

وَلَا تُخَفِّفْ لَهُمْ عَنْ يَوْمَئِذٍ كَيْدَهُمْ  
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And say: O my Lord, increase me in knowledge (XX:114)



By: Mohammad Agha Miri

# CONFERENCE OF THE BOOKS

## THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY IN ISLAM

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## Preface



**T**he *Conference of the Books* is a collection of studies in the ethos of the Islamic intellectual heritage and the contemporary Muslim reality. The studies presented in this book arose from my encounters, as a jurist and teacher, with Muslims in the United States and other parts of the world. The essays were written in response to actual recurring problems in the Muslim community that are directly relevant to the moral and ethical definition of Islam in the contemporary world. The range of topics addressed in this book is quite broad; among others, the topics include censorship, political oppression, terrorism, the veil and the treatment of women, marriage, parental rights, the role of Islamic law, the dynamics between law and morality, and the character of the Prophet Muhammad. The range of topics was dictated by the types of issues raised by the people I encountered, as well as by my own spiritual and moral development. Therefore, there is a noticeable evolution in these essays, and I leave it to the reader to decide on the direction and merit of this evolution.

heritage of beauty and magnificence. It is my hope that the *Conference of the Books* will help rekindle the interest of Muslims in the book, and in their rich intellectual heritage.

The Muslim jurist and theologian Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (d. 478/1085) once wrote that the requisites for the pursuit of knowledge are intelligence, diligence, poverty, the instruction of teachers, travel in foreign land, and a long commitment of time. This statement reflected a particular ethos toward knowledge that prevailed in the Islamic classical age. The same ethos is also reflected in the oft-repeated statement: the pursuit of knowledge mandates an exertion of the intellect and a long and arduous struggle (*jahd al-nafs wa badl al-qarība*). Classical Muslim scholars often expressed the conviction that the pursuit of knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*) is an essential component of the Divine Will or plan, and that God values the search for knowledge more than the results of the search.

The ethos of which I speak consisted of the belief in the difficulty and elusiveness of knowledge, the belief that the more important the field of knowledge, the greater the demand for exertion, and that the elusiveness and inaccessibility of knowledge served a Divine purpose or plan. Integral to this ethos was the conviction that the pursuit of knowledge was a religious and ethical act, and that the pursuit of elusive and difficult knowledge was particularly pleasing to God. The attainment of knowledge was considered to be a cumulative and gradual process by which students built upon the insights of their masters, and scholars engaged each other in constant debate. All knowledge was thought to belong to God and, while God is all-knowing, human beings had to diligently seek this knowledge. Human beings, however, will never be able to attain but a fraction of God's truth. This did not necessarily mean that truth is relative, but it did mean that truth is partial. Diligence and persistence in searching, as well as debate and engagement, would yield greater insights into God's infinite knowledge, but at all times the knowledge attained would be partial and incomplete.

Symptomatic of this ethos were the numerous traditions or reports emphasizing that the pursuit of knowledge is an act of permanent worship (*ṭalab al-ʿilm ʿibada dāʾima*). Some reports elevated the pursuit of

The essays, however, do not represent a systematic argument toward a specific conclusion, nor is this book intended as a scholastic discourse on the contemporary Muslim reality. The essays do not assume an air of detachment or academic objectivity but, rather, reflect a variety of moods; they are passionate, jubilant, angry, and sometimes sarcastic, but they are invariably committed. Each essay was written in the context of an imagined conference of books that occurs every night. The books represented here are the books of my personal library, which contains books on a variety of subjects including Judaism, Christianity, law, philosophy, and literature. However, the books represented in this conference are mostly classical Islamic texts, and these texts engage their readers in reflections about the contemporary Muslim reality. Books, in general, preserve snapshots of the intellectual activity of their authors. Classical Islamic texts are the repository of the intellects of the past—the intellects that eventually transformed into books. And, it is my belief that, of all God's wondrous creations, the intellect is the most wondrous of all, and it is also my belief that a book is the gift of God that preserves the intellect for generations to come. With this in mind, I engaged the intellects of the past in addressing the intellects of the present. A Muslim may read these essays as the testament of a Muslim jurist on the problems that confront us today. A non-Muslim may read these essays for their sociological significance and for their relevance to comparative insights on law and theology. Yet, as the Islamic message was addressed to human beings at large, I wrote these essays for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Each essay in this collection is designed to stand on its own merit, so the book may be read selectively or out of order. Nevertheless, there are unifying themes in this book, and these unifying themes are this work's basic message. My primary focus is on the ethos of knowledge and beauty in modern Islam. Furthermore, this book seeks to create a nexus and bond between the Islamic intellectual heritage of the past and contemporary Muslim thought. Muslims today are uprooted from their intellectual tradition, and the result has been that Muslims have lost the ethos of knowledge, as well as their moral and intellectual grounding. The Islamic message started with a single book—the Qur'an—a book of remarkable moral vision and beauty. And, this single book has inspired an intellectual

