

## Chapter IV

### From Utopia to Paradigms\*

*The Touch of Midas* (1984) edited by Ziauddin Sardar<sup>1</sup> is an important and interesting but, ultimately, disturbing and saddening book. Before elaborating on this judgment, let me summarize the book's content.

It consists of thirteen essays based on talks and discussions from several seminars held in different European cities and in Saudi Arabia under the sponsorship of the International Federation of Institutes of Advanced Study and devoted to various issues derived from an assumed or alleged conflict between science and technology on the one hand, and values and cultural, more specifically Islamic, identity, on the other. The contributions have been divided into four sections. The first one, called Overviews, comprises one essay by M. Husain Sadr identifying from selected passages of Revelation an Islamic attitude toward scientific research and thinking. The key Islamic principle is, argues Sadr, that the means and the ends of science cannot be separated and, thus, from the very beginning, the concept of *tawhid* (unity) is introduced, here with the implication of a holistic vision of the scientific process. A second essay, by Glynn Ford, is a thoughtful assertion of the unavoidable biases of scientific activities and, as a result, a justification for a culturally defined Islamic science of and for the contemporary world.

The second section, on Science and Values, contains two strongly stated radical critiques (by J. R. Ravetz and Helger Nowotny) of Western science seen, on the one hand, as unable or unwilling to deal with the social or other problems it has created and, on the other, as hypocritical in its assertion of moral universality. A third article, by Ali Kettani, is a clear but not particularly original restatement of medieval Muslim scientific achievements and an explanation for their success and for their eventual decline. The explanation is a standard one, not really justified by any thoughtful weighing of historical evidence, based on the assumption of a moral and religious sclerosis coupled with the eventual appearance of an alien, i.e. Western science. The fourth article, by Munawar Ahmad Anees, is a fascinating and thought-provoking

---

\* First published in *Mimar*, 18 (1985), pp. 41–5.

<sup>1</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, ed., *The Touch of Midas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

discussion of a particularly active field of contemporary research, reproductive biology, seen in Islamic terms.

In the third section, on Values and Environment, two contributors, Lloyd Timberlake and Alison Ravetz, discuss environmental issues from a primarily Western point of view, emphasizing in particular the damages brought about by a variety of recent activities. Timberlake does make the very valid point that the cultural make-up, Islamic or not, of the political leadership in most Muslim countries is an essential component of the deterioration of the environment. S. Parvez Manzoor's article is in part a debatable comparison between Christian and Muslim environmental values and in part the lucid statement of a theoretical construct for an Islamic morality of the environment. S. Gulzar Haider's long contribution is a passionate and logically structured statement of a utopian (in a good sense of the word, p. 181) vision of a perfect Islamic city. More will be said about both of these contributions.

The last section on possible syntheses contains an overly abstract cybernetic construct by James Cornelis, an emotional statement by Parvez Manzoor on the uniqueness of Islam confronted by Christianity and Western secularism, and a number of general observations on the seminars by Robert Walgate. A more synthetic series of observations by the editor, Ziauddin Sardar, serves as a useful introduction to the whole volume.

The importance of this book cannot be denied. Whatever biases and debatable hypotheses or conclusions it contains (more on those below), it is, to my knowledge, the first example in recent years of thoughtful statements about Islamic values in dealing with contemporary science and environmental technology by professionally competent individuals. It is neither a shrill denunciation of imperialism or colonialism nor a vacuous statement of meaningless pious wishes, even though, as I shall try to show, it is not exempt from the defects of both practices. A hundred years ago such thoughtful discussions were usually the work of single individuals (Muhammad Iqbal, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Taha Hussein); today they are the products of seminars and group thinking. Whether or not this is a good thing remains to be seen, as one misses the well-reasoned, even when passionate, thinking of earlier writers on the subject of Islam and innovations from elsewhere. Like all group seminar creations, the book has too many conclusions and not enough developments.

The meetings themselves involved both Muslims and non-Muslims, with a curious mix of ideological positions. The Muslims tend to be conservative and in a sense fundamentalist, whereas the Western contributors are radicals within their own system. It might have been interesting to contrast Muslim views with those of Western scientists who are also committed Christians, as exist within the Catholic Church and perhaps also among Protestant fundamentalists. The one contributor, Cornelis, who is involved in the Orthodox Church does not deal with a subject to which his religious beliefs and affiliation are pertinent. Although not overly significant for an evaluation of the book's content, this

point about the encounter of Islamic fundamentalism with Western radicalism has unexpected implications to which I shall return.

