

The Cultural Revolution in the Islamic World and What It Means for the Future of Muslim Societies

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Across the world, three mighty pillars that sustained human progress since the Enlightenment are steadily crumbling. *Science* produced prosperity, made the natural universe explainable in terms of physical laws, and enabled a rational approach to human affairs. But it was too successful for its own good and its achievements have come to be feared. It lies in the gun-sights of fundamentalists of every faith, even as they live off its fruits. *Nationalism* once created a collective spirit for progress. Trust in rulers made a society governable. However, in a globalizing world, the social compact that knotted together the nation-state and its citizens is withering away. National prosperity now depends just as much upon what happens outside national borders as inside. Thus nationalism finds frequent expression in hatred for the Other, meaning those who lie outside of the collective identity that defines that particular nation. *Socialism*, whose origin lies in the noble belief that human beings are equal and must be treated equally, once gave hope and direction in the struggle for a better world. That secular dream was shattered by the disastrous experiences of the USSR and China. Not surprisingly, reformers and revolutionaries have been elbowed out by the vendors of religious utopias.

Today's crisis of human society is unprecedented. Over all of planet earth, the winds of religious change rush to fill the vacuum of secular ideology. But they blow the hardest across the cultural and political landscape of Islam. They rage fast and furious in Pakistan as well as Palestine and Somalia, blow somewhat steady in Iran and Saudi Arabia, picking up speed in Turkey and Malaysia, and are only just stirring in Bangladesh and Indonesia. Europe and North America once knew next to nothing about Muslim immigrants – except as people who would work more for less pay – but they are now seeing their city neighborhoods change visibly as Muslims assert their identity by building mosques, putting their womenfolk in *burqa*, and opening *halal* food stores and restaurants. In alarm, Switzerland has banned the minaret and France the *burqa*, igniting furious debates on religious freedom. Obsessed by the fear that Western civilization is mortally imperiled by Islam and multi-culturalism, some right-wing extremists – the Norwegian mass killer, Anders Behring Breivik, being a startling example – use violence to preserve the “purity” of European culture.

But the Islamic cultural revolution of the present epoch is unstoppable. Simply because it will last longer and affect more people, it is likely to have greater impact than the cultural revolution of Mao Zedong or that of Ayatollah Khomeini. But it is very different from those revolutions. It does not have a definite starting date but probably began about twenty-five to thirty years ago. There are no agreed upon goals, and no central figure or authority stands behind it. Instead, it is powered by mighty tectonic forces that come from the deep disequilibrium within Muslim societies as they encounter alien, modern values. This revolution admittedly has some restorationist component – the urge to return to some glorious past – but it is not mostly that. Components of the emerging culture are actually in deep conflict with traditional Muslim cultural values which have evolved over the millennia.

The Islamic cultural revolution – a glimpse

Islam has to be everywhere, say today's Islamists, not just in the mosque. It cannot stop at just prayer and fasting, nor at *zakat* (alms) and *Haj*. Islam alone must determine economics, politics, family laws, as well as govern lifestyle – dress, food, personal hygiene, marriage, family relations, and even daily routine. Its grip must be total over all aspects of a person's life. The orthodox warn that Islam must not be thought of as just another religion like Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism. Those are mere theological constructs, they say, not a complete code of life. How this notion of totalism turned into an avalanche is reserved for later discussion; for now let us view some of its manifestations.

Women are disappearing. How much a Muslim woman should cover up is a hotly disputed matter. For some, the simple Malaysian headscarf and Iranian-style *hijab*, which leave the face uncovered, will do. Liberal Muslims go further and contend that almost any (modest) clothing is sufficiently Islamic, and the Qur'an merely enjoins men and women to avoid gazing at each other lustfully. But the revitalized orthodoxy finds the headscarf and *hijab* excessively promiscuous. The Saudi *burqa*, with even the eyes covered, is finding increasing favor in much of the Sunni world. An exceptionally energetic proselytizer, Farhat Hashmi, resides in Canada but makes frequent forays to Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Britain, and various African countries. She, like others, has weighed in on orthodoxy's side and her campaign has made deep inroads into the Muslim urban middle and upper classes. "Cover up," "stay at home," and "obey your man" is the message from thousands of *Al-Huda* centers across the world. Millions of housewives have bought into this.¹

The Taliban vigilantes in Afghanistan and Pakistan believe the *muslimahs* of *Al-Huda* are saying the right thing, but with insufficient force. For them, few sins are greater than for women to walk around bare faced. Instructed by a wisdom that transcends the country's law, they have shot and killed women for not wearing the *burqa*, and have set off powerful bombs killing dozens in markets frequented by unveiled women. Throwing acid, or threatening to do so, has been spectacularly successful in making women embrace modesty. The head of Islamabad's Red Mosque, a graduate of Quaid-e-Azam University, where I teach, broadcast the following threat to our girl students from the mosque's FM station:

