

ROLE REVERSAL: SHARED KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND THE WEST

Farooq Hassan

Department of Humanities,
NED University of Engineering & Technology, Karachi,
PAKISTAN.

drfarooq68@yahoo.com, mfhassan@neduet.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The paper will investigate and analyze how Muslims at the height of their power, because of their pluralistic, humanistic, rationalistic, creative and mystical minds warmly received and accepted knowledge, science, culture and Greek thoughts which were not contrary to the teachings of Islam. The paper will elaborate on how Muslims familiarized the western world with the treasures of Greek thought which provided keys to substantial contributions and advancements in every branch of human learning of their day. The liberating light of Islam and Muslim thinkers and Scholars in Abbasid courts influenced every aspect of European growth. Now, more than ever it is the Muslims' turn to benefit from the scientific and specialized knowledge of the West. Instead of resistance and revolution Muslims must consider, think and reflect on the western progress without biases. Muslims have developed an attitude of despair and revolt. Educated people realize that anything they do or think is not the product of any race, religion, country, language or class but the product of the world as a whole. The Ulema in contemporary Muslim World can be the custodians of positive change by acting fast in analyzing and passing verdicts and juristic opinions on dilemmas of the world today and help to assert better understanding and peace among the people of the world. The role of the Jurists should be a blessing and not a burden for Muslims.

Keywords: Intellectual consciousness, balanced and responsible sharing, pluralistic vision

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Its Birth

Faith is a powerful motivating force and the basis of religion and science. Science is an action of creative mind. Traditions of intellectual development, scientific and rationalistic approaches are found in the teachings and lives of the prophets mentioned in Holy Scriptures including the Qur'an. Allah says (34:12) "And unto Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course, a month's journey. And We caused a fountain of molten copper to flow at his behest." Qur'an says (34:10), "And [thus], indeed, did We grace David with Our favour: O you mountains! Sing with him and praise of God! And [likewise] you birds! And We softened all sharpness in him". In the story of Joseph (pbuh) Qur'an says (12:36, 41, 47-48) that he was educated in the science of the interpretation of dreams. Qur'an says (5:110) about Jesus (pbuh), that he used to heal the blind and the leper, and raise the dead. The Past and present are interconnected so the Qur'an gave examples from many nations as the Saba (Sheba) civilization (34:15) for inter-civilizational co-operation for present and future improvements.

Islamic teachings are essentially based on rationalistic principles and values.¹ Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) adopted balanced and responsible approaches and initiated an open, honest and intellectual community in the Arabian Peninsula (610 - 632 A.D). He (pbuh) commended his followers to love, learn and leave a legacy of intellectual positivity and productivity and said, “*Wisdom is the lost legacy of a Muslim he should get it wherever it is found*”,² when Arabs conquered Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and India, they found this wisdom with the Aramaic, Coptic, and Roman, Greek and Indian scholars. They made all out efforts to achieve that knowledge from them but accepted only such wisdom as was compatible with the Islamic notion of Tawhid.³

Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Its Evolution in Early Centuries

Imam Shafii (150- 204 A.H/767-830 A.D) excelled in Medical science,⁴ and non-Native people were eager to learn and understand the books of Greek philosophers from him.⁵ He also said that there are two types of knowledge, the science of comparative religion and the science of Human Body (medical science).⁶ Imam Shafii regretted the fact that Muslims had lost their expertise in the field of Medical science. He used to say that with this loss of medical science Muslims lost one third of their knowledge and gave it away to the Jews and Christians.⁷ V. Danner rightly says, “Thinkers like al-Kindi (d.c. 850), who was the philosopher of the Arabs, or the Turk al-Farabi (d.950), or the Persian Ibn Sina (d.1037) had no pangs of religious conscience in cultivating philosophy. For them, it was but a form of truth. Therefore, it could not but uphold scriptural truth, which was revealed.”⁸ Later on Muslim thinkers such as Ibn –e-Rusd (Averroes) (d. 1198 A.D) who wrote commentary on the book of Aristotle and also wrote *Bidayatul Mujtahid in fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence). Imam Razi (d. 1209 A.D) the author of *Tafseer Kabir* was also the interpreter of the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d.1037).

