Islamic Education: Traditional Education or Education of Tradition?

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Introduction

Some may argue that the proposed difference between traditional education and education of tradition does not point to any substantial difference between the two but to mere quibble over words. The purpose of the exercise undertaken here is to show that the difference is substantial. This because each is part of a distinct semantic field that carries with it a theoretical baggage regarding how the past and the present are related and how the self makes sense of itself and the world in which it finds itself. Each semantic field has at its core a determinate view of tradition, thematized here as the normative view and the ontological view. While the essential characteristics of the former are presented as Cartesian in nature, the exploration of the latter relies on the concepts borrowed from Martin Heidegger and Hans-George Gadamer.

The primary concern of this article is an attempt to answer the question: is Islamic education necessarily traditional education or perhaps it should be understood as education of tradition? Any attempt to answer this question would necessarily involve a close examination of what we understand by the term tradition. The suggested close examination of our understanding of the term tradition does not mean a formal linguistic analysis engaged in by philosophers such as Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, among others. What is needed is an attempt to understand the thing we call tradition. It is not an enterprise that requires a close scrutiny of how to use the term without any formal logical contradictions, but one aimed at understanding the term that lends clarity, depth and better grasp of our everyday social reality. In other words, it requires looking critically at the way we interpret social reality, in this case tradition.

Although social construction of reality is the end product of the social activities that we engage in every day, yet it does not mean that our
understanding or interpretation of social reality is always unquestionably correct. As social beings we collectively create reality that as individuals we experience as, what Durkheim called, social facts. Social facts are ‘real’ in as much as no individual can either will or wish them away but willy-nilly has to conform to them. Although we are the authors, so to speak, of social reality yet that fact does not grant us the privilege of safely assuming that we never misunderstand social reality. In fact we quite often do. One point that is common to philosophers as diverse as Nietzsche, Marx and Freud is their insistence that we can never assume that we have the picture of our social reality right. There are forces at work, both at the individual and at societal levels, that constantly distort our understanding of social reality. And since our future oriented actions depend on our understanding of current social reality, misunderstanding can lead to disastrous results. The fall-out from misinterpretation of actions of individuals is easily containable since few are in the harm’s way. The fall-out from misinterpretation of social reality cannot be that easily contained since it has consequences for everyone.

Harmful consequences do not follow from misinterpretation of social reality per se but from the fact that misguided actions follow from the warped understanding of social reality. As suggested above, social reality is not ordained, given, or found but rather created by us as we go about the business of living our lives as best as we can. And since we are the authors of this reality, we can rewrite the script of our future actions and change or modify social reality. Every reform movement or revolution, be it religiously inspired or propelled purely by secular motives, is an attempt to change social reality by and amidst which humans live their lives. Change becomes necessary when contradictions appear in the interpretive fabric of social reality that leads to actions harmful to our general well being. And change is possible because social facts are the result of human actions and consequently can be changed. The through and through human quality of social reality sets it apart from the rarefied realm of transcendental Reality, which by virtue of being transcendental is beyond human intervention.¹

A few points of clarification in the discussion so far: following the hermeneutical usage, the terms ‘understanding’ and ‘interpretation’ are used interchangeably because for all practical purposes their meaning is synonymous. Understanding is always interpretive. Furthermore, it should be made clear at the very start, that the present discussion of the term tradition does not include its customary use in Islamic literature. In Islamic literature the word tradition has come to mean the Prophetic Sunnah. This is a more

specific and hence technical meaning of the term tradition, and not an issue here. What is at issue here is our common everyday understanding of the term tradition.

The Enlightenment View: The Normative View of Tradition

The word tradition as a concept is so much part of our everyday use that we rarely or hardly ever stop and reflect on what we mean by the term or wonder if our interpretation of the term squares up with our other experiences. We have received and unreflectively accepted a particular interpretation/meaning of the term tradition. In our unreflective common usage it has come to mean the opposite of the word modern. Tradition is that which modernity is not, or it is the other of modernity. In other words, tradition is understood as one of the pair of dichotomous words. The meaning of each word in the dichotomy is dialectically related to the meaning of the other. The question we need to ask is how did tradition come to be understood as the opposite of modern? There is nothing inherent or essential in the word tradition to mean just what we have come to associate with that word. To ask that question is to ask how the term tradition came to be interpreted this way. The question asked is not regarding the etymology of the meaning of the word tradition. The issue is not to unearth the hidden or the primary dictionary meaning of the word tradition, but rather to understand the received interpretation of the term tradition. For this we have to go back to that period of European history called the Enlightenment.

One simple way to understand this fairly complex historical period of European history stretching roughly from the 17th to the 19th century is to think of it as a time when Europe became conscious of itself as Europe and as modern; a unique historical project that marked modern Europe off not only from others in history but from its own immediate past as well. What marked it off from others and its own past, was its unflinching belief in reason and reason alone as the highest court of appeal for everything that matters to human beings. The self-consciousness of Europe as modern Europe was the consciousness of being enlightened by reason. To be modern was to subject everything to the criterion of reason, and consider everything that did not meet this strict criterion as superstition, of which myths and not reality was made of. In this, Europe was harking back to the ancient Greece of five hundred years before the birth of Christ and rejecting its immediate past, which to the enlightened eyes of the modern Europeans, was ruled not by reason but by faith. The societies that had not seen the light of reason were defined as traditional to differentiate them from modern societies that had been so enlightened. Thus, it was evident by the light of reason that society or
societies defined as traditional were those that had not broken loose from the shackles of superstition and hence not progressed. They were, so to speak, frozen in time. Reason was the engine of change and progress. On the Enlightenment view, societies were either progressing and hence progressive or stagnant and backward. The modern and the traditional were labels that the Enlightenment thinkers used to define these two types of societies. Modern societies were progressive and traditional backward.

This modern/tradition dichotomy was in fact an attempt to explain social change and hence to understand social and historical experience. From about the 17th century central Europe had stared to experience rapid and momentous changes. The classification of societies as modern or traditional, by the Enlightenment thinkers, was part of the attempt to understand and explain that change. Later when sociologists started to develop more sophisticated theories of social change the Enlightenment bias or prejudice continued to exert influence. It is the underlying theme of the Marxist thesis; it shows up in Max Weber’s definition of traditional as opposed to rational authority, to mention only a few outstanding examples.

Having understood modern/traditional dichotomy as an attempt to explain social change, it is easy to grasp how and why, when later Europeans looked at the world from their vantage point, they classified societies more like them as modern, and unlike them as traditional. It did not take long for the rest of the world to accept this classification and start organizing their historical and social experiences in terms of this dichotomy.

It is not difficult to see the normative bias built into the Enlightenment classification of societies into modern and traditional. The Enlightenment thinkers viewed modern society as normatively superior to traditional society; modern was a positive term and tradition a negative one. But not everyone who accepted the dichotomy necessarily stacked the values the same way. For some the reverse was true: traditional society was valued as superior to modern society. What is true of both, however, is that the classification carries a value judgment with it. Hence traditionalists are those who place a higher value on traditional society, and of course modernists are those who value modernity.

The Enlightenment view of tradition is not in fact an isolated theme but rather part of a cluster of themes that is referred to as the Enlightenment project. This does not, however, imply that there were no differences among the Enlightenment thinkers. To say that their thinking represented a common project, though a simplification, is nevertheless a useful one, once the qualification that the Enlightenment thinkers did not comprise a homogeneous group has been made.
To have a clearer understanding of the normative view of tradition it is necessary to have some understanding of the Enlightenment project. Only then can we know what philosophical baggage that view is encumbered with. This in turn will show that the issue of rejecting the normative view of tradition is not merely a matter of interpreting our historical experience differently but understanding a lot of other things differently too.