The government should abolish coeducation. Quaid-i-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. . . Sportswomen are spreading nudity. I warn the sportswomen of Islamabad to stop participating in sports. . . Our female students have not issued the threat of throwing acid on the uncovered faces of women. However, such a threat could be used for creating the fear of Islam among sinful women. There is no harm in it. There are far more horrible punishments in the hereafter for such women.²

Such threats from the clergy have not been condemned by the public, nor even by the students of my university who were directly threatened. Today there is scarcely a female face visible anywhere in Pakistan's Pakhtunkhwa province or outside of some Afghanistan's cities. Working peasant women cannot function while wearing the tent-like *burqa*, but the pressure on urban

women grows by the day. Both *burqa* and the Saudi *abaya* (a shapeless gown) were unknown fifteen or twenty years ago on any university campus. Now, while the undraped head is still occasionally visible, delivering my physics lectures to rows of *burqa*'ed women feels somewhat like giving sermons in a graveyard. This situation holds in Pakistan's other public universities.

The taboo of the female body often overpowers all else. On April 9, 2006, twenty-one women and eight children were crushed to death, and scores injured, in a stampede inside a three-story madrassa in Karachi. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals. After the October 2005 earthquake in Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building.

In October 2012, the nearly successful killing by the Taliban of 15-year old Malala Yusufzai, a school girl from Swat, captured the attention of people both inside and outside Pakistan. Known as an activist for girls education, she had maintained diaries while living under Taliban occupation that were subsequently made public. Thereafter she came between the cross hairs of Taliban killers, who had banned education for girls. Shot in the head and neck, she made a miraculous partial recovery. For a while, it seemed that the country had come together in its condemnation of religious extremism. But, as it turned out, this was a passing phase only and the religious minded soon bought into various conspiracy theories.

The degraded status of women in Muslim countries is a global change, and not just limited to Pakistan. At any international airport Muslim women are identifiable through their *hijabs* and *burqas*. Reasons vary: a defensive assertion of cultural identity in a foreign land, specific instructions from relatives, fear of social disgrace, peer pressure, physical threat, or a belief that dressing this way fulfills a divine instruction.

The veil transcends particularities of geography. But it has strong consequences for what woman may or may not do. In India, the mainstream Deoband madrassa issued a fatwa on April 4, 2010, stating that: "It is unlawful for Muslim women to do job in government or private institutions where men and women work together and women have to talk with men frankly and without veil."³ Presumably this means that women may work only in a man-free environment, or else "frank" conversations may follow. Moreover, as the Deoband spokesman said, to work in a bank that operates on interest is *haram* (forbidden) for man and woman.

Mosques are winning over shrines. A shrine that is losing out stands barely a mile down the road from the university where I teach. The site of a festive annual pilgrimage that, at its peak, brings nearly a half million devotees, the Sufi shrine of Bari Imam in Islamabad is still colorful. Arriving barefooted from faraway places in the Punjab, pilgrims twirl to rapidly beating drums. Some carry miniature golden mausoleums garlanded with yellow and green streamers, while triangular flags bearing Qur'anic verses flutter everywhere. They seek blessings, spiritual enlightenment, miracle cures, and relief from life's other stresses. A carnival atmosphere prevails. Until they were banned some thirty years ago, there were gatherings called *mujras* where spectators showered money upon dancing girls. The present generation finds it hard to believe that such a spectacle could have been allowed.

There is little doubt that times have become leaner and meaner for Sufi shrines, including that at Bari Imam. This shrine was targeted a few years ago by a Sunni suicide bomber who killed over twenty Shia devotees on the festival's closing day. Major shrines of the subcontinent, such as that of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi or Data Darbar in Lahore, are experiencing a precipitous decline in the number of devotees. Fear is only part of the reason. The larger part owes to a growing feeling among Muslims that the "soft Islam" of Sufis and saints is not "proper Islam".⁴

The conflict between hard and soft Islam has a long history. Wahabism, which originated in the eighteenth century, started as a reaction to Shia'ism and Sufism. In its early years, it succeeded in destroying all shrines, together with priceless historical monuments and relics from the early days of Islam. Muslims of the Deobandi-Salafi-Wahabi persuasion fiercely decry the syncretism of popular Islam, claiming that it arises from ignorance of Qura'nic teachings. Dismissed by these hardliners is the fact that Sufis were responsible for much of Islam's rapid spread after its initial military conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries. Converts from caste-ridden Hinduism were attracted by a people-friendly religion – Islam. The Kurds of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey were also converted in this way and still maintain their brand of folk Islam. For Sufis, the Qur'an has to be interpreted allegorically. Harsh instructions for punishment were smoothed away, just as its divine miracles were smoothed away by Muslim rationalists like Syed Ahmad Khan. Charismatic Sufi masters like Mansur al-Hallaj and Jalaludin Rumi invested in the concept of subjugating the self (*jihad bi nafsih*) to the service of the Creator and His creation. Allah, they argued, must be worshiped not out of duty or fear but because he loved his creation and was loveable. Many dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy. In searching for that divine love, Sufi Muslims pray at shrines, venerate local saints, sing, and dance themselves into ecstatic oblivion. In India, Sufi saints continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

Today's Pakistani and Afghan Taliban share the Wahabist hatred for shrine worshippers, who they equate with idolaters. Rahman Baba, a Pakhtoon Sufi poet of the nineteenth century who played the rubab and loved to sing and dance, was the particular object of an attack in Swat in 2009 by those who claim to be anti-imperialists. A Pakistani journalist sardonically observed that "Islamist warriors won a great victory in the ongoing global jihad against the satanic western powers, especially the United States, when they successfully bombed and damaged the mausoleum of Rahman Baba."

