

MUSLIM RE-ENLIGHTENMENT – HOW MUCH FURTHER TO GO?

by
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In a stunning indictment of the state of the Arab world today, the Arab Human Development Report 2002, authored by Arab intellectuals and recently released in Cairo, concludes that Arab societies are being crippled by a lack of political freedom and knowledge. High quality, mind-opening education is virtually non-existent. Half of all Arab women cannot read or write. Although oil has brought prosperity, the report finds that productivity is small and declining. Dependence upon other countries is extensive while science and technology are almost non-existent.

The facts point to a bleak situation: “The entire Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one-fifth the number that Greece translates”, says the survey. It adds that in the 1,000 years since the reign of the Caliph Maa'moun the Arabs have translated as many books as Spain translates in just one year.

Even a cursory glance at other Muslim countries, including Pakistan, reveals that the Arab situation is typical. Of the 48 countries with a full or near Muslim majority, none has yet evolved a stable democratic political system. In fact, all Muslim countries are dominated by self-serving corrupt elites who cynically advance their personal interests and steal resources from their people. None of these countries has a university of international stature.

Fortunately, a few Muslim countries do not share the Arab predicament. Iran, for example, has a system of high-schools that competes in quality with those in the developed world, and has often won – sometimes even against the United States – in international science Olympiads. Although subject to severe restrictions, Iranian films have won wide acclaim for artistic excellence. And, in spite of the hijab requirement, Iranian women have become an important part of the work force. One finds bookshops everywhere, including small towns and villages, and thousands of titles are translated every year from western languages into Farsi. This country – through which passes George W. Bush's “axis of evil” – is, in fact, one of Islam's brightest spots.

Nevertheless, even relatively progressive Islamic countries like Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia, are far from being role models. Upon flipping through scientific journals, seldom does one encounter a Muslim name. And, if one does, the chances are that this person lives in the West. Looking around one sees that Muslims are virtually absent from the world of ideas and scholarship. An exception was Professor Abdus Salam who, together with Americans Steven Weinberg and Sheldon Glashow, won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979. He was a remarkable man, terribly in love with his country and his religion. And yet he died deeply unhappy, scorned by Pakistan, declared a non-Muslim by an act of the Pakistani parliament in 1974.

Today's sorry situation contrasts starkly with the Islam of yesterday. Between the 9th and 13th centuries – the Golden Age of Islam – the only people doing decent work in science, philosophy or medicine were Muslims. Muslims not only preserved ancient learning, they also made substantial innovations. The loss of this tradition has proven tragic for Muslim peoples. The last

great Muslim thinker, Abd-al Rahman Ibn Khaldun, belonged to the 14th century. Then came seven centuries of darkness. Muslims have long agonized the fundamental question: what brought about the Golden Age? And then, why did the lights go out?

Historical evidence suggests that science flourished in the Golden Age of Islam because of a strong rationalist and liberal tradition, nurtured in the courts of Al-Mamun, Harun-al-Rashid, Abd-al-Rahman II, and other enlightened caliphs. But in the 12th century, Muslim orthodoxy reawakened, spearheaded by the Arab cleric Imam Al-Ghazali who followed the orthodox tradition of Al-Ashari. Al-Ghazali championed revelation over reason, predestination over free will. He damned mathematics as being against Islam, an intoxicant of the mind that weakened faith.

Soon the bin Ladens and Mullah Omars of antiquity drove their battering rams into the imposing edifice of Muslim knowledge and science. It crumbled, and then crashed down. Zealots persecuted and hounded, for petty doctrinal reasons, those very Muslim scholars to whom Islamic civilization owes much of its former brilliance and greatness. Al Kindi was whipped in public by a fanatical sultan and blinded, Al Razi and Ibn Sina escaped numerous charges of blasphemy and attempts upon their lives, and Ibn Rushd was exiled and had his books were burned.

Manifest civilizational decline has prompted a wide variety of Muslim responses over a period of 200 years. At one level, there is continuing denial of any kind of crisis. At another, there is agreement that a crisis exists but this is attributed to Muslims being helpless victims of conspiracies hatched by an all-powerful, malicious West. But a few influential Muslim leaders of the late 19th and early 20th century outrightly rejected such conspiracy theories, calling them destructive and counterproductive. They realized that the decline of Islamic greatness took place long before the age of mercantile imperialism; the causes were essentially internal.

The resistance of Muslims of the subcontinent to modern ideas motivated Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) into becoming a forceful proponent of modern science and thought. He was convinced that the subjugation of Muslims to the West was a result of their scientific backwardness, and that this in turn was a consequence of the dominance of superstitious beliefs and rejection of *maaqulat* (reason) in favour of blind obedience to *manqulat* (tradition). He therefore set about the monumental task of reinterpreting Muslim theology, making it compatible with post-Renaissance Western humanistic and scientific ideas.

Writing in his journal *Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq* a few years after the traumatic events of the 1857 war, Syed Ahmad Khan demanded that “if the Mussulman be a *mard-e-momin* and true to his faith, then let him do to science and learning what his forefathers had done to the knowledge of the Greeks”. The Holy Quran, he said, is the word of God and a book of guidance. But it is not, he stressed, a book of science. In essence he paraphrased the Renaissance philosophy – the Quran tells us how to go to heaven. Science tells us how the heavens go!

The amazing resilience of Islam to external challenges over 14 centuries suggests that it will continue to exist for time scales beyond what anyone can see. The real question is – what shall be its shape and form in the decades and centuries to come?

If the bin Ladens, Mullah Omars, and Sheikh Yassins turn out to prevail then it shall be unending misery and strife, and a continuation of today's Dark Age. Their notion that Islam can survive and prosper only in an Islamic state run according to *sharia* will ensure violent internal strife, given the impossibility of different sects agreeing upon one single set of rules. It is an inescapable fact that societies are far larger, more diverse and complex than the small homogeneous tribal society in Arabia 1,400 years ago. While their holy wars against the West may well inflict some hurt upon their enemies, they lack any strategy to achieve victory. On the other hand, the price to be paid by other Muslims will be stupendous.

But there exists an escape route, and the possibility of a brighter future. The absence of a centralized theological authority – such as the Pope in Christendom – offers Muslims the chance to make personal interpretations of their Faith consistent with broad, universally accepted principles. They need not rely upon the strict interpretations imposed by self-appointed religious authorities. The immense diversity in Islamic practices globally, and even within well-educated people of any one country, is proof that there is no unitary Islam and that beliefs and attitudes can evolve and adapt with the times.

Ultimately, the well-being of Muslims lies in controlling the confrontation with the West. This has more to do with political power than theology. Khatami's call for a “dialogue of civilizations” should be seriously heeded by the United States, which presently seems lost to imperial arrogance and drunken triumphalism. Although there are many contentious issues, the problem is still fundamentally Palestine. The barbarism of Israeli occupation, more than anything else, gives satanic power to the bin Ladens and Sheikh Yassins. The sooner an independent Palestinian state is formed, the brighter will be the world's future.

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