The Enlightenment Project

What interests us here is not the entire Enlightenment project but what some people consider its central feature. And that feature is best exemplified by the philosophy of Descartes. Cartesian philosophy is best summed up in Descartes’ famous adage: “I think therefore I am — ego cogito, ergo sum”.

This pithy phrase needs to be elaborated and analyzed to bring out the true flavour of Cartesian philosophy. The Cartesian ego or the self, as several commentators of Descartes have pointed out, is situated neither in social space nor, for that matter, in time. In other words, it is socially and historically unencumbered. It is a disembodied, abstract ego that functions free of time and space constraints. Furthermore, the Cartesian ego exists independent of the object of study. In other words, the knower, the subject stands facing the object that exists independent of it. According to Descartes, only because subject and object exist independent of each other that objective knowledge is possible. For to know is to know the object-as-it-is and not how a subject may feel or think about it. In coming to know the object-as-it-is the past is neither a guide nor a help but rather a hindrance. For Descartes the primary goal of philosophy was to arrive at a method that would ensure the subject to have knowledge of the object-as-it-is. Such a method would get rid of all the subjective characteristics of the knower, such as social and historical location of the subject, that only distort the knowledge of the object.

Grounding knowledge on foundations free of social and historical constraints was an essential part of the Enlightenment project. Richard Rorty calls it the “Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition” identifying this mode of thought with the names of three premier figures of the Enlightenment project.

Criticism of the Enlightenment Project

In the last five or six decades criticism of the Enlightenment project has provided a common theme linking a fairly diverse group of Western thinkers. Martin Heidegger, John Dewey, Hans-George Gadamer, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, are some of the thinkers who figure prominently in this group.
A trend is hardly ever the result of just one person’s efforts. It is, however, useful to identify one person as having taken the lead in starting the trend. The lead in thinking against the Enlightenment project in Western philosophy is commonly associated with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, more generally with his early writings.\(^2\)

It is incredibly difficult to summarize any aspect of Heidegger’s rather dense and complex philosophy. What is being attempted here is not to summarize an aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy, but something even more modest. The attempt is to pit some key concepts of Heidegger against those of Descartes in order to mark the break from Cartesian philosophy in particular and the Enlightenment thinking in general, that opened the pathways to a new mode of thinking that lead to a different way of conceptualizing tradition.

A commentator has characterized Heidegger’s groundbreaking book *Being and Time* as, in part, designed to demolish the Cartesian model of knower and knowledge.\(^3\) Heidegger’s key concept of *Dasein’s* being-in-the-world in one fell swoop showed that the view of the free floating Cartesian ego and the reliance on method to found knowledge on firm ground were inadequate explanations of both the nature of knower and of knowledge.

For Heidegger, human being was a thrown project (hence *Dasein* — being there). To think of human being as *Dasein* is to think of him/her as always already situated in the world in a specific way and constituted by the way he/she relates to it. And knowledge, for Heidegger, was not the result of disinterested observation with the help of a method but rather the outcome of being involved in the world and solving the problems that result from such an involvement. For Heidegger, what lay behind all and every human activity was not some solid foundation that human mind could discover for itself but social practices that we always take for granted or assume. We can never get clear about them or get to their bottom because to do so we have to assume what we want to get clear about. Thus according to Rorty, “Heidegger’s...letting social practices be taken as a primary and unquestioned datum, rather than an explanandum, exemplifies what Robert Brandom has called “the ontological primacy of the social”.\(^4\)

Heidegger’s move against the Enlightenment project did not stop at giving ontological primacy to the social but went on to provide a radical

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explication of the structure of *Dasein*. Heidegger argued that since *Dasein* is a thrown project temporality is internal to and inherent in the structure of *Dasein*. The way we experience temporality, therefore, “is not merely to undergo or endure or suffer this sequence as it comes, one thing at a time...nor is the individual merely a temporally persisting, underlying substance which supports the changing effects of time as subject to its predicates or properties, like a thing,” 5 but rather to experience it as constitutive of us. While objects are always present in their totality at any moment of time, we on the other hand are stretched across past, present and future.

Heidegger never explicitly made the case against the Enlightenment view of tradition; he did, however, talk of tradition. But to simplify the argument Heidegger is presented as if he did in fact argue against the Enlightenment view of tradition. According to the Enlightenment view, tradition was that stage in human history where knowledge was based not on rationally justified grounds but those sanctioned by custom and time-honoured practices. By giving ontological priority to social practices and demonstrating temporality to be part of the structure of *Dasein*, Heidegger not only rejected the Enlightenment view of tradition but also, more importantly, brought about a revolution in the understanding of tradition. If thought is grounded in social practices and not on some rationally justified foundations then the distinction between the traditional and the modern does not hold. To fully appreciate, however, the Heideggerian grounds for rejecting the Enlightenment view of tradition we have to have some familiarity with his very radical way of thinking about time in relation to human beings and its implication.

**Self as a Narrative**

As mentioned earlier, *Dasein* experiences time not as something that rolls over it as a huge sea wave or passes it by as the moving traffic. These analogies suggest time as something acting upon human *Dasein* from without as rolling over it or passing it by. When in fact time is not something that happens to *Dasein* but is rather part of the structure of *Dasein*. But temporality is not the only element in the structure of *Dasein*. *Understanding*, among other elements, is also part of structure of *Dasein*. By locating *understanding* in the structure of being of *Dasein*, Heidegger transformed understanding from an epistemological category, which is how it has customarily been viewed, to an ontological one. These two characteristics have implication for the way a human being relates to his/her life.

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The distinctive feature of Dasein or human life for Heidegger is that in living human beings relate themselves interpretively to their lives, that they understand themselves in a continuous process of self-interpretation, experience and re-interpretation. For Heidegger, this circle of interpretation indicates that “being itself is time”, as Gadamer puts it. “The meaning of this claim is two-fold. In the first place, the way in which a human life understands itself is conditioned by time. (Human being) is not simply an entity like others to which various predicates can be attached but a life that exists as a temporal continuum. (Which means)... that the past acquires its meaning in light of present experiences and anticipations while the meaning of the present and anticipation of the future are conditioned by the way the past is understood”.  

The point that Heidegger makes is that self-interpretation is not merely conditioned by time, but required by it. It is not merely the case that human beings interpret their lives and do so within a circle of anticipation and revision imposed by the temporal structure of life itself. This claim had already been made by Dilthey and others; Heidegger stakes out entirely new territory when he claims that “human beings must so interpret themselves, that they must live their lives in certain ways, determine some future and therewith the meaning of their past”. This claim designates self-understanding as part of the structure of being of Dasein and by so designating transforms self-understanding from an epistemological to an ontological category. To put it a little differently, understanding refers primarily to the necessary, practical relation one has to one’s own life and is therefore nothing extraneous to, or optional for, human life at all. Hans-George Gadamer puts this point clearly when he writes: “Prior to all differentiations of understanding in the different directions of pragmatic or theoretical interests, understanding is Dasein’s mode of being...”