Why is Sufism losing out on the Indian subcontinent (and perhaps elsewhere too)? Unlike Wahabis, followers of Sufism tend to be reflective, rather than being aggressive proselytizers who freely brandish the threat of apostasy. But this trend is also a consequence of growing global literacy. This enables more individuals to read the abundant religious literature, and to absorb the dominant back-to-the-Qur'an line. Relatively more educated people see through the fraud committed by many Sufi *pirs* who hand out amulets, prescriptions, and blessings – all for a hefty price. Thus, at least among educated Muslims, Sufism has come to be associated with ignorance and blind belief.

But, most importantly, while shrines rely upon relatively small local donations, petro-dollar funding for madrassas and mosques has steadily worked in favor of the hardliners. Across the world, and in the West as well, hard-line Islamist clerics have their salaries paid for by donations from oil-rich countries. The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) religious movement, headquartered in Raiwind

near Lahore, has annual congregations that rank in size second only to that of the Haj pilgrimage. With an estimated following of seventy to eighty million people of Deobandi persuasion, this brand of Islam has spread across Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. In France it has about a hundred thousand followers, and by 2007, Tabligh members were situated at 600 of Britain's 1350 mosques. Tablighis despise mystical Islam, which they equate with idolatry and ancestor worship.

The TJ represents only the tip of the religious iceberg. Attendance at mosques has skyrocketed, as has adherence to prayers, fasting, and other rituals. In Pakistan, an observer who grew up in a military family notes that “until the late seventies, the mosques located at the armed forces bases were 90 percent Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama’t [Sufi], 8 percent Deobandi, and 0 percent Salafi. Currently 85 percent of the mosques are Deobandi or Salafi, and less than 10 percent are Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama’t.”⁵ This is an enormous transition, and has strong implications for what Pakistan’s military will become in the future. Steadily, the culture of the mosque is defeating the culture of the shrine.

Culture is retreating. Charles Ferndale, a freelancer who occasionally writes on Pakistan, reflects upon the destruction of the country’s literary and artistic heritage. “Archaeologists date the arrival of *homo sapiens* in the world by the traces of art they left behind. Art was then a celebration of life, an act of worshipping a beautiful world, which is now being destroyed by ‘progress.’ These ancient remnants of art show the earliest expression among people of their sense of what is sacred. We need art because when we lose that sense of the sacred, we destroy the world to which we truly belong, and replace it with savage doctrines and wastelands.”⁶

Ferndale says nothing new but the truth of his observations rings true: university students are forgetting how to dance traditional dances or any other, cannot act or mimic, cannot recite classical poetry, and read almost nothing beyond their textbooks. Most students secretly watch Indian or western films on their computers or VCRs in the privacy of their rooms. But an attempt in 2007 by my university’s physics department to screen *A Beautiful Mind*, the story of John Nash, the famous Princeton mathematician, was disrupted by bearded students who decried it as immoral and an imposition of Western culture. Perhaps the biggest cultural casualty has been music. While many students sang well in past decades, far fewer do so today. Playing a musical instrument of any kind is also becoming rare. Much has been lost.

The expulsion and murder of Pashtun traditional musicians by the Taliban provides a still starker example. Many think that the move against music is just a problem of the wild tribal areas of Pakistan, but the problem is still deeper. The Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT), the fascistic student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, is very much an urban student organization. It forced the music department at Punjab University to relocate off-campus. Worse: Peshawar University was shut for nearly a month in 2010 after IJT members bludgeoned to death a student who insisted on listening to music in his hostel room. The music department at Bahauddin Zakaria University in Multan was closed for good in 2009 because the university said there was a lack of interest in music. What could be sadder, if its claim is actually true?

Music has always been a disputed matter in Islam, with arguments only about the degree to which it has been forbidden in the Qur’an; i.e. whether partial or total. Mustafa Sabri, a leading

twentieth-century conservative Ottoman scholar and a *Shaikh-ul-Islam*, writes about its pernicious effects: “Music has a tremendous effect in agitating the feelings of romance and love. That is why a banquet with music is usually accompanied with pretty women and alcoholic beverages. Therefore, the most intimate secrets of love are exposed first by poems, then, under the disguise of music, in a similar manner to some women making themselves more attractive under the disguise of the hijab.”⁷

A somewhat softer approach is taken by the Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences (of Shia persuasion): “If the content of the poems and all literature is endorsed by the *Shari’ah* and does not offend man’s moral values, then music can be used in poetry, prose, oratory, writings and recitals.” While this concession puts him in the category of Muslim “liberals,” it still does not allow for the rich tradition of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic love-and-romance music. Even more, his exceptions do not include today’s pop music, vulgar but attractive, broadcast on growing numbers of FM stations in Muslim countries. So how do today’s young Muslims deal with it? They love the beat but feel uncomfortable at some deep level, often internalizing a guilt that comes out as repentance at a later stage in life.

