the accounts of the resurrection of the body. In the later tradition, a good portion of the intellectual investigations were devoted precisely to this issue of bodily resurrection. Thus Ibn al-`Arabî, and, following more or less in his footsteps, Mullâ Sadrâ, demonstrated that bodily resurrection can be verified by the experience of imagination (khayâl). For a few of Ibn al-`Arabî's teachings on this, see Chittick, Imaginal Worlds (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), Chapter 7. For Mullâ Sadrâ, see James Morris, The Wisdom of the Throne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁴ Let me clarify, however, that the world of imagination has two basic dimensions. First is what the tradition calls the world of “contiguous imagination” (khayâl muttasil), which is very much a part of the subjectivity of the individual soul. Second is the objective, external realm of true visions that is called the world of “discontiguous imagination” (khayâl munfasil). It is only the latter realm that has an objective, external reality. My “vision,” in case anyone doubts it, was very much part of the first of these two worlds.

⁵ The reference is to a famous story in the Koran (18:65-82) in which is portrayed as a paragon of transmitted knowledge but without spiritual insight. He is unable to understand the actions and words of an unnamed sage (whom the tradition identifies as Khizr or Khadir, “the green man”). The sage is portrayed as the master of what I have been calling intellectual learning, or verification and realization.