Islamic Intellectualism As Perceived By the Non-Muslims

Infact many Islamic rooted theories and contributions are not acknowledged by the West but with exceptions such as:

- a. J.W. Draper writes, “Within twenty-five years after the death of Muhammad, under Ali, the fourth *khalif*, the patronage of learning had become a settled principle of the Mohammedan system. Under the *khalifs* of Bagdad this principle was thoroughly carried out. The cultivators of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and general literature abounded in the court of Almansor, who invited all philosophers, offering them his protection, whatever their religious opinions might be. His successor, Alraschid, is said never to have travelled without a retinue of a hundred learned men. This great sovereign issued an edict that no mosque should be built unless there was a school attached to it. It was he who confided the superintendence of his schools to the Nestorian Masue. His successor, Almaimon, was brought up among Greek and Persian mathematicians, philosophers, and physicians. They continued his associates all his life.”⁹
- b. Esposito comments, “Muhammad brought more than simply a new synthesis or interpretation of existing religious ideas and customs (Arabian, Jewish, Christian). He fashioned a new order and community, a religious and political (more accurately, a religio-political) community rooted in and united by a religious vision or bond. Old ideas and institutions were adopted and transformed in the light of Islamic norms, as a new sense of identity; solidarity, community, and authority were fashioned.It was this vision that was to transform the tribes of Arabia and bring about a major world historical and cultural transformation”¹⁰

- c. B. F. Breiner and C. W. Troll writes, "Christians and Jews studied with Muslims at the universities of Cordoba (968) and Cairo (972), perhaps influencing the later development of western European universities (Paris, 1150; Bologna, 1119). The Middle Ages was a time of contradictions in Christian-Muslim relations: sometimes we find Christians and Muslims studying together, and sometimes we find them opposed to each other on the battlefield. Sometimes the language of interreligious polemic verges on the obscene, and yet Nicholas of Cusa explored the idea of an ultimate unity of all religions, and John of Segovia and George of Trebizond actively campaigned for a Christian-Muslim peace conference"¹¹

MUSLIM'S RESPONSIBLE CIVILAZTIONAL SHARING IN ABBASID PERIOD

The advancement of science would have stopped had it not been for the vast contribution of the Muslim Scientists. Al-Ma'mun established the *Bait al-Hikma* (house of wisdom) for local and international researchers from across the world of arts, humanities, social and natural sciences regardless of faith, creed and colour. During the reign of Harun al-Rashid and al-Mamun Baghdad became the biggest intellectual centre of the civilized world.¹² K. Armstrong writes, "During the ninth and tenth centuries, more scientific discoveries had been achieved in the Abbasid Empire than in any other period of history."¹³ To the renaissance in Europe, Islamic knowledge was not taken as whole, it lost its significance to a great extent as it was stripped of its Islamic character. In the same manner Muslims can learn from the West, excluding the issues based on religion. Medieval Islamic culture provided an intellectual environment which stimulated to the respect for information and knowledge that directed both the domestic and international relations of the Islamic community.¹⁴

ISLAMIC TRANSLATION MOVEMENT

The caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833) founded an academy to translate works of science, philosophy, and medicine from Greek into Arabic. The Bible was also translated for the first time. Islam became the heir to the learning of the past and reached creative heights in architecture, science, technology, and philosophy.¹⁵ Muslims worked for the betterment of mankind and moved from regionalism to universalism. *Falsafa* injected in them the desire to live rationally at all levels, physical and cosmological. This *falsafa* brought more mobility, objectivity and vision into their lives. It provided breeding grounds for fresh ideas and free flow of information. The study of Indian learning in Baghdad was greatly encouraged by the Barmak (a family probably converted from Buddhism). Arab physicians and surgeons were famous for their expertise in Asia and Europe.¹⁶

WHAT MADE THE MUSLIMS GREAT IN MEDIEVAL PERIOD?