religious knowledge to a status higher than prayer or ritualistic practice, even stating that the scholars are the inheritors of Prophets. Several traditions, or reports, asserted that a pious scholar is far superior to a pious but ignorant worshipper. In fact, the merit of a scholar over the ignorant is akin to the merit of the Prophet over the lowliest of people. Other reports emphasized that the best kind of travel is that which is done in pursuit of knowledge, and that this kind of travel is the mandatory *hijra* (religious duty of migration) that never ends. Still other reports demanded that Muslims travel even to the farthest reaches of the earth in pursuit of knowledge.

Classical Muslim scholars proffered several justifications for this ethos. They often argued that the complexity of knowledge is a function of the richness of God and of the complexity of God's creation. Muslim scholars also argued that the mind's worship is in the pursuit of the subtleties of the Divine Will, while the body's worship is in physical compliance with the law. If knowledge was not complex and elusive, God could not be served through the mechanisms of the intellect but would only be served through the obedience of the body. This would defeat the whole purpose behind the creation of the intellect, and would reward individuals with lazy and dull minds. Furthermore, Muslim scholars asserted that the existence of diversity in scholarly opinion is a mercy or blessing upon Muslims so that the religious law may be able to accommodate the varied and changing affairs of human beings. Part of God's charge and test to human beings is that they would know how to disagree and debate (*adal al-ikhtilaf*) without falling into strife and animosity (*fiina*).

There are many historical and social, as well as theological reasons, for the emergence of this ethos in Islamic classical culture. Among these reasons were the geographic vastness of the Islamic empire and the *de facto* emergence of geographically centered schools of legal and religious practice. Doctrines legitimizing and justifying intellectual diversity arose alongside these geographic schools. Furthermore, within the first three hundred years of Islam, a juristic class with its own institutionalized structure, and specialized and technical language, emerged within Islam. This juristic class mediated between the political elites and other social and commercial elites. It also played an important function in mediating

between the elites and the masses. The ethos of knowledge helped sustain this class, validated its mediating role in society, and endowed it with theological and moral legitimacy. Importantly, however, the fact that there were historical and social factors that contributed to the emergence of the ethos of knowledge does not in any way minimize or lessen the value or the Islamic authenticity of the ethos itself. The ethos became an essential part of the fabric of Islamic theology and morality. Regardless of the historical reasons, the ethos produced a remarkable richness in the quantity and quality of the intellectual product of the Islamic civilization, and this intellectual richness left its undeniable mark on the world at large.

Significantly, this richness and diversity is, for the most part, lost in contemporary Islam. There has been a sharp and clear deterioration in the ethos of knowledge in the Muslim world today. There are many reasons for this deterioration, among them the legacy of colonialism, the emergence of the puritanical and anti-historical Wahhabi and Salafi movements, economic problems, the breakdown of private endowments supporting educational institutions, and the monopolization by the state of the mechanisms for the production and propagation of information. Unfortunately, the deterioration in the ethos of knowledge has infected Muslims inside and outside the Muslim world and has contributed to a state of intellectual paralysis, even among Muslims in the West.

Muslim connections to the epistemology, processes, and products of their intellectual heritage have been severed in the modern age and, in my opinion, Muslims are the worse off for it. It is not that this intellectual heritage was ideal or free of problems, but that its ethical and moral potential is far superior to anything that replaced it. Furthermore, this intellectual heritage is more consistent with the moral and ethical spirit of the Islamic message as reflected in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. As such, this intellectual heritage does not only have the virtue of authenticity, but it is also qualitatively superior to anything followed by contemporary Muslims today. It is important to note, however, that I do not idealize, but rather, admire the Islamic intellectual legacy. The reader will find many occasions where I am critical of positions and stands taken by classical Muslim jurists. The mistakes of the past have as much to teach us, as do the successes.