What Heidegger is saying is that human beings are the sort of beings who must make sense of their lives. But given that temporal stretch is part of the structure of their being the only way they can make sense of their lives is by relating the present to the past on the one hand and the future on the other in such a way that the meaning of each affects the meaning of the other two. We can now understand Heidegger’s notion of self as a “thrown project” to mean that self understands itself in terms of a past it did not create and a future over which it has no control. Or that self-understanding is a “thrown project” in

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7 Ibid., 39.
history in which the past acquires its meaning in light of present experiences and future anticipations, while the meaning of the present and anticipations of the future are conditioned by the way in which the past has been understood. The understanding of the past in relation to the present and the future, and the understanding of the future with reference to the present and the past, imposes a particular circular structure upon this understanding. This structure Heidegger referred to as the hermeneutical circle within which understanding takes place. This circular structure relates the part to the whole and the whole to the part in such a way that they are both constitutive of each other. Whatever understanding is arrived at will be unstable and provisional. Thus, if the past is taken as the whole and the present as the part, change in the meaning of the present will change the meaning of the past, which in turn will change the meaning of the present. The circular nature of hermeneutical understanding means that self-understanding can be understood only as a narrative. It is in narrative that the past, the present and the anticipated future are brought together as an organic whole. In other words, the human necessity for self-understanding, given its temporality, will result in self as narrative.

According to Heidegger, the self, therefore, is not suspended in social and historical vacuum but is rather always already situated in an interpreted social and historical world, a world already made meaningful by previous generations whose meanings project forward to a determinate, although not fully deciphered, future. What this means in more specific terms is that a self in trying to make sense of his/her life or arrive at some self-understanding is not abandoned to his/her very meagre resources. A self does not arrive in a world bereft and barren of all meaning and starts making sense of this world ex nihilo but rather has the meaning created by untold generations of people that have preceded him or her to make use of in trying to make sense of his/her life.

The meaning created by previous generations is nothing but a treasure trove or repertoire of storylines, themes and modes of interpretation that a self relies on to construct the narrative he or she is. The reason the narrative that I am has striking resemblance to narratives of other members of my community is because we have all drawn our storylines and themes from pretty much the same source. Our narratives are not identical but similar, just as siblings are not identical, unless of course they are identical twins, but similar. They have, what is called, the family resemblance. Hence what constitutes a community is the family resemblance among the narratives of its members. The process of drawing from the common repertoire of the community to construct individual narratives is called tradition. In contrast to the normative view of tradition of the Enlightenment, this view is called
ontological because it is predicated on the realization that both understanding and temporality are part of the ontological structure of human *Dasein*.

**Ontological Notion of Tradition**

According to this perspective tradition is not, as it is for the normative view, a designated point in time in the past. It is not a location in time but a process in time; it is a process by which the past acquires its meaning in light of present experiences and future anticipations while the meaning of the present and anticipation of the future are conditioned by the way the past has been understood. It is a process that is dialectical in nature, rendering the meaning of both the present and the past fluid, open-ended and indeterminate. Moreover, it is a process that takes for granted history as a continuum in which the past, the present and the future are not separate moments marked off from each other by definite boundaries but rather an unbroken arch of time that is forever flowing. Furthermore, by assuming history to be a continuous flow of events in which past, present and future merge, this view does not allow any period to be evaluated positively or negatively with respect to any other period. Unlike the Enlightenment commitment to viewing history as a slow and tortuous march to a better future and to an ultimate end point, this view is not burdened with any progressive amelioration or teleology in history.

It would be prudent to make clear here that although history flows one-way, the attempt to understand history does not. It necessarily has to be so because we try to understand history while located in history. It is so because human beings not only make history but are also made by it; and we can no more step out of our historical situation then we can step out of our skin. Our attempt to understand the past, therefore, has to take into consideration how the present has already been formed by the past and thus the questions we put to the past are the result of how the past has shaped us or how we understand the past. This is what Gadamer calls “effective history”.  

At this point it is necessary to make clear what exactly is meant by the claim made earlier that the meaning of both the past and the present is open-ended and indeterminate. The objection often made to such a claim is that the past has already happened and the present is already in place, no doubt shaped and formed by the past, but both have been determined and are now accomplished ‘facts’. While it is true that a war or a revolution or for that matter any historical event of whatever significance once enacted cannot be erased or changed, the meaning of an historical event is something that can

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9 Ibid.
never be fixed. It is our understanding of events that is open-ended and fluid
because understanding of events is our interpretation of them, and there is no
understanding of an event that is not already an interpretation. For, after all, it
is our understanding or interpretation of events that makes a difference to our
lives. To make the distinction between event and interpretation of it or fact
and its interpretation is to follow the positivistic logic and posit a ghost like
thing-in-itself, which something is assumed to be prior to any interpretation.
The positivists have a hard time explaining how we come to know the thing-
in-itself if not by interpretation. The assertion that thing-in-itself is that which
can be quantified is a question begging response. For the positivists have still
to answer the question: how do they know what is it that they need to
quantify?

Tradition as Conversation

What has been said so far is that tradition should not be viewed as a point in
time constituted by series of events that having occurred have exhausted their
potential meaning but rather as a process, unending and continuous, in which
the past keeps coming alive with each new present. What is it in this view of
tradition that keeps past alive in each present? To put it bluntly and briefly: if
we think of tradition as a conversation we have with the past and not as a past
frozen in time, then we will have past coming alive each time we have
conversation with it. But why have conversation with the past? To answer this
question we have to go back to the ontological presupposition of this view.

It was argued that according to Heidegger, self-understanding is part of
the structure of \textit{Dasein}. In other words, a self must struggle to make sense of
him or herself. It is not, however, a matter of choice for a self to make or not
to make sense of his or her self, but rather a \textit{Dasein} must do so. And since
\textit{Dasein} is historical, it was argued that making sense of self has to be in the
form of a narrative.

A \textit{Dasein}, however, cannot make sense of him or herself \textit{ex nihilo} but
needs help in constructing a narrative that is his/her self. And the help that a
\textit{Dasein} gets is in the form of storylines that the culture provides with which to
design his/her narrative. That is why it was argued that those belonging to a
common culture have similar but not identical narrative structures; there is
among them what, following Wittgenstein, is called a family resemblance.

A culture or a society is a treasure trove or a repertoire of storylines that a
self can borrow from to design his/her narrative. A self does not, however,
draw an entire storyline from the same source in his/her culture. A self has the
freedom and the luxury to pick and choose from a whole array of storylines
that the culture makes available. A self, in a sense, shops around for the plots
and sub-plots that make best sense of his/her experiences and allow them to all hang together by knitting them coherently in a single storyline. It is not to deny that at times a self’s narrative is marred by incoherence. Coherence is what is aimed at but not always realized in constructing a narrative. When events in one’s life fail to cohere, a self has to either radically rewrite his/her narrative or resort to seeking help from an expert. In extreme cases lack of coherence or kink in the narrative is the result of the self suppressing an unpleasant traumatic experience in his/her past. The role of the expert is to help the self face the bit of the past that has been pushed underground by helping her/him to rewrite the narrative with that bit now part of it. In other words, a new and a coherent narrative replaces the old pathological self-understanding. This roughly is what the classical Freudian therapy seeks to achieve.