That guilt is created by the grim, joyless and humorless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement that frowns upon every expression of spontaneity and pleasurable pastime, decrying them variously as *biddat* (unacceptable innovation) or *haram* (forbidden). Corruption of the youth, says orthodox Islam, must be eliminated by regulating cultural life. Weddings, once colorful events of joy, have moved toward specious consumption of food, electric lights, much glitter, but less and less dancing and singing.

Ziauddin Sardar, a Muslim of South Asian origin who lives in Britain, asks an impolite question: why are Muslims so boring? He remarks that,

“The displays at the Ramadan assembly are copies of the Qur’an, a couple of prayer mats, and an odd poster. There is the standard, solemn recitation of the Qur’an. In contrast, the Diwali assembly is a riot of colour, costume, dance and music. Ditto for Chinese New Year. Not surprisingly, the pupils enjoy themselves thoroughly and, unlike the Ramadan event, look forward to them eagerly.

I sympathise with the children. We Muslims are not very good at expressing joy. We have reduced our religion to a set of rituals which we enact like robots at every occasion. When Muslims want to celebrate something, they go and offer some extra prayers! Indeed, there are some amongst us who have even outlawed all sources of pleasure and delight. Every time some unfortunate sods in the Muslim world are lumbered with an ‘Islamic government’, music is declared to be Haram, cinemas are closed, dance and theatre are banned, and art and imagination are outlawed. No wonder, the rest of the world finds Muslims somewhat lacking in humanity.”⁸

It is therefore unsurprising that no substantive movie industry of any consequence exists in any Muslim country, although many are secret consumers of Bollywood. Iranian documentary movies may be the exception because of their rich aestheticism, but their makers are in constant battle against state censorship. Bangladesh, with its rich secular culture of music and poetry, may be next in the firing line. One hopes that Bengalis will look to their mother country and decide that that is not where they should go.

To be sure, a few paragraphs cannot possibly encapsulate the huge diversity of Muslim experiences of our times. At the outermost periphery of Muslim culture, one sees some interesting recent experiments, both within and outside Muslim countries. Junoon, headed by Salman Ahmad, and Taqwacore, headed by the Muslim convert Michael Muhammad Knight, and Bangla rap/hiphop music with a political message, are examples of counterculture music groups. With rock and punk, seeking to create art outside of established norms, these groups fight against the notion that Islam is harsh and sterile, arguing that it is a religion that individuals can interpret at will and practice as they choose. Perhaps such efforts shall gain traction sometime in the future.

Nationalism is retreating. Ahlul Bayt, a Shiite Iran-based Islamic organization, has this to say about nationalism: “In Islam, there is no room for one to be a loyal and genuine nationalist. The goal of nationalism is to create national units, whereas the goal of Islam is universal unity. To nationalism what matters the most is loyalty and attachment to the homeland, whereas to Islam, it is God and religion.”⁹ Abul Ala Maudoodi, founder-thinker of the (Sunni) Jamaat-e-Islami and a mid-twentieth-century Islamic scholar, had a similar line. Such opinions reflect an increasing trend among Muslims to dismiss the nation-state as a Western construct.

The tension between religious, national, and ethno-linguistic identities can be quite wrenching. Perhaps more than other Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan to the West feel at sea when asked by their children: What is our culture? Where do we really belong to? Only a few respond by identifying themselves through their ethnic origins. Most simply say: we are Muslims. This reflects attitudes in the home country as well. The British Council conducted a survey of two thousand young Pakistanis between eighteen and twenty-seven across Pakistan regions in 2009. It found that “three-quarters of all young people identify themselves primarily as Muslims. Just 14 percent chose to define themselves primarily as a citizen of Pakistan.”¹⁰ Only where ethnic and linguistic nationalism is very strong, as in Bangladesh or Turkey, do populations have a significant primary identification with the nation-state.

This phenomenon was investigated in 2011 by the Pew Global Survey, which reported that “Among most of the Muslim publics polled, Muslims tend to identify with their religion, rather than their nationality. This is particularly true in Pakistan, where 94% think of themselves primarily as Muslim instead of Pakistani. .”¹¹

Does this mean that Muslims are moving towards a super-state run by a caliphate? While there does exist such a movement, the enormous divisions and rifts between Muslim states makes the possibility a remote one. History has shown that the Sunni-Shia divide is unbridgeable. If it could not be resolved in fourteen hundred years, it is difficult to imagine that it will disappear in the twenty-first century. Today there is at least as much mutual hostility between Iran and the

Arab states as between the Arab states and Israel. Many Muslim states buy arms from the West to protect themselves from other Muslim states.