The Muslims were diverse in composition, pluralistic in character,¹⁷ intellectually curious of scientific inquiry and rationalists in their speculation.¹⁸ The cause of the fall of the Greek and Roman Empires was due to their moving away from the moral intellectual traditions and the vacuum was filled by Muslims. The rich Greek, Roman and Latin heritage of arts and sciences was preserved and translated into Arabic. If the Muslims had not stopped this treasure from extinction, today the Europeans would not have the supremacy in the world of science and technology. J.W. Drapers admits, "It would have taken the Arabs many thousand years to have advanced intellectually as far as they did in a single century, had they, as a nation, and remained in profound peace. They did not merely shake off that dead weight which clogs the movement of a nation-its inert mass of common people; they converted that

mass into a living force.”¹⁹ Indeed development of a community depends on production and supply of intellectual capital.

Esposito comments, “Islamic civilization was a product of a dynamic, creative process of change in which Muslims borrowed freely from other cultures. It demonstrated a sense of openness and self-confidence that came from being masters not servants, colonizers rather than the colonized. In contrast to the twentieth century, Muslims then enjoyed a sense of control and security. They felt free to borrow from the West, since their identity and autonomy were not threatened by the specter of political and cultural domination.”²⁰

MUSLIM DECLINE - WHAT IS MISSING IN MODERN TIMES?

Why Muslims are not open in today’s world? Why are the present day Muslims different from the Muslims in the past? Are the Muslims seeking knowledge from cradle to grave? Are the Muslims qualified to be the best guides? Are they teaching right things to the students? How can we assure positive engagement of our people? Can we agree on certain universal principles? What do we mean when we say value? Why is the inability to make a real difference? Why is there no leadership with vision and ability to influence for culture of creativity in these challenging times? Why are there no great philosophers among the Muslims in the 21st century? What is the reason for their stagnation and loss of hope? Is revival of Islamic intellectual tradition possible? Can transplantation of new ideas take roots in contemporary situation for rebirth of Muslim *Ummah*?

- a. Muslims have to look back towards tradition of learning for future progress. The secret of progress lies hidden in intellectual renaissance and freedom which can save the communities from stagnation and hypocrisy; it can also breed creative people for research, reforms and renewal in all areas of life. Despite the end of the colonial period, and weaknesses in modern Western civilization as Nasr pointed out “it does not possess the objective criteria to judge and criticize its own activities.”²¹ The west is dominating the world due to its development in science and technology. Muslims are already importing the western technologies but why not their administrative qualities, wisdom and peaceful intellectual values.
- b. How can the Muslims revive the intellectual tradition of Islam in the 21st century? How can Muslim youth be made to excel in the Academics so that they can attain their highest potential? In some Muslim countries like Pakistan where law and order conditions are poor, scientific and technological activities can’t progress.
- c. Muslims can learn from their glorious past too, how they combined science with religion. Dishonesty has to be removed from personal and collective lives of the Muslims. Muslims should try to build mutual trust among the Muslims and people of other faiths instead of looking prejudiced at the unjust behavior of the non-Muslims with them.
- d. What are the practical solutions for Muslims to advance in Science and Technology? Islam has the capacity to meet the challenges of the time but Muslim jurists also have to play a vital role in this regard. Jurists in the past because their ability to think and give juristic opinion on realistic grounds in time contributed a lot, they interpreted the *Shari’ah* in the light of the needs and realities of their time.²²

Islam-Judeo-Christian Collaborative Research Culture in Arab Al-Andalus

There are historical evidences of peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence and co-operation among people of Abrahamic traditions²³ because the Qur’an and the Bible do not forbid it. Karin De Villa, a Spanish Professor writes about the rich history of Arab Spanish

and Islamic pluralistic values at the time of power and influence, “This intercultural and multicultural *convivencia* between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Al-Andalus was key to the development of different sciences that later contributed to give birth to the Renaissance in Italy. When the inhabitants of Al-Andalus put emphasis on their spirituality, this was also the time when their scientific and technological advances were strongest, also influencing Catholics in later times.”²⁴ Ibn al-Arabi with a God given transcendence developed the positive attitude towards other religions.²⁵ He said, “The man of God was equally at home in Synagogue, temple, church and mosque. Since all provided a valid apprehension of God.”²⁶ Nehru writes “Arab Spain, and especially the University of Cordoba, that kept the lamp of learning and intellectual curiosity burning throughout those dark ages of Europe and some of its light pierced the European gloom”.²⁷