The importance of the book does not, however, lie in the ideological bents of its authors, but rather in the genuineness and seriousness of its purpose. It acknowledges modern science and technology as a challenge to be met by understanding the nature of their overt or hidden value [42] systems and by proposing alternate Islamic values. The two most developed attempts to do so are by Munawar Anees in dealing with biology and Gulzar Haider discussing the environment. But their approaches are different. The biologist raises ethical issues about research activities which are already taking place and which will continue to take place regardless of the judgment, correct or not, passed on this research by a specific individual or group, unless the individual or the group is important within the society which sponsors the research. Protests and debates around nuclear-free zones or manipulations of the genetic code are cases in point. The architect-planner, on the other hand, tries to develop a theoretical model for an eventual practical reality within a world which shares his beliefs. Both approaches are theoretically justified and they both illustrate the sense of concerned purpose which pervades most of the book.

What makes the book interesting to the readers of *Mimar* [this journal] is found primarily in Manzoor's and Haider's contributions. The former, at times polemical, especially in his second article, asserts that in Islam man and nature are united in the sense that man has been ordained by God as the steward of the universe. Through the analysis of concepts such as *tawhid* (unity), *khilafa* (stewardship), *amana* (trust), *shari'a* (ethics of action), *'adl* (justice), *i'tidal* (moderation), he proposes the Islamic principle of a "sacramental earth" (p. 160) as opposed to a Christian "profane" one, and sees the protection of the environment rather than its transformation as the only legitimate and ethical objective of man. Fascinating and attractive though the construct may be, it contains two difficulties. One is that he has given meanings to Arabic-Islamic terms which are not their only meanings; nor are they necessarily their historically most frequent meanings, as for instance *shari'a*, which only by implication can be called an "ethics of action." What this means is that his construct is either an arbitrary and innovative system for which traditional terms were found or a legitimate derivation from the Divine Revelation, but, if so, it must first be justified in theological terms. That justification is clearly implied, but it is not explicated, and Husain Sadr's article (pp. 15-25), which deals precisely with the topic of an approach to the sciences derived from the Qur'an, is careful to avoid such specificity to the qur'anic message and to assert far more generally that a Muslim position requires an ethical judgment for every human activity and every human action without always specifying the character of such judgments. What principles underlie these ethical judgments has been discussed by Muslim philosophers and theologians

since the second century AH. No trace of these discussions is found in Manzoor's argument.

The second problem with his argument is that his construct could be adopted with hardly a change by every ecological, "green," Sierra club, or related group in the Western world. Few members of these groups were influenced by Islam and many would argue that what they seek to preserve is the dignity of every man. They are in many ways among those secular humanists against whom Manzoor thunders and who believe in the possible improvement of man's setting on earth, the "meliorism" Manzoor and other contributors to this book attack so frequently. The coincidence between the two positions, one based presumably on a concrete Revelation, the other on an almost visceral sympathy for the victims of any damage to nature, cannot be the result of political relations, nor even of formally ideological ones. It is rather, I believe, that in both instances a fear, largely justified but rarely expressed, lurks behind the argument. The ecologist fears the loss of a symbiotic environment to an intellectually and logically brilliant technology which is irreversible and whose physical and psychological consequences are unknown and at worst destructive. The Muslim fear, as implied in many of the essays of this book and in statements often heard elsewhere, is that of losing cultural identity to a universal sameness which is immensely attractive for the same reasons of logical and intellectual brilliance but whose universality is only superficial, for it is inextricably bound to Western civilization, even when made in Japan.