Nevertheless, even for those who wish for the Leninist “withering away of the state,” weakened nationalism is not good news. It means weakened trust, not just in rulers but in institutional and social mechanisms as well. Society needs a high level of trust to build and sustain an economy, develop science, and manage conflicts. In Francis Fukuyama’s terminology, this constitutes social capital.¹² As the national spirit weakens, trust horizons move inward toward family and tribe, and away from stable and efficient institutions.

The revolution’s impact on society

In his magnum opus, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argues that capitalism and the rational pursuit of economic gain were aided by the inherent logic of certain religious ideas that encouraged planning and self-denial. Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington essentially extend that line of argument in the volume they edited, *Culture Matters*. The evidence that culture strongly influences the acquisition of wealth and resources appears solid. It is another matter that gain often happens at the expense of other groups or nations, or perhaps of the natural environment. Greed is an engine of progress, but has its downsides when viewed in a larger context. Economic success alone cannot establish the superiority of one system of ideas over the other.

I shall attempt now to assess the impact of the ongoing cultural revolution upon the functioning of Muslim societies.

Work habits. Which is more important, this world or the world of the hereafter? The answer determines how much time a society gives to religious rituals. Ultimately this is a question of core values. Higher levels of religiosity directly impact upon time and attention left for work carried out in factories, offices, businesses, and universities. In this regard there can be little doubt that Islam is more demanding than other religions. A fully observant Muslim must put in a significant amount of time, energy, and mental concentration if he or she is to fulfill religious duties well. Unless corners are cut, these include participation in five daily congregational prayers (additional prayers called *nufils* are encouraged). In the holy month of Ramadan when fasting is mandatory, the body is so taxed that institutions and industries generally close well before normal hours. Apart from praying and fasting, daily recitation from the Qur’an is recommended. The pilgrimages of *Haj* and *Umra* are strongly encouraged as well. Inevitably, compromises with religious demands are sought in industry, government, and academia, or else observant Muslim employees would become quite dysfunctional. Of course, such practices are not unique to Islam: Orthodox Jews refuse to use even elevators on the Sabbath.

Some Muslims, including those who perform rituals, are occasionally perturbed by a work ethic that often renders institutions in Muslim countries inefficient and ineffective. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric who frequents Al-Jazeera, is reported to have delivered a fatwa intended to address Egypt’s productivity problem – pray less, work more, and limit prayers to ten minutes at a time. The article reporting this news goes on to say that “According to an official study, Egypt’s six million government employees are estimated to spend an average of only 27 minutes per day actually working, reflecting a real problem with productivity.”¹³ Since there is

no footnote citing an actual survey, I suspect this is an exaggeration. Qaradawi goes on to say that "to save some time, they can also just put some water over their socks, instead of taking (socks) off to wash the feet." But there is little doubt that workers of all levels in many Muslim countries massively misuse prayer time to cover up laziness. Ramadan is a month when every non-religious activity barely crawls along. Who, living in a newly energized Muslim society, can deny this?

Internal peace. When a state proclaims a religious identity and mission, it is bound to privilege those who belong to the "right" religion, and who organize religious life and interpret religious text. This is true for Pakistan, Israel, Iran – and Israel. Since many models and interpretations exist within every religion, within each religion there is bound to be conflict over whose model shall prevail. Hence there is a larger confrontation between religious principles and practices, and ideas that owe to the Enlightenment, ideas, that have emerged over the past three hundred years. This truth, for all its simplicity, explains why democratic institutions have done poorly in Muslim countries. As a religious state, Israel treats its non-Jewish citizens very differently from its Jewish ones, even though its treatment of different Jewish persuasions is relatively more mature.

Religious sectarianism sharply divides modern Pakistan and religious minorities are anxious about their future. This is an inevitable outcome of the so-called "Islamization", a project once endorsed by most Pakistani politicians and soldiers. When religion is pushed explicitly into politics it becomes a currency of power and used to garner support while undercutting actual or potential rivals. A large number of religion-wielding newcomers in national and local politics have emerged since General Zia's Islamization began in 1978. These include the most virulent hatemongers of today. The list of threatened minorities, earlier limited only to Hindus, has expanded to include Ahmadis, Christians, Ismailis, Zikris, and mainstream Shias.

Education and Science. The ongoing cultural revolution is bad news for Muslim education and science. To put this into historical perspective, the Muslim experience of science consists of a spectacular golden age extending from the ninth through thirteenth centuries and then a subsequent collapse.¹⁴ For more than seven hundred years the Muslim world has produced little in the way of ideas, scientific inventions and discoveries, or great scholarship. A modest rebirth occurred in the nineteenth century and maintained a positive growth. This is now being threatened by changing norms and values of the ongoing cultural revolution. The failure is intimately linked to education.