Writing and rewriting of narratives by borrowing storylines from the culture is one way that a culture is constantly and continuously being renewed. This process feeds upon the culture, which it in turn then feeds. New and novel ways that a self puts together a narrative by taking bits and pieces of storylines from most diverse sources in the culture is a creative process. This process is analogous to writing a novel, a short story, a play or a poem. One could even say that literature, understood broadly, is exciting, gripping and ultimately edifying because of the unique narratives it constructs from most diverse but ordinary sources. Literature is edifying when it helps us with constructing the narrative we are. This is a major reason why parents tell stories to their children and religious texts have parables, and artists draw inspiration from unique and interesting narratives they encounter in life. It is not that life imitates art or art imitates life, but rather they enrich each other and in turn enrich the culture of which they are a part.

It seems on the face of it relatively easy to appropriate meanings that exist in the same timeframe as you. But how does one grasp meanings that extend beyond the present into the distant past? In other words, how does one make the storylines that are located in the past contemporaneous with oneself? These questions can only be answered by explaining the logic of conversation. Gadamer, among others, has made use of conversation as a process to describe how we come to know the past. The following discussion, although in every detail not true to Gadamer, yet in general terms is Gadamerian.

What is Conversation?

One will no doubt object, how can one have conversation with someone long dead? In response one should begin by asking what is conversation and what is the process, the dynamics that makes conversation possible or causes it to
happen? Conversation or dialogue is a process by which ideas, views, information is exchanged between two parties. The customary understanding of conversation views it as face-to-face exchange through the spoken word. But then we also quite frequently exchange views, ideas and information through the written words too. Granted the response is not as rapid and immediate as in face-to-face situation yet, although stretched over time conversation is possible and does take place through the written word. Face-to-face encounter, therefore, is not the necessary condition for conversation to take place. In other words, the people with whom one can or does have conversation do not have to be physically present. And once we concede this, we will have no difficulty in understanding how conversation with someone not existing in the same timeframe as us is possible. In simple terms, we can have conversation with people long dead.

An objector may protest that while not being physically co-present with the other is not necessary for conversation, existing in the same timeframe most definitely is. He or she may further argue that one can have conversation only with people who are alive; and that to have a conversation a person has to be alive, even though he/she may live miles away. Once dead, a person is beyond the reach of conversation, for conversation, after all, is exchange and as such of necessity requires a person to be able to respond.

**Conversation as a Critical Enterprise**

To make credible the possibility of having conversation with people no longer alive, one needs to ask the question: what is the purpose of conversation? Is the need for conversation solely for the purpose of exchanging views, ideas and information or the exchange is merely a means for something else? Is it not true that I feel the need to exchange ideas, views and information in order to reach an understanding regarding some matter or issue at hand? If conversation is conceived as a way of reaching an understanding then the exchange, the give and take of conversation, the inner dynamics of conversation stands out clearly as a process of seeking elucidation, clarification and justification that are relayed back and forth as questions and answers. Implicit in any conversation, therefore, are the questions: what is it that someone is saying or claiming to be the case and why, and could the claims made be different? In other words, the to and fro of conversation is not a mechanical response akin to a ball being bounced off a wall, but a critical inquiry undertaken in order to understand the meaning of statements or claims.

Although this still does not answer the question how we can have conversation with the people not alive now, yet it marks the next step in the
argument, in fact, in the conversation unfolding here. The act of understanding is normally correlated with text. We understand a text, and by text is meant a written document. According to some thinkers it is useful to consider meaningful action as text.\(^{10}\) Pushing this line of thought a little further, we can legitimately say that to understand is always to understand a text. Here text is used as a metaphor to denote all those sorts of things that demand understanding. Hence, it is not only human actions that are viewed as text-analogues, but also anything that requires the same type of strategy in understanding as a written text. To put it a little differently, if meaningful action can be taken as text because it is potentially understandable, then all traces that human beings leave behind of their existence in the world in the form of signs, in as much as they are potentially understandable, can legitimately be viewed as texts? These signs do not consist exclusively of written words, but include objects of art and artifacts, buildings, gardens and monuments; in fact anything that bears the trace of human activity and thus potentially understandable is text.

It was claimed earlier that the inner dynamics of conversation consists of questions and answers the aim of which is to get clarification and justification regarding an issue or a subject matter in order to reach an understanding. To understand, it was said, is to grasp \textit{what} is the case or \textit{what} it is that is being asserted or said, and \textit{why} it is the case. Understanding, in other words, results from engaging in critical enquiry regarding what is the case and why it is so, and could it be otherwise. Critical enquiry, therefore, is an ongoing dynamic process undertaken to reach understanding. This dynamic process is best expressed and exemplified in and through dialogue or conversation.

It should be borne in mind that the sense in which conversation is used here is a little different from its everyday usage. A common, ordinary everyday conversation is not a critical enterprise because it is not entered into to reach an understanding, but rather to while away time or to gossip; it is idle prattle. The critical potential of conversation is then not realized or not fully realized. When conversation is engaged in earnest it is used as a critical enterprise to reach an understanding. Thus to understand something is to enter into a conversation with it, or regarding it.

The give and take process of conversation can be initiated and carried out with an interlocutor who is either another human being sitting across from you or a human being long dead. In the first case, the text consists of spoken words, that can, however, be transcribed or recorded as they are spoken; in

the second case, the text is the written word of a person long deceased, but in either case we are dealing with text or traces of human existence. It is equally true of historical buildings and monuments that are nothing but traces of human existence that need to be understood. As traces of human existence, they have meaning that we fully grasp only when we have fathomed the reason for their saying or doing what they say or do. It does not, however, mean that we have to agree with the reasons they give for what they say or do. The nature of trace left behind is inconsequential for the determination of trace as text. It makes very little difference, therefore, if the actions or the utterances of a person we wish to understand are in the same timeframe as us; what matters are the traces. Traces or texts contain information and conversation is a process by which that information is drawn out, very much the same way as a thread is drawn out of a silk cocoon. I can have conversation with a book or an historical building just as I can with a person. Written or spoken language just as much as a building are all traces of human existence, and thus text.

The Dynamics of Conversation

How does any conversation get going? What initiates a conversation and gets it on the way is obviously a question. The question that starts a conversation should not be viewed merely as something that breaks the ice between the interlocutors. The initial question in fact sets the stage for all the subsequent exchanges between the interlocutors. One, therefore, needs to ask what question is and what it does.

The question that gets the conversation going is not merely an inquiry, a probe, or a request for further information but rather an expression or reflection of the prejudice of the one formulating the question. The term prejudice is used here in the Gadamerian sense. Gadamer’s use of the word prejudice is pitted against the philosophic sense given to it by the Enlightenment philosophers. The point of Gadamer’s philosophic discussion of prejudice is to point to the myopic view of the Enlightenment philosophers for understanding prejudice as a barrier, which is to be overcome in order to arrive at true objective knowledge. Prejudice, for Gadamer, is not an expression of human being’s psychological limitations that a correct method can remedy but rather an expression of his/her finitude, which by definition cannot be overcome. Here Gadamer is relying on Heidegger’s insight that human Dasein is a thrown project and always already situated in-the-world in a specific way. The specific way one is situated in-the-world is what Gadamer’s use of prejudice reflects. For Gadamer, hence, prejudice is not a psychological but an ontological category. Gadamer further radicalizes Heidegger’s insight
by giving it a historical twist. For being-in-the-world he substitutes being-in-history where our finitude gets expressed through historically acquired and constituted prejudices.