This is where Haider's essay is so fascinating and so revealing. Starting with a somewhat more elaborate statement of Muslim principles governing life and the processes of behavior, he designs a self-acknowledged utopian Islamic city. Its attributes are all ethical precepts which could have been written up by any European eighteenth-century "philosophe," the epitome of the intellectual mode rejected by all Muslim writers in this volume. The rather Ancien Régime position taken by Haider reveals itself curiously in the definition of social distinctions as "natural hierarchies sanctioned by ethical tradition" (p. 183), a formulation which is hardly likely to be accepted by the vast majority of Muslims seeking social and economic justice. Then he proceeds to principles of design, where once again innocuous generalities (environmental sensibility, morphological integrity, symbolic clarity) are elaborated in some detail and illustrated by a series of drawings of traditional or classical works of Islamic architecture. It is curious to note that, in dealing with "symbolic clarity," Haider ends up with two instances of calligraphic ornament as most clearly exemplifying values that are unique to Islam. What is curious about it is that a true Islamic authenticity, something that cannot be matched elsewhere, is found in letters and words, not in formal (nor, of course, representational) designs. It is curious because it suggests that the most immediately telling way of seeing a building as Islamic is through the signs put on it, not through its own forms. This is where

Haider's essay rejoins Anees' article on science, for it implies that visual forms or techniques of construction are in fact culturally [43] neutral. Only the adjunction to them of external signs or symbols gives them the ethical and visual means for defining authenticity. Whether or not this conclusion is valid requires further investigation, but the interesting point, it seems to me, of Haider's essay lies less in the specifics of his model than in compelling readers to ask further questions, to clamor for more investigations, more thinking, more discussion.

It is precisely the growth of this need which explains why the book struck me as disturbing. It is intellectually and scientifically disturbing to see the *madrassa* of Sultan Hasan, a grandiose expression of power and wealth so strikingly different from most Mamluk monuments of Cairo, used as an example of "spatial integrity and image rather than [being] material objects in space" (p. 192), to note the near absence of references to Muslim thinkers who for centuries debated on the nature of a Muslim morality, to miss the extraordinary variety of Muslim experiences from rigid legalism to free thought or to mystical complexities, or, on a more specific level, to jump so rapidly from the Qur'anic Revelation to theoretical principles and to assume so easily that the traditional environment of the past was harmonious, pure and pious, something contradicted by the reading of any old chronicle. What these examples, among many others, indicate is a considerable disregard of history and of people. A disregard for history is difficult for me to accept on more than narrow professional grounds, for it implies rejection of variety and of change or evolution.

The reasons for this rejection are not explicitly stated or discussed; there is nothing comparable, let us say, to the criticism of history made at times by anthropologists that it is a pseudo-science because its data base is so arbitrary and limited. By implication, however, several authors in this book reject both variety and evolution on ethical grounds, for their assumption of a single Islamic position on the environment (or, by extension, on anything else) has the corollary [44] that significant changes and variations are evil. Although not fully thought out, this conclusion derives quite clearly from the relentless attack, especially in Haider's and Manzoor's articles, on what they, together with American fundamentalists, call secular humanism. As a convinced secular humanist myself, I am prepared to concede to their right to their position, even if I am not ready to be condemned for immorality. But, on a more serious level, the rejection of humanism is, first of all, the rejection of a Muslim tradition which flourished in the fourth through seventh centuries of the Hijrah, as Mohammed Arkoun has shown, and which helped explain the growth and creativity of Islamic science during these very centuries. It is also the rejection of that area of freedom for any self-expression which has existed within the Western world (and occasionally in a number of other places as well) for about a century and a half. That area did not always operate successfully, nor is it free of very deep-seated prejudices

of its own, not the least of which has been almost a cult of ignoring others, but it is an area that has made possible the kinds of exchanges and of statements which characterize this book, among many others. It is true that its openness has meant sometimes a lack of belief or of commitment, at best a very primitive sort of universalism, but it did not prevent, within a few more or less defined limits, the expression of nearly any view or opinion, and it allowed for the investigation of nearly everything, with admittedly dubious results at times.