Traditional Islamic education, with its emphasis on teaching of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* and on perfect memorization, had remained essentially unchanged since the *Nizammiyah* curriculum was devised under the rule of the Sultan Nizam-ul-Mulk in the eleventh century. Ibn Khaldun, the great fourteenth-century scholar, in a comparative study of education in Muslim lands, pointed out that only in Muslim Spain and Persia were subjects such as poetry, grammar, and arithmetic included in the syllabi. But the passage of time forced changes, and today all Muslim countries have partially secular education systems that teach science and mathematics in addition to religious studies. The tension created by modernization remains to be resolved. The dilemma is that a strong secular education requires a questioning mind, whereas religious education

demands one that passively accepts. Most traditional learning institutions, the madrassas, have resisted demands to introduce secular subjects.

Some blame today's Muslim science deficit on poverty and poor governance. But material resources are of secondary consequence. To do science, it is first necessary to accept the key premises underlying science — causality and the absence of divine intervention in physical processes, and a clear-cut belief in the existence of physical laws. Without the scientific method one cannot have science, because science demands a mindset that incessantly questions and challenges assumptions. It simply cannot rely upon received wisdom. If this condition is not fulfilled, all the money and machines in the world can make no difference.

So, can Islam accept the premises of science? There are some versions of the religion that can, and others that reject it. It is not enough to say that because Muslims could do brilliant science in ancient times, they can do wonders with modern science as well. Ancient science and modern science are not quite the same, although they are often confused. The ancient science of the Greeks, Chinese, Muslims, and Hindus was a rather limited affair that did not put any theological system under undue stress. Scholars observed, drew a few conclusions, and wrote treatises that only a few could read. It was inconceivable at that time to imagine that the workings of the entire physical world could be understood from just a handful of basic principles. There was almost no link to technology and therefore no impact upon how people actually lived.

Not so for modern science. For better and for worse, this product of the European Enlightenment is now the essence of a universal human civilization. Although it was fuelled by the discoveries of ancient science, including Muslim science, the Enlightenment had an impact that was totally different from the stellar works of individual ancient scholars.

Modern science defines our world by constantly creating new technologies. It also attempts to explain everything from the scale of the atom to the universe, and from times that range from the present day to billionths of a second after the birth of our universe. It evokes strong resistance among traditionalists because it offers an explanation of how humans emerged from the depths of biological evolution to their present form. In 2010, primitive life was directly synthesized from chemicals, a vindication of the view that life comes from synthesizing complex molecules from simpler ones.

On the other hand, all religions are philosophically averse to the notion of material forces running the world. They insist that the Divine Hand intervenes, and so individual well-being requires constant supplications to the power “up above.” This belief system ascribes earthquakes, as well as drought and floods, to divine wrath. To the extent to which this is held to be true, for those who believe this to be the literal truth, accepting science becomes difficult if not impossible. It is fair to say that Saudi Islam, or the various Wahabi-Salafi-Deobandi versions, reject material causality and hence the very basis of modern science.

Shia Islam, on the other hand, while politically assertive and insurrectionist, is less inclined toward pre-modern beliefs. Ayatollah Khomeini was quite content to keep science and Islam in separate domains. He once remarked that there is no such thing as Islamic mathematics. Nor did he take a position against Darwinism. In fact, Iran is one of the rare Muslim countries where the

theory of evolution is taught. Today it is a frontrunner in stem-cell research. Paradoxically, President George W. Bush and his neo-conservative administration had sought to ban such research from the United States.

But there is another side of the coin: Khomeini also developed the doctrine known as “guardianship of the clergy” (*vilayat-e-faqih*) which gives mullahs much wider powers than they had generally exercised in the past. Instead of being simple religious leaders, in post-revolutionary Iran they became political leaders as well. This change echoed the broader Islamic movement toward fusion of the spiritual and the temporal, something that science is acutely uncomfortable with.

To sum up this point: scientific progress in Muslim countries requires greater personal and intellectual freedom than now exists. Thinking, ideas, innovations, discoveries, and progress hinge critically upon the freedom to analyze, criticize, and create.. Better equipment or faster Internet connectivity cannot by themselves lead to any substantial change. Instead, to move ahead in science, Muslims need freedom from dogmatic beliefs and fundamental attitudinal changes.

Reversing the revolution

Faced with internal failure, having manifestly declined from a peak of greatness many centuries ago, and afflicted by cultural dislocation in the age of globalization, many Muslim societies have turned inward. From the early 1950s, following the era of decolonization, a sense of grievance and frustration produced a multitude of Islamist movements spreading from Algeria to Indonesia. The *Jamaat-e-Islami* (Indian subcontinent) and *Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen* (Egypt) are examples. But those earlier movements achieved limited traction in an environment that generally preferred modernity to tradition, progress to history.