A concrete example will help make sense of this rather abstract discussion. To be situated in history is in a sense no different from being situated in space, say, of a classroom. Each student occupies a specific space from which he/she has a particular view of the classroom. The fact that a student can occupy only one seat and thus has only a particular view of the room is an expression of his/her finitude. From Gadamer’s point of view to say that a student has only a particular view of the room is to say that his/her view is prejudiced. No student can claim his/her view to be the view of the room; each and every view is from a perspective and hence partial and limited. Gadamer claims that the way we are-in-the-world is the result of our past and hence our understanding of it is shaped by historically constituted prejudices. Had the history been different we would be differently situated-in-the-world. Had there been no partition of India, the Muslims of the sub-continent would be situated-in-the-world differently. When the Muslims of the sub-continent undertake an historical investigation today the questions they ask cannot escape being influenced by that historical event.

The point Gadamer wants to make with the help of his notion of prejudice is that the only view of history available to us is from within history and not from some privilege point outside of it. This limitation does not, however, undermine the possibility of historical knowledge. The recognition of this fact, for Gadamer, is the very condition for the possibility of having critical historical knowledge.

To say that the question we ask of a text expresses our prejudice, is to say that it reflects our being-in-history, or what is of concern to us in our historical situation. And, furthermore, it is recognition of the fact that our present historical situation flows necessarily from our past. The question we ask, therefore, not only makes the past available to us in light of our present day interests and concerns, but also to some degree reflects the future we anticipate. Through the lens of the question we see the past in light of the present and, the present in light of the past. In a sense the question makes the history fold back upon itself. There are as many ways of history folding back upon itself, as there are questions to ask. Historical understanding is, therefore, always an interpretive exercise because it is always from a perspective and the question embodies the perspective.

The answer we get in response to the question is not to be accepted at its face value. That is why the “what” is linked to the “why” of the claim. In other words, what someone is saying or claiming has to be further inquired
into by asking why the claim is being made. By linking “what” with “why” further justification, clarification and explanation are implied. The “what” only gets to the literal or surface meaning of the claim. It is like asking, in everyday conversation, what someone said. One would still want to know or establish why the claim is being made. This inquiry leads to beyond the text to the social and historical context that generated the text. What this means is that historical considerations are not irrelevant to the establishment of meaning. To put it a little differently, it is not possible to understand a text in isolation from other texts. A text implies other texts. To understand a text is to understand it in the context of a network of other texts. And how wide the network of other texts we treat as significant for our consideration, depends on the question. This necessarily leads to beyond the author and his/her intentions to the world the author inhabits. And to ask the further question, could a different claim be made? is to investigate the relations of power that generated the claim. Any attempt to understand has to give due consideration to the fact that texts or texts-analogue do not exist in a power vacuum. Both power relations and meanings constitute social reality. Power, however, does not operate on meaning-system as if from outside the system. Power as embodied in institutional arrangements not only legitimizes meaning but also helps shape its content.¹¹ Which meaning gets wide currency and is allowed to shape social reality depends less on some abstract notion of validity or logical determinacy but more on the mundane and concrete question of whose meaning it is, i.e., power.

The upshot of the discussion of the dynamics of conversation is to show that for an inquiry to be critical it has to have the form of conversation. It is, in other words, more than an inquiry into the logical validity and rational coherence of a proposition but rather grasping the force of a claim being made by understanding its meaning in its socio-historical context. And the claim under study is not a general claim but one elicited in response to a specific question. Where the logical evaluation of a proposition is almost immediate, to grasp the full force of a claim cannot be understood instantly; it needs to unfold through the give and take of questions and answers in and through conversation. It further underscores that understanding requires asking for justification and clarification; the “what” of a meaning rides in tandem with the “why”. And finally we need to ask if there were any constraints, and if there were, then what constrains for just such a claim to be made or meaning to be constructed.

¹¹ This is most probably one of Michel Foucault’s most profound insights into the social mechanics of the formation of knowledge structures. Cf. particularly his, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, tr. and ed., Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
It goes without saying that for conversation to be possible the interlocutor has to be treated as an equal and guaranteed a just hearing. The purpose of conversation is to learn from and with the help of the other and not to dominate him/her. And it is part of the learning process to modify the prejudice that prompted the initial question if in the course of conversation enough evidence is provided to warrant it. The dialectics of conversation cannot unfold and understanding cannot take place, if it is conducted from a fixed point of view or perspective. The very logic of conversation demands that we surrender our views, assumptions and perspectives to the give and take, and the questions and answers of conversation. The starting point of a conversation should not be viewed as fixed but rather as a point of departure on the way to reaching an understanding. Thought, in other words, becomes truly critical only when it is forced to reflect back upon itself, which the logic of conversation compels it to do. To rectify a prejudice, however, is not to say that we rid ourselves of all prejudices; that would amount to overcoming our finitude.

Situated in the present we reach back into the past to mine history for storylines, so to speak. And conversation with the past is the tool by which we mine history. Yet the storylines from the past cannot be forced to make sense of contemporary experiences. To put it a little differently, the mould of old storylines cannot be used mechanically to give shape to present day sensations and hope that the result will be meaningful to one living in the present. The point is to learn how meanings were constructed by studying old storylines and themes that made the concatenations of events in human life hang together, and then borrow elements from it and put them into new and novel configuration to construct new stories. Here the critical thrust of conversation comes into its own. The questions “what” and “why” play a crucial role in reviewing the storylines and determining what worked then and why it worked, and deciding what will work now and why. Neither the mechanical reproduction of old storylines nor the uncritical following of a single story would do. If we approach the past uncritically or what amounts to the same thing, reproduce the old storylines mechanically, we would in fact be abandoning participation in conversation. In place of dialogue we would have monologue instead, where the past speaks and we listen passively. When this happens we have slipped from ontological to normative tradition; from a situation where the past is an equal partner to where the past speaks with the voice of authority. Instead of we being the authors of our narratives, albeit with storylines borrowed from the past, tradition now sanctions the narrative we can have. Following the official line in constructing narratives makes for very dull narratives.
What lends vibrancy and vitality to tradition is conversation that is forever finding new things to say by shaping new storylines out of the old ones. And what makes participation in conversation exciting and thus attractive is how new objects of experience and new ways of experiencing old objects are being constantly brought into the horizon of its participants. All this makes for constructing exciting narratives.

Thus each individual narrative is unique although made of parts borrowed from other narratives. The new stories will have a family resemblance to the old stories and yet be unique. The experiences they articulate hence hark back to the past yet say something new. This is accomplished hermeneutically by understanding the past in light of the present, and the present in light of the past, where the past is the whole and the present is part of that whole. As said earlier, the hermeneutical relation between the whole and the part is never stable but dynamic, undergoing continuous revisions. The meaning of the past, and hence of the present, in other words, is being constantly revised. Furthermore, tradition is renewed each time individuals weave new narratives from borrowed storylines.

**Tradition and Knowledge**

In the discussion so far the point of having conversation with the past was seen as necessary to make sense of our finite lives. And the hermeneutical circle that makes that possible was sketched out. If, however, we leave the discussion here, the need to make sense of our lives could be viewed as little more than an egocentric indulgence, with very little beside meaningful narratives to show for it. Is this all what the conversation with the past is good for? That would be true, however, only if we take a very narrow view of what it means to make sense of life. If we shift our perspective only slightly a very different view of the entire enterprise of making sense of our lives becomes visible.