The rejection of people is more surprising than the rejection of history, for, after all, history has been rejected by others and historians of the Islamic world have not been very generous in making their knowledge accessible to others. The absence of people, except as shadowy abstractions roaming in idealized spaces, is difficult to explain, because here tools of contemporary analysis do exist, as sociologists, anthropologists, economists, statisticians, psychologists are trained to provide a sense of the potential, tastes, ambitions, dreams, expectations and beliefs of any human group. That so few such analyses exist and that the ones that do exist were not used by many of the authors of this book can be attributed to yet one more disturbing assumption of many of its contributions, the result of a misuse of history. The assumption is that the qur'anic message and the Prophet's life and statements as expressed in the Traditions were transformed into an Islamic setting which, in turn, created the so-called Golden Age of Islamic civilization, roughly, if I understand a rather murky argument, a period extending from the late eighth to the thirteenth centuries. With a few exceptions here and there, especially in architecture or because of a thinker like Ibn Khaldun, it was all decadence from then on, partly for internal reasons and partly, especially over the last two centuries, because of Western pressures. Except for the undeniable fact of Western imperialism, this vision of history is simply unacceptable. It is true that a complex socio-ethical system was developed on the basis of the qur'anic Revelation, but there is no proof that it was ever really put into successful practice, especially after the establishment of Muslim power outside of Arabia. Its constantly honed and disputed ideals could not prevent social, political, ideological or personal struggles which were at times constructive, at other times bloody and destructive. Those pious Muslims who wished to maintain a more perfect life had to withdraw from the main centers and establish themselves on remote islands or at the edge of deserts. And over the centuries, in many variants, a constantly shifting and constantly threatened equilibrium existed between more or less fixed ideals and human realities or ambitions. This is still true today and, while there is some point in defining the ideals, such definitions are senseless without an awareness of human realities. In dealing with the environment or with science and technology, these realities are relatively simple to define. There is the elementary and perhaps reprehensible desire to profit from the appearances and glitter of a Western or Far Eastern technology, but, in a deeper sense,

there is the need and the desire to control – or at least to participate in the manufacture and control of – the technology and the means to make a satisfactory environment. Success in achieving this control will, I believe, only come by developing within the Muslim world a deep and coolly objective understanding of itself, of its forms and of its needs.

To millions of people who know that they are Muslim and who have no wish to become something else, abstract definitions of Islamic values are less significant than their own scientific institutes, their own means of producing technology, their own signs, symbols and forms. In that task the primary role belongs to Muslims, and this is why a book such as this one is an exciting event. To be really useful, however, it must come to grips more successfully than it does with the realities of the Muslim world, in the past or today, and it is a disturbing and poignant irony that Western contributors allude to these realities much more frequently than the Muslim ones.

What saddened me in this book is in part what I see as its misuse of the past and of history. But it is also the misunderstanding of Western history and of Western civilization, with one major implication. I understand why many people writing in a Western language and therefore primarily for a Western audience may feel compelled to compare and contrast Islam with Christianity or with an alleged post-Christian secularism and meliorism. But only too often (see pp. 153, 182, 232 and ff.) the West thus presented is also a caricature in which a single abstract mode is taken as characteristic of an enormously complex series of parallel organisms. Neither the West nor the Muslim world can be defined, at any one [45] time or place of their existence, in simple single terms. Such simplifications are only harmful to a just cause, because they weaken one's trust in other data and ideas. A further implication of these simplifications is the assumption of cultures today competing with each other because they are incompatible with each other. It is probably true, in a strictly theological logic, that any absolute truth makes everything else to be falsehood and demands its eradication or, at the very least, subjection. Christians, Muslims and many contemporary revolutionary or rational groups have occasionally acted in an accordingly destructive way. But in our times of population explosion, of economic and political inequality between regions, of easily transferable technologies and information, a pluralistic equilibrium between equally valid and equally true, even if theoretically incompatible, ways is inevitable. It seems to offend a theological sense of ultimate truth, but this is only an appearance, as religious allegiances have become genuine, and for some, necessary mantles of identity within a pluralistic world, not separate enclaves, competing with each other for the souls and bodies of men. It was sad indeed to feel the remains of an antiquated competition in an otherwise intelligent book, even if one can understand the frustrations and humiliations, contemporary ones or old ones, which led to these views. All hope will be lost, however, if the arrogance of Western universalism is replaced by the assertion of unbridgeable differences.

In short, this is a book to be commended and to be recommended. As I have only too abundantly shown, there is much in it with which I disagree, and many of its underlying assumptions on Islamic and other issues are profoundly disturbing. Yet its very shortcomings together with its acerbic critique of the very notion of a science free of cultural values make it a major contribution to several ongoing debates on topics ranging from the nature of scientific procedures to the ways of creating an Islamic environment. Its most important impressions on me, however, are two. One is the passionate need to understand and to preserve one's self within a world tending toward technological homogenization controlled by a small group of people and nations. The other is the need for massive research into the past and the present, so that generalities become grounded by correct information and intellectual or environmental models become not utopias but paradigms.