Those were definitely more liberal times. Looking back to the middle of the twentieth century, one cannot see a single Muslim nationalist leader who was a fundamentalist. Turkey’s Kemal Ataturk, Algeria’s Ahmed Ben Bella, Indonesia’s Sukarno, Pakistan’s Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iran’s Mohammed Mosaddeq – all sought to organize their societies on the basis of secular values. However, Muslim and Arab nationalism, part of a larger anti-colonial nationalist current across the Third World, included the desire to control and use national resources for domestic benefit. The conflict with Western greed was inevitable. The imperial interests of Britain, and later that of the United States, feared independent nationalism. Anyone willing to collaborate was preferred, even the ultraconservative Islamic regime of Saudi Arabia. In time, as the Cold War pressed in, nationalism became intolerable. In 1953, Mosaddeq of Iran was overthrown in a CIA coup, replaced by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Britain targeted Nasser. Sukarno was replaced by Suharto after a bloody coup that left more than half a million dead.

Had the USA not cultivated Islamists as allies against communism during the Cold War, history could have turned out very differently. But in 1979 things came to a head with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The American strategy for defeating Reagan’s “Evil Empire” required marshalling the forces of Islam from every part of the world. With General Zia ul-Haq as America’s foremost ally, and Saudi Arabia as the principal source of funds, the CIA openly

recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen. It worked. In 1988, Soviet troops withdrew unconditionally, and the US-Pakistan-Saudi-Egypt alliance emerged victorious. A chapter of history seemed complete, and hubris defined US policy for another two decades. But the true costs of this victory did not take long to become known. Even in the mid-1990s – long before the 9/11 attack on the United States – it was clear that the victorious alliance had unwittingly released a genie suddenly beyond its control.

All this is history – and unchangeable. Today, relations between Islam and the West, particularly as represented by the USA, are worse than ever before. Huntington’s civilizational clash may not be here yet, but it could be just around the corner. Stung by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States lashed out against Muslims globally. Plans for attacking Iraq were put in place just weeks after 9/11, and the Bush administration zeroed in on Saddam Hussain as a villain who had to be eliminated. Evidence was suitably fabricated, and the Muslim world’s reactions to the forthcoming invasion were brushed aside. America’s neoconservatives thought that cracking the whip would surely bring the world to order. Instead, the opposite happened. Islamists won massively in Iraq after a war waged on fraudulent grounds by a superpower filled with hubris, arrogance and ignorance. “Shock and Awe” turned into “Cut and Run.” Left behind was a snake pit, from which battle-hardened terrorists stealthily made their way to countries around the world. Muslims saw reinforcement of their belief in an oil-greedy America in collusion with Israel, as a crusader force occupying a historic centre of Islamic civilization. Al-Qaeda rejoiced. Its mission has been to convince Muslims that the war was between Islam and unbelief. It could now brag: *We told you so!*

That many developing societies were being packed with flammable material was predicted even before 9/11 by Eqbal Ahmed, a Pakistani scholar of exceptional insight who died in 1999. He could foresee the confrontation beyond the horizon – and wrote eloquently about it in a paper titled “Terrorism: Theirs And Ours.”¹⁵ I shall paraphrase his ideas without adding anything original.¹⁶

Ahmed argued that even as communications shrank distances between cultures, strong material forces were acting in the opposite direction. A mass of newly landless peasantry, displaced by shrinking farms and mechanized agriculture, was drifting toward shanty towns surrounding urban centers. Looking anxiously for wage work, peasants were forming a new proletariat that would shake the foundations of Muslim states. This was classical Marx – except that it was occurring at a faster rate than ever before.

A transformation so systemic was bound to threaten old ways of life. It destroyed the autonomy of rural life lived for millennia, shrank the distances that had separated communities from each other, forced diverse peoples and individuals to live in urban proximity and compete with each other, undermined the structures and values of patriarchy as it had prevailed for centuries, and threw millions of people into the uncertain world of transition between tradition and modernity. In brief, the phenomenon put into question, and increasingly rendered dysfunctional, traditional values and ways of life. Yet, cultures tend to change more slowly than economic and political realities. All societies caught in this process undergo a period of painful passage.

Ahmed argued that the extent to which a society makes this transition peacefully and democratically depends on its historical circumstances, the engagement of its intelligentsia, the outlook of its leaders and governments, and the ideological choices they make. The Islamists have seized upon existing discontent. Where there is mass unemployment, they offer critical assistance. Where the state proves unequal to aiding victims of economic and national disaster, they step in. But their welfare system is contingent upon mosque attendance. Steadily, their power increases.

What can slow the slide into extremism?

Frontal assault, Atatürk style, can always be imagined. Mustapha Kemal Atatürk's was the first revolutionary response in the Muslim world. He abolished the Caliphate, established an uncompromisingly Turkish secular republic, suppressed many religious institutions, proscribed the veil, prohibited polygamy, and enacted secular laws regulating property rights and women's rights on the basis of equality. He broke with tradition and from the association of Islam with state power. But this was a one-off; it is hard to conceive that well-prepared Islamists would permit such direct assault in the twenty-first century. Moreover, a century later, Turkey is experiencing the resurgence of Islamism.

