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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Misuse of Ijtihad : A Response to Waghid and Rasool on Muslim Intellectualism

In a recent article published in Muslim Views under the caption “Anti-Intellectualism and the Future of Muslim Thought”, Yusuf Waghid - Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Education at University of Stellenbosch – aligns himself with the views expressed by Ebrahim Rasool in his public lecture delivered on the occasion of the inauguration of the Muslim Thinker at the Islamia College in Cape Town on 29 September 2025, in particular the view that Ijtihad should be understood *not* merely as a juridical concept but as a pedagogical imperative. Both Waghid and Rasool call for the revival of Ijtihad as an educational and intellectual practice—one that encourages dissent, critical reasoning, and democratic deliberation within Muslim discourse.

While the call for intellectual rejuvenation within Muslim societies is both timely and necessary, the authors’ conceptual treatment of Ijtihad is deeply flawed. Their attempt to broaden Ijtihad into a form of critical pedagogy reflects a misunderstanding of its linguistic, juristic, and epistemological foundations.

Ijtihad: A Term of Juridical Precision

In classical Islamic scholarship, Ijtihad is a technical term that refers to the exertion of a qualified jurist’s utmost intellectual effort in deriving a legal ruling from the sources of

Shariah. Ijtihad is “the total exertion of one’s capacity in seeking a legal opinion from the detailed evidences of the law.”

This effort is not arbitrary. It presupposes mastery of Arabic, the Qur’an, the Sunnah, consensus analogy and knowledge of abrogation, as well as an understanding of the higher objectives of the Shariah. Such prerequisites ensure that Ijtihad remains a disciplined and guided reasoning process, firmly rooted in revelation.

To equate Ijtihad with critical thinking or intellectual freedom—as Waghid and Rasool do—is therefore to strip the term of its scholarly precision and spiritual gravity. Ijtihad is not a synonym for “thinking,” nor is every act of independent reflection a form of Ijtihad. It is guided exertion in pursuit of divine truth, not mere intellectual speculation.

The Conflation of Ijtihad and Intellectual Dissent

Waghid and Rasool’s use of Ijtihad as a metaphor for dissent and pedagogical reform introduces a dangerous conflation between critical engagement and religious reasoning. Their framing suggests that Ijtihad can be exercised by anyone deemed “critical” or “intellectually engaged,” regardless of their training or grounding in the Islamic sciences.

This approach effectively democratizes Ijtihad, allowing individuals without any knowledge of usul al-fiqh, Hadith, or Arabic linguistics to assume the interpretive authority historically reserved for qualified scholars (mujtahidun). The inevitable consequence of this flattening of epistemic hierarchy is confusion and fragmentation—each individual becomes their own jurist, free to dissent even from established truths.

Islamic scholarship, by contrast, distinguishes between Ijtihad (authoritative reasoning grounded in revelation) and ra’y (mere opinion). The former is bound by divine guidance; the latter, by human conjecture. To erase that distinction under the banner of “critical pedagogy” is to undermine both the sanctity of revelation and the integrity of religious knowledge.

The Limits of Dissent: Revelation as Boundary

Even if one were to concede that Ijtihad can extend beyond jurisprudence to moral or social reasoning, this expansion cannot justify dissent in matters already settled by



revelation. Islam allows for Ijtihad only where the texts are silent or ambiguous—not where revelation has spoken with clarity.

Reason and revelation do not conflict; when they appear to, the error lies in human reasoning, not divine guidance. Thus, the idea that Ijtihad entails a “pedagogical right to dissent” on all matters—including those firmly established by Qur’an and Sunnah—is not only methodologically unsound but theologically perilous.

By framing Ijtihad as an educational practice of dissent, Waghid and Rasool unintentionally blur the line between legitimate scholarly reasoning and rebellion against revelation. True Ijtihad never sanctions contradiction of divine instruction; it operates within the limits of revelation, not outside it.

Intellectual Revival: Yes, but Name It Correctly

None of this is to dismiss the importance of critical thinking or reflective engagement in Muslim education. Indeed, the Qur’an commands tafakkur (reflection), ta’aqul (rational deliberation), and tadabbur (deep contemplation). These are the Qur’anic terms for intellectual exertion, and they are the rightful descriptors for the kind of thoughtful engagement that Waghid and Rasool wish to promote.

If Muslim educators and thinkers seek an Arabic term for critical pedagogy, tafakkur or ta’aqul would be accurate and theologically sound. But to use Ijtihad—a term denoting a juristic process bound by knowledge, discipline, and revelation—for generic intellectual activity is misleading and academically careless.

The Classical understanding of Ijtihad

The Classical scholars did not classify it as mere critical reflection or educational dissent. For them, Ijtihad was a solemn act of devotion, performed by those equipped with both intellectual rigour and spiritual restraint.

Imam Al-Ghazali warns that the unqualified person’s attempt at Ijtihad leads to error and misguidance.

It is thus imperative that Ijtihad remains within the domain of those who possess sound knowledge of revelation and the principles governing its application. In this classical sense,



Ijtihad is not a metaphor for thinking—it is a structured process aimed at uncovering the divine will.

Conclusion: Restoring Conceptual Integrity

The Muslim world does need a revival of intellectual engagement—an awakening from blind imitation and superficial religiosity. But this revival must be built upon tafakkur, ta'qqul, and tafaqquh—forms of reflection anchored in knowledge and humility—not on the misappropriation of Ijtihad.

Ijtihad can, at best, inspire a spirit of disciplined inquiry; it cannot be recast as a democratic tool for dissent or as an academic slogan. If every act of thinking were Ijtihad, the term would lose its meaning entirely. Intellectual renewal, yes—but not at the expense of conceptual precision or theological coherence.

In short, the future of Muslim thought depends not on redefining Ijtihad, but on restoring respect for the intellectual and spiritual conditions that make it possible.

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