Human *Dasein*, it was said, is always already in-the-world, thus making sense of our lives entails making sense of the world we inhabit. For how can we make sense of our lives without making sense of the world in all the different ways it impinges on our life. The physical, the sociological, the historical, the aesthetic and the moral are the different ways the world leaves its impress on our lives. The world has many faces, many aspects. The world, thus, can be made sense of only in different languages, in the language of science, of humanities, of beauty and of morality. In a sense, then, the different languages are part of the different storylines that we borrow to make sense of our narratives. From this perspective, therefore, we can say that the process by which tradition is maintained and renewed finds expression in social construction of forms of knowledge. For, forms of knowledge are
nothing but attempts by us to make sense of our life and our world. Forms of knowledge, in other words, are not bodies of knowledge floating above our heads but embedded in our everyday activity of making sense of our lives and the world that we inhabit. This way of looking at forms of knowledge goes against the view that knowledge is created and maintained by its own internal logic that has little, if any relation to the mundane world of human existence.

Every tradition creates its own characteristic forms of knowledge, and every form of knowledge is rooted in some tradition. Knowledge structures vary from tradition to tradition not only in respect to their content but also in respect to which ‘language of the world’ they give priority to over others. Today, we find that science has become the dominant ‘language of the world’ and other languages have been assigned a secondary place in the scheme of making sense of the world and our lives. What is, however, much worse is that science has come to be seen as the norm by which every other ‘language of the world’ is to be evaluated.

Tradition can, therefore, be understood as a process that not only makes it possible for those who participate in it to construct meaningful narratives but also to create knowledge; in actual fact the gestures that create the former also create the latter. It follows then that when a tradition weakens it affects not only the construction of meaningful narratives but also the construction of forms of knowledge.

**Tradition and History**

A conversation is kept alive only if people find it inherently meaningful to participate in it. If participation in a conversation slackens the conversation withers, and participation slackens when and if people find the conversation no longer meaningful. If tradition is conversation the present has with the past in order to understand and discover itself, then the health of conversation depends on how actively and frequently people in the present participate in it. And in turn, how nuanced and differentiated self-understanding of the present is depends on how lively the conversation with the past is. This places the responsibility of maintaining tradition squarely on the shoulders of the people who belong to the tradition. This characteristic of tradition marks it off from history. While it is true, as it has been argued earlier, that the possibility for there being tradition at all is because human existence is historical, yet the concept of tradition has to be differentiated from history as such. History does not have to be maintained; it just happens. History just happens because people inevitably have to act and the results of their action flow out to the future. In the realm of history even the inability to act or refusal to act by a community of people is action that has consequences. And if as a consequence
of their action/inaction the community is dispersed then their history will be
the history of their Diaspora.

Tradition, on the other hand, is not something that just happens; it is
created and hence has to be preserved. It has to be constantly fed to prevent it
from withering, from dying out. A tradition for want of participation can die;
history, however, relentlessly marches on.

The characteristic of tradition as something created and renewed through
participation also highlights the paucity of the normative view of tradition,
which by contrast formulates tradition as a point in the past. This perspective
makes of tradition as something given — a fact. Those who wish to preserve
tradition foreclose the future by retreating to some mythical past, and those
who desire to reject it abandon the past for some equally mythical truncated
present.

When it is claimed that tradition should be thought of as conversation, it
should not be assumed that a tradition consists of just one conversation. A
tradition normally consists of a cluster of conversations that at times run
parallel to each other and on occasion crisscross each other. There is always a
constant tussle among several conversations to achieve preeminence in a
tradition. It is, therefore, possible that at any given time there may be just one
that overshadows all other conversations. The reasons why a conversation is
marginalized and others come to dominate are several. It may be a function of
power or it may be a case of a conversation losing its significance for those
who participated in it due to change in the historical situation. The tussle and
conflict between and among the several conversations notwithstanding, the
existence of several conversations in a tradition is a source and proof of a
tradition’s health and depth and range of meanings it encompasses. It is,
therefore, wrong to classify and judge an entire tradition by the conversation
that may be dominant for a period of time. A serious study of any tradition
requires us to inquire into the historical and social conditions that allowed a
conversation to become dominant and marginalize others. In short, it is wrong
to assume that a tradition is a monolithic structure that harbours just one
conversation and always speaks with one voice. Voices of dissent and rebellion
and voices of alternative conversations are, if one cares to listen, audible just
below the noise of the dominant conversation.

Tradition and Education

If tradition is conversation that for its preservation depends on people
participating in it, the question then is: how are people made to participate;
and given that there are several conversations in a tradition, in which one?
Participation in conversation could hardly be attributed to human instinct; we
are not born with the instinct to participate in conversation or for that matter in anything else. The act of participation in conversation is not rooted in our biology but in our social existence. In short, it is a behaviour we learn.

To be born in a society is not enough to acquire the social identity of that society; one becomes a member of a society by having one’s identity socially constructed through participation in that society. Being born in that society may help the process but it is neither necessary nor sufficient. The self that I am acquires the social colour, texture and structure from the storylines, which I borrow from the common pool of storylines of society to construct my narrative with. The sharing of storylines gives the narratives a common social identity or makes them resemble each other as if belonging to a single family. To be able to draw from the common pool, however, one has to participate in the conversation that is tradition. In other words, participation in conversation is the necessary condition for acquiring common social identity. What this means is that each one of us, in order to acquire social identity, must have been initiated into a conversation. And initiation is a learning process. One learns not only what the conversation is about, but also the proper protocol for thinking and feeling in order to participate in the conversation. Not only are objects of thought and feelings given to us in conversation but we also learn how to think and feel about them.

Thus, to the question: which social process is capable of initiating us into the conversation that is our tradition? the simple answer is, education. For, before education is judged as a process that teaches us marketable skills or helps us to broaden our intellectual horizon, it has to be understood as the sum total of activities and processes that maintain the continuity of society by passing all that society considers valuable, important and significant to the next generation. And how can each passing generation best accomplish this if not by initiating the generation that is to take its place into the conversation it has been participating in. And what is this conversation if not tradition? Thus, education understood as the social process that initiates each new generation to the conversation that is tradition, can be nothing but education of tradition. Here the term education encompasses both formal (schooling) and informal education. If formal education is conducted primarily in schools and places of work, family and its surrogates are domains where informal education is dispensed. It is recognized that both formal and informal education play a major role in what sociologists call the socialization process, a process by which a human child is given a social form and identity. What is being argued here is that socialization is a process of initiating each new member of society to the ongoing conversation that lends identity by making available storylines that have been worked upon and renewed by each passing generation with
which to make sense of his/her life today. Giving of an identity tantamounts to locating a person in history that goes beyond his/her biography on either end.

Informal education was once the primary domain where the initiation into the ongoing conversation took place; but with the growing importance and enlarging influence of formal education, now schools and universities have the primary responsibility to conduct the initiation process. With the responsibility comes the power to determine which of the several conversations that comprise a tradition will be sanctioned and legitimized. This makes education a highly political activity. It is not to say it was ever not political, but only to emphasize that it is now even more so. To legitimize a conversation is to determine which conversation and whose conversation will be identified as the tradition, and to sanction which knowledge and whose knowledge is worth learning.

**Islamic Education: Traditional Education or Education of Tradition?**

Having sketched out the respective domains of the normative and the ontological notions of tradition it is time to turn to Islamic education, and see in which of the two domains is the widely accepted view that has shaped the practice of Islamic education is to be located. Once located, the implications of such an education for formation of knowledge structure and self-identity can easily be drawn out.