Could the answer be science? One might have hoped that science would prove to be a Trojan horse. Reminder: a few thousand years ago, after a fruitless ten-year siege of Troy, the Greeks built a huge wooden horse. Hidden inside were crack Greek warriors. The Greek army pretended to sail away, and the Trojans pulled the horse into their city as a victory trophy. At night, the Greek warriors crept out of the horse and opened the gates for the rest of their army, which had sailed back. The Greeks destroyed the city and won the war. Cassandra, the soothsayer of Troy, had insisted that the horse would be the downfall of the city and its royal family but she was ignored. Doom and loss followed.

In a sense, modern science is also a Trojan horse. In the centuries-long war between science and religion, it has made itself welcome – and even indispensable – by offering products big and small that the modern world now relies upon: antibiotics and aspirin, computers and cars, gasoline and gelatins. Although they smash television sets and blow up internet cafes, even the rigidly orthodox and primitive Taliban pay tribute to science by using rocket-propelled grenades instead of swords and driving around in Toyota pickups instead of riding horses or camels. Thus science clearly has the power to penetrate everywhere.

The hope for those who believe in science as a panacea goes something like this: if a society is convinced that it must develop science, then teaching science obviously becomes necessary. Since science teaching requires developing critical inquiry as a basic tool, it can silently subvert mindless superstitions, irrational beliefs in witches, spirits, and other constructs handed down by tradition. Briefly stated, the hopeful ones think: science in, non-science out.

Unfortunately, the world doesn't really work this way. Troy made a fatal mistake by ignoring sound advice, but today's Cassandras are being listened to very attentively because they can point to real evidence that science has weakened the hold of religion, and even removed it from

the realm of ordinary life. They sense that this great horse also hides within it certain germs, pathogenic substances that soundlessly attack and weaken cherished beliefs from within. Indeed, the Cassandras of orthodoxy in all religions have come to recognize science as an invasive foreign body. A range of distinct immune responses is before us. One can ignore science but welcome technology. In this way of looking at things, science is just the window dressing. You don't have to know how a cell phone works in order to use it. So just don't bother about asking questions about *why* things work. In earlier times, Muslim orthodoxy resisted new inventions such as the printing press, loudspeaker, and penicillin, but today such rejection has all but vanished.

Could changing popular culture through music and movies be the answer? Open up more avenues for public entertainment such as sports, festivals, and the like? Surely these are good softeners and make it relatively harder for extremism to penetrate the mind. Khaled Ahmed, an astute observer of the Pakistani cultural scene has a pithy definition: "The handiest meaning of culture – in the absence of a permanent and consensual definition – is the ability of a people to have fun."¹⁷ Indeed, every opportunity that provides the public with alternatives to joyless, hard-line, one-track thinking must surely be seized upon. But there are strong limits here: hardliners violently resist what they perceive as going against their version of Islam. Culture can never replace the power of reason.

So what may be the most effective way? While I've offered several possibilities above, nothing will work better than for the West to admit that it too thinks in tribal terms and that Muslims have indeed had a rough deal. The fact is that in spite of a degree of global consciousness, we humans are still very far from the ideal of universalism. We are nice to our own kind, but ruthless to others when there is competition. At football or cricket matches, the tribal instinct rushes to the fore. Spectators cheer their own teams and shower abuse on players from the other side. Or, to take a different example, CNN broadcast heart-rending stories of survivors and relatives in the Minnesota bridge collapse in August, 2007. But this very channel had, during the Iraq invasion, gloated over the destruction of a bridge over the Tigris. As cars fell into the river, commentators shamelessly prattled about the accuracy of US smart bombs. For a majority of Americans, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and the Blackwater murders are just tiny blips on the radar screen. The American media focused upon the four thousand Americans killed in Iraq but rarely mentioned the horrific toll of Iraqis which, by one estimate, exceeds six hundred thousand.

Of outstanding importance to the Muslim mind is dispossession of the Palestinians. It has been appropriated as a Muslim cause. Its real importance is not absolute – a few million Palestinians do not really matter in a world of six billion people – but symbolic; their treatment is a manifest injustice sanctioned by those who claim to be on the side of universal human justice. Thus, every new house built in the occupied territories adds to the Muslim's sense of the West being complicit with Islam's enemies. President Obama's failure to persuade Israel to stop further settlements was received with a shrug of the shoulder in the Muslim world: the USA and Israel are perceived as identical. This is not wholly unreasonable; the United States has frequently given *carte blanche* for military action against the Palestinians, as in the invasions of Lebanon in 1982 and 2006. American officials remain silent about the future of occupied territories. The fact that Hamas and Fatah are at each other's throats does not mean that the Palestinian problem has gone away. On the contrary, it strengthens extremism and makes a solution more difficult.

Without a Palestinian state, the Palestinian problem will mutate into a new and still less controllable form. And without a just settlement, the world will become still more violent.

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