

KNOWING ONE ANOTHER
Shaping an Islamic Anthropology

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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

We have created you all out of a male and a female,
and have made you into nations and tribes,
so that you might know one another. . . .
the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one
who is most deeply conscious of Him.

The Qur'an, Surah Al Hujjurat 49:13

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Preface

The predominant characteristic of the modern world is interdependence. No nation can think of itself in isolation. What happens in one corner of the world affects the entire world. The apocalyptic warning of a Chernobyl is just one example that what happens in another country can become our problem, a problem requiring international action. The speed of communication, the interconnection of the world's economies, the increasing ease of travel and the numbers of people moving from one part of the world to another are all trends for the future.

The question: is this increasing realization of interdependence matched by an increase in mutual understanding? The state of international relations, the subtle forms of xenophobia, and the festering sores of antagonism and animosity between nations would suggest not. Although we may not be able to exist in isolation, we still think of ourselves in terms of our exclusive groups. The problem is not with having special identities, but in how we understand and operate them. Knowing ourselves is only the initial step that will help determine how we know other people. The more we can come to understand and respect other people in their own terms, to accept that our special identity can be secured only when we secure the special identity of others, the more likely we are to create a safe world for all of us.

In recent decades Muslims have realized that they need to find solutions to the onslaught of modernity and to shape the future according to the dictates of Islam. An essential part of this quest is the 'islamization of knowledge', a movement that seeks to ground the quest for knowledge in the eternal principles of Islam. This book is an attempt to contribute to that movement by offering a definition of Islamic anthropology.

Islamic anthropology has a special role to play in the islamization of knowledge. As the essence of Islam is universal, anthropology should be a way for Muslims to understand themselves and to treat non-Muslims with tolerance and understanding. Islamization should not mean retreating behind purist walls of isolation but should open out the Muslim consciousness so that Muslims can play a constructive part in the modern world's collective future. I hope that in some way this book conveys that objective.

I am eternally grateful to Gough Tonge, the teacher who provided the time, space and stimulus that led me to invent a rudimentary kind of anthropology for myself when I was nine years old. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my teachers and, in particular, my supervisor, Peter Ucko, at University College, London, where I discovered that anthropology already existed. It would be impossible not to record how much I owe to a group of friends who have welcomed me as a Muslim, listened to my musings and rantings, and let me learn from their discussions. Finally, I owe an overwhelming and special debt of gratitude to my friend and mentor, Ziauddin Sardar, without whom nothing would be as it is. Certainly without his unfailing attention and supportive badgering this book would have never got started nor have been finished.

The ideas contained in this book have had a long gestation, and a difficult delivery. In all the crises attendant upon the writing, my mother has been a tower of strength, a great encouragement, despite the fact that I cannot expect her to be pleased with the line I must follow. I hope she will recognize I have been trying to live up to the standards I learned from a very special and remarkable lady, in my own way. If there is any merit in what I have done it has been nurtured in her care and love and in the efforts she expended in securing me my opportunities in life.

In a world where international interdependence has become a major consideration, where nations cannot exist in isolation, anthropology is of crucial importance. Attempts to define the essential nature of mankind and to answer the questions that arise from the diversity of human society and cultures — knowing one another — are basic to fostering understanding between peoples. For Muslims, anthropology has a special significance. The essence of Islam is universal, and anthropology will equip Muslims with both self-knowledge and the understanding to treat non-Muslims with tolerance. Such knowledge will enable Muslims to play a constructive part in the modern world's collective future.

Knowing One Another contributes to the quest for the Islamization of knowledge by defining the basic concepts of Islamic anthropology. It first explores the different strands of traditional, western anthropological scholarship with its emphasis on interpreting 'other' cultures in the context of the scientific categories and terms of reference that are generally accepted in the west; then explains the importance of the Islamization of knowledge movement, the need for Muslims to re-define the parameters of scholarship for themselves by returning to the basis of all knowledge, the Qur'an. It looks at the concept of human life and community as defined in the Qur'an and the ways in which Muslim thinkers have shaped an Islamic anthropology within a Qur'anic framework. The final chapter calls for a constructive dialogue between Islamic and western anthropology and explains why this is essential for the growth of the discipline.

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