To define Islamic education, or for that matter any education, as traditional education should, in light of the discussion above, immediately brings to mind the normative view of tradition. In other words, if Islamic education is understood as traditional education, then the term tradition here refers to the normative view of tradition. As was said earlier, on this view the terms tradition and modernity are not concepts that describe state of affairs in neutral terms, but terms that carry a sizable theoretical baggage with them that is quite often lost sight of by those using them. What needs to be done now is to draw out some implications the unexamined theoretical baggage has if Islamic education is understood as traditional education.

It was argued that tradition, according to its normative view, is a point in time located in some mythical past, totally cut off from the present. What this means is that the past cannot be understood in light of the present, nor the present understood in light of the past. The attempt to understand the past in light of the present is prevented on the grounds that it protects the meaning of the past from being contaminated by the present concerns. Once the living, organic link with the present is broken, past is no longer the past of a specific
present, but having broken loose from any specific stream of history now
floats free like a bit of historical debris to be transplanted any place any time.
Hence, Islamic education as traditional education, has but for some minor
changes, remained the same across time and space.

Although it extols the past, traditional education is nevertheless
insensitive to or rather ignorant of the historical nature of human existence.
The historical nature of human existence requires that my life can be
meaningful only when it is situated in history in such a way that I understand
my present in light of the past and the past in light of the present. Truncated
from the present and the meaning frozen, the past cannot speak to the present
concerns, hence ceases to be meaningful to those in the present. Thus,
attempting to protect it from the contaminants emanating from the present,
the normative view of tradition renders the past meaningless to those in the
present. Following this logic, traditional education does not locate one in a
stream of history but rather maroons one on an island from which there is no
escape. Those on the island, quite unaware of being marooned, invite others to
join them on the island, and define those who refuse as deviants. Muslims who
receive Islamic education thus find themselves out of time and out of place.

In other words, traditional Islamic education does not initiate us to a
conversation through which we can appropriate from the past critically and
creatively storylines, themes and vocabularies to make sense of the present.
Traditional education, almost by fiat, imposes a storyline(s) on the present to
make sense of its experiences. The imposition of old storyline(s) has two
drastic consequences: (a) It dampens the critical and creative abilities and
impulses of those getting education, and (b) it severely limits the ability to
understand and articulate new experiences of the generation coming of age in
the present.

The freedom to be creative and to appropriate critically the old storylines
and vocabularies to make sense of the present experiences does not, however,
mean to approve or grant legitimation to every new experience only because it
is new. What this means in concrete terms is having the freedom to interpret
and understand the new in light of the Qur’ān and to understand the Qur’ān
afresh in light of the new experiences. This would allow a Muslim to explore
the possibility of being a Muslim in ever-new ways; for one can be a Muslim
and realize his or her Islamic identity in ways that have not been explored yet,
while remaining within the bounds set by the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. It is to
view being a Muslim as a historical project and not as a static stage whose
configuration and contours have been determined for all times by the past.
This freedom makes the difference between experiencing being a Muslim as
something challenging and exciting or burdensome to be suffered without protest simply for fear of punishment in the Hereafter.

Human creative impulses are nurtured within the bounds set by the Qur’ān and the Sunnah when the tradition is understood not as a point in time whose impress all future life-experiences bear as a seal of approval, but as a living, thriving conversation that requires our participation — creative and critical participation — to continue and prosper. For the conversation to be Islamic the dominant theme has to be the Qur’ān; the Qur’ān not as a book but as the Divine book which gets woven into every theme which the participants wish to pick up and carry on with. It is when we participate in this conversation that we are creative; we create structures of knowledge, we create our world as Islamic and ourselves as Muslims. This requires Islamic education to be education of Muslim tradition and not traditional education.

**Islamic Tradition and Muslim Traditions**

The notion of Islamic tradition is too broad and abstract to be of much practical use in designing education for any particular society. Hence, distinction must be made between the Islamic tradition and Muslim traditions. One major distinction is that while the Islamic tradition is one, there are as many Muslim traditions as there are Muslim societies. It would be wrong, however, to view the Islamic tradition as a meta-narrative or meta-conversation that, while remaining free of all several Muslim traditions, grants them legitimacy by sitting in judgment over their authenticity as truly Islamic. Rather, the Islamic tradition should be seen as the sea that the several Muslim traditions feed, and as Muslim traditions change overtime so does the Islamic tradition. The Islamic tradition should be viewed not as a monolithic structure that towers above all Muslim traditions but rather as multi-faceted, multi-coloured display of human ingenuity in creating meanings in light of the Qur’ān.

In trying to understand what is a Muslim tradition and why it is necessary to distinguish it from the Islamic tradition one should recall that one important function of tradition, as conversation, is to locate us in a historical stream that links a specific past to a specific present. What this view underscores is that while it is true that human beings are located in history yet each one of us is located in a specific history. We as individuals and as a community have concrete experiences that we interpret as present experiences that are linked to specific concrete experiences in the past. By concrete experiences is meant experiences that form and are a part of my immediate world or lived-reality. My lived-reality is the point of reference for all that I find meaningful, either concrete or abstract. In other words, things are or can
be meaningful to me only to the extent they relate to or can be ultimately related to my lived-reality. It is, therefore, not possible to experience either a generalized past or a generalized present. A generalized past or present would be empty of experiential content. Hence it is meaningless to talk about participating in a conversation which is general. A general conversation would have for its content experiences that are so removed from any particular world or lived-reality as to be meaningful to no one. This point can be made clearer with the help of an example. To understand what the word colour means one has to have experienced a specific colour. In absence of such an experience the word colour remains a concept devoid of any experiential content. To a person who has been blind since birth, the word colour will have no experiential content; and since such a person would have no way of relating to it, the word colour would be meaningless.

For a conversation to have experiential content, it has to be located in some specific time or space. For me to participate in a conversation, it has to relate to my concrete experiences, experiences of a specific past and a specific present. Hence, it is important to distinguish the Islamic tradition from Muslim traditions. The former deals with generalities, generalities of meanings that are not anchored in the lived-reality of anyone and hence stay abstract with little or no power to shape our lived-reality. The power of a meaning to leave its impress on our lived-reality is the function of its concreteness. The less concrete and more abstract a meaning is the less likely is our lived-reality to bear its impress. The Sunnah is important precisely because it makes concrete the abstract meanings of the Qur’ān.

Furthermore, who can speak for the Islamic tradition, who can articulate what it is? Whoever proclaims to speak on the behalf of the Islamic tradition has to step out of the specific historical stream in which as a human being he/she is located. A human being, however, can no more step out of his/her skin than he/she can step out of history. To exist independent of history is a Divine attribute and not human. No human being can thus make the claim to speak for the Islamic tradition. And those who claim to speak on behalf of Islamic tradition are in fact privileging one Muslim tradition over others and setting it up as the final arbitrator of what constitutes a truly Muslim tradition.

When I interpret, using the Sunnah as the signpost, the concrete experiences that I encounter by virtue of being located in a specific historical stream in light of the Qur’ān, I make the abstract meaning of the Qur’ān concrete. When a people try to make sense of their experiences that are specific to them because of where they are in time and space in light of the Qur’ān, a very specific meaning of the Qur’ān and hence a very specific
meaning of what it is to be a Muslim emerges. One way to understand what is being said here is to think of the Qur’ān as providing us with a language that allows a certain range of correct statements to be made in it, but which particular statements we actually make is up to us to decide. (By language is not meant the Arabic language, but rather the word ‘language’ is used as a metaphor that connotes the ability to think thoughts and have experiences that although not mentioned in the Qur’ān yet are made possible by it if we live by the Qur’ān.) In other words, a language determines what we can say, but not what we will say. The statements we do make depend on what we wish to articulate which in turn depends on what kinds of experiences we have had. The kinds of statements a people make constitutes their tradition and since the statements are made in the language given to them by the Qur’ān it will be a Muslim tradition. It goes without saying that while all Muslim traditions will have a family resemblance since each will be engaged in making sense of their experiences in light of the Qur’ān, yet each will be unique because their experiences will be different.