These essays do not only attempt to reinvigorate but also to re-orient the pre-modern methodologies of Islamic knowledge. I argue that there is much beauty in the traditional Islamic methodologies of knowledge, but I also argue that even the traditional methodologies should be re-oriented toward an unrelenting and persistent exploration of a core Islamic value—beauty.

The German orientalist Joseph Schacht once argued that Islamic law is the epitome of Islamic thought and the core and kernel of Islam itself.\* The veracity of this statement depends largely on how we define Islamic law. If by Islamic law we mean the sum total of positive commandments or rules (*ahkam*), this statement is clearly false. If Islamic law means the process, methodology, and normative values of the Islamic religion (*Shari'a*), then this statement is true. One suspects that Schacht meant the former, and, in that, he is clearly wrong.

God's law (*Shari'a*) is about a process, methodology, and morality. At the core of this morality is the value of beauty. Human understanding of the law (*fiqh*) engages the process and searches the various normative values of *Shari'a*, but human understanding can never be the embodiment of God's beauty. Furthermore, the rules (*ahkam*) are the product of the human attempt at understanding, but they do not represent God's beauty. As I argue in this book, the positive commandments or rules delineate the outer boundaries of proper behavior, but they do not articulate the substance and soul of Islamic morality. The rules are at the fringe of Islamic morality; they are the external shell that do not express or create substance. The rules are about boundaries. The boundaries could be the product of an attempt to give effect to a certain morality, or they could be the product of circumstance or convenience. Although the rules may have been inspired by a moral vision or normative ideas, they do not express a moral vision or ethos. Put differently, piety creates and pursues the rules, but the rules do not create piety. However, the rules may promote piety if they are carried out with the appropriate intent and moral vision. If the intent and moral vision do not exist, then the rules become meaningless pedantry.

\* Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1.

In this collection of essays, I try to promote a cultural ethos of beauty in contemporary Islam. I believe that the core and kernel of Islam is the search for beauty—the search for God's inexhaustible beauty and the beauty of God's creation. The search for God's law must attempt to pursue, express, promote, and re-create God's beauty. The search for beauty will necessarily mean transcending rule-making to the discovery of normative values. The normative values should inspire and direct the process of rule-making; but, as stated above, the rules themselves cannot be equated with morality or the core value of beauty.

Admittedly, speaking in terms of the pursuit of beauty instead of rules is alien to contemporary Islamic culture. I do not hide the fact that I see much ugliness in the reality of Muslims today, and that I think most Muslim discourses are either apologetic and dogmatic, or legalistic and formalistic. In contemporary Muslim discourses, legalism, and the pursuit of pedantic rules have replaced the search for moral or normative values. Result-oriented and unprincipled methodologies of inquiry are quite widespread. Even the so-called reformers or liberals rely on the opportunistic concept of public interest (*maslahah*) to justify what they deem to be socially desirable results. Like the traditionalists or conservatives, Muslim liberals are dishonestly selective and non-critical in dealing with the Islamic tradition and, like the traditionalists or conservatives, they do not bother with systematic methodologies of inquiry or with the search for moral or normative values. Authoritarian methodologies of knowledge are commonplace among all types of Muslim intellectual orientations, and this has led to intellectual dishonesty, censorship, and intolerance. Even centuries-old classical texts have been banned, while other classical texts have been censored or cleansed of "offending" passages. The treatment of women in many Muslim communities is simply appalling. The dominance of puritan creeds such as Wahhabism has led to an attitude of disregard and disrespect toward the Islamic intellectual heritage, and to an ahistorical, if not anti-historical, approach to Islam. In the words of a friend, "Wahhabism and Salafism have made Islam in the modern age boring and dull."

I pray that this is a passing phase in the history of Islam, and that Muslims will regain their intellectual vigor and their enlightened spark. I

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wrote these articles not as an outsider or armchair critic. Rather, I deal with the issues that plague the Islamic world, day-in and day-out, as a professor and teacher. As a Muslim, I live these problems and, as a Muslim, I firmly believe in the beauty and resilience of the Islamic message.

Therefore, in search of the majestic beauty of Islam, I humbly present these essays. And, as classical Muslim jurists would typically say, this is my effort, if I am correct, it is a blessing from God, and if I am wrong, I seek God's forgiveness, for God knows best.

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