This line of reasoning ineluctably leads us to the conclusion that if Islamic education is understood as education of tradition, it has to be education of a Muslim tradition that bears the impress of specific location in time and space. In other words, Islamic education cannot be the same across time and space, for then it would be abstract and general with little or no concrete experiential content, and as a result fail to hook up with the lived-reality of students. Furthermore, such an education will also fail to equip the students with the necessary critical tools to change their lived-reality and make it truly Islamic. Islamic education that fails to link up with the lived-reality of the students may well prepare them for life hereafter but it most certainly will not prepare them for life here. But since Islam does not only prepare us for the Hereafter but also for this world such an education will fail as Islamic education.

The Qur’ān and Muslim Traditions

It is a truism that there is just one world, but it is true in a very general and abstract sense. Each human being, however, lives in a concrete world to which he/she relates in specific ways. Thus, while there is just one abstract world there are several concrete worlds. Tradition is the concrete world in which humans live and by participating in it make sense of their lives. A Muslim tradition is one that provides its participants with the Qur’ānic language so to speak, with which to make sense of their lives and become Muslims, and understand their world and make it Islamic. For if the Qur’ān is to guide us in this world then it has first to help us to understand it. But each tradition is the bearer of unique historical experiences that need to be interpreted and
articulated to become meaningful. And when the Qur’ān is employed to make those experiences meaningful to the participants of a tradition, the Qur’ān does so not by erasing or levelling down the uniqueness of historical experiences but by giving it a new language in which to understand and articulate them. Thus, when a Muslim tradition uses the Qur’ān to interpret and articulate the experiences it has had, it will bring forth a particular reading of it by emphasizing and exploring those aspects of the Qur’ān that have been particularly useful in making sense of the experiences unique to it by virtue of its location in a specific historical stream. A tradition may perhaps enhance a particular shade or nuance of meaning which an other tradition may have passed over because it did not speak to its historical experience. Each tradition will explore the Qur’ān from the perspective of its unique historical experience and hence shed new light on it. Each reading of the Qur’ān will supplement the readings that other traditions have done of the Qur’ān.

It does not, however, mean that we abandon the very idea of correct or false reading of the Qur’ān and proclaim that any and every interpretation of the Qur’ān is acceptable. What is being argued here is that if the conversation that is tradition is active and lively it will be healthy and as such will have a self-correcting mechanism built into it. The Qur’ān as a book about which there is no doubt will be part of the creed of a tradition in as much as it is a Muslim tradition and, hence will have to keep referring back to it to justify whatever meaning it creates. The meaning it creates does not have to be similar to meanings other traditions have created yet it has to be justified on the basis of the Qur’ān. What is being argued for is not license to interpret the Qur’ān whichever way one pleases, but for the acceptance of variability and difference in the understanding of the Qur’ān limited only by the range of meaning the Qur’ānic text can itself bear. The Qur’ān itself points to the importance of different traditions and races when it says: “O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other” (49:13).

There may be some who, although they accept the arguments to replace the normative with the ontological view of tradition, may yet find the whole discussion too abstract and utopian to help them reorganize education in general and their understanding of historical experience in particular. There is ample evidence in the writings of certain modern Muslim scholars to illustrate the point that the above discussion is neither abstract nor utopian but rather refers to facts on the ground, so to speak. What is unique and significant about scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud and Khaled M. Abou El Fadl is that although they are serious and committed Muslims yet they look at the tradition that is the bearer of the Qur’ānic truth critically. They realize that
the Qur’anic truth has to be communicated through human agency, and human understanding of the truth is influenced by social circumstances of which power relations are an essential part. They, therefore, pay close attention to historically produced distortions in the truth and alert us to the dangers of being indifferent to history. Yet they do not look at the tradition from some point outside that tradition or from the perspective of some other tradition. Located well within the tradition they turn the critical tools the tradition has hammered out on the tradition itself. In other words, they use the tradition against itself. They are acutely aware of the fact that the only way the past can be understood is through the lens of history and that lens is never free of distortions. The only way the distortions can be partially overcome is by rigorous and vigorous participation in the conversation that is tradition, and not by policing or trying to control the conversation. A healthy conversation is always self-correcting. They all seem to be saying, each in his/her own way, that in Islam what is considered of highest value is a Muslim’s struggle on the path of truth, because in the final analysis Allah alone knows the truth.

Yet some others may object to giving importance to tradition that they argue only serves to create barriers, which we can do as little as possible with today. Although this objection has great moral value yet it suffers from misplaced values. Fred R. Dallmayr, an astute observer of modern political scene, provides the best response to this objection. He writes:

As it seems to me, our time is in fact marked by a dual development: globalization is matched by parallel efforts to revive or preserve local ethnic or cultural legacies. Both movements are intimately correlated and intermeshed: while local traditions are increasingly permeated by global-scientific perspectives, universalism in turn has to rely on particularistic resources to provide the soil for a global culture. Without this nourishing soil, global order would remain an abstract and meaningless formula, and the members of “unlimited community of speech” would have nothing concrete to communicate about. In the absence of particular traditions, moreover, universalism would seem to be hostile to identity formation: distantiﬁcation would coincide simply with alienation and “anomie”. To the extent that self-discovery or self-understanding is possible only through concrete interpersonal encounters, human identity in a global age must be anchored not only in abstract-universal principles but in viable local and regional modes of life.12

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Conclusion

There is a consensus among Muslims of all nations, races, gender and ages that they have not been as creative and productive as they could be. Some, as a consequence, wax nostalgically about the glorious past in an attempt to restore their self-image; others resort to violence. To look wistfully at the past is an exercise in futility and violence, however justified, is destructive, and both are expressions of failure to react creatively to the present predicament. Yet others propose to build Islamic knowledge by thoroughly getting rid of un-Islamic elements from knowledge borrowed from the West. Fazlur Rahman’s response to a project of this nature was to point to the inherent problem of deciding what is and what is not Islamic in a body of knowledge, including with respect to knowledge that is widely accepted as Islamic. For Fazlur Rahman, the project of Islamization was, however well intended, a bit of a red herring. According to him the answer to the problem of lack of creativity among Muslims in the field of knowledge lay in helping them to become thinkers or rather Muslim thinkers, and not in telling them how to think. For, ultimately the project of Islamization of knowledge boils down to dictating a method of thinking to Muslims.

Fazlur Rahman did not, however, provide any concrete suggestions as to how to motivate Muslims to become Muslim thinkers. By thinkers Fazlur Rahman did not mean just philosophers but essentially people who create meaning to help us see and understand things in new ways, in ways that are in line with the spirit of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. What is suggested here, however, is that to become a thinker one has to actively participate in the conversation that is our tradition and what initiates us into that conversation is education. That is why it is being proposed that education should be education of tradition. The question as to why we are not participating in that conversation? has yet to be asked. Trying to answer that question will take us not only to the heart of the problem of our education but also of our tradition as conversation, and yet another essay.

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