The healthy interactions and the relationships with the people of other faiths in the Middle and Medieval Ages was a real phenomenon which is reflected from the writings of the scholars of the East and the West. In the Christian West, how Jews survived as part of medieval society despite persecution and violence, how Christians and Muslims survived in spite of the confrontation with each other during the Crusades and how the three communities lived together in Iberia- where first Islam was the dominant power, and then after the Reconquista, when Christians ruled over communities of Jews and Muslims in Spain needs to be reinvestigated.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES - POSITIVE SIDE OF CONFLICTS

Conflicts do not always and in all the cases pose dangers but are also a healthy process; one can learn the useful lessons for future by studying and analyzing them. Challenges, in fact, are the only ladder to the ongoing progressive journey of human history. In ancient times, the confrontation of Roman and non-Roman culture resulted in the emergence of Muslims. Afterwards, Muslim and the non-Muslim cultures came into conflict resulting in the emergence of Renaissance in Europe. In the 21st century European and non-European cultures faced challenges. As a result, United States emerged on the scene with the greatest strength of unity in the world. Modern Muslims are learning about their intellectual and philosophical past from Western sources; which are full of knowledge and scholarship but from a non-Muslim point of view. Muslims by and large are not responding responsibly at this time of difficulties, challenges and crises that is why some of the western scholars are trying to exploit this situation and showing in their writings that Islamic Civilization will die soon such as David P. Goldman, author of book “How Civilizations Die: (And Why Islam Is Dying Too).” Looking at the current state of Muslim backwardness in science and technology, revival of their lost intellectual power and reawakening should not be underestimated.

MUSLIMS BACKWARDNESS AT PRESENT- WHO IS TO BLAME?

How did Muslims arrive at this state of uncertainty and ignorance which leads to hatred towards everyone? Why have the Muslims remained behind while others have progressed? What are the barriers in the way of development of an intellectual culture in Muslim societies? There could be a number of factors such as they accepted the false idols of this age and did not remove false “isms” that confuse the mind of the modern Muslims. The Muslims are themselves responsible for their weaknesses and decline at present.

- a. At the time of crises Muslim reformers paid attention towards internal reforms at all levels instead of cursing the people of other faiths and nations such as Abu Hamid,

al-Ghazali (1058-1111 /450-505), a medieval Muslim theologian, Sufi, Jurist remarkably contributed about 500 books²⁸ on different subjects, but did not write any book on crusades although it happened before him. The Crusades began in 1095 A.D. and lasted for over a century and a half.

- b. It is not enough to be nostalgic about the glorious past. Muslims have to prove their worth now. Son of Prophet Noah had noble ancestor but he did not prove himself worthy of greatness so he was drowned with many others.
- c. Cursing the time and the present circumstances is not solution of the problems faced by Muslims. This attitude is against the spirit of Islamic teachings. Allah says, “The son of Adam wrongs me for he curses ad-Dahr (Time); though I am ad-Dahr (Time). In My Hands are all things, and I cause the revolution of day and night”²⁹
- d. The obstacles to Muslims’ progress are limited way of thinking, hollow high phraseology without the culture of high thinking. Truth and falsehood have gotten mixed up. Many precious doctrines have become doubtful and hazy due to moving away from clearly defined doctrines. Future planning is said to be against the principle of gratefulness. They attribute their failures to fate. The decadence of society is signs of the approaching Day of Judgment. They misuse religion for Justification of laziness. On the contrary Islam believes in progress and development.
- e. Muslims must prepare for research oriented intellectual defense and resistance on every front in which Islam is challenged because history does not necessarily repeats itself. Rational and not emotional way of presentation of Islam is the need of the hour. It is one of the ways out from the state of psychological and cultural inferiority complexes.

MUSLIM CRISIS IN THE INTELLECTUAL VALUES-A WAY FORWARD

How to reopen the horizon to seek a new form of alliance between Muslims and the people of the West? How can intellectual and rationalistic culture be reintroduced in the Academic and public education in an Islamic state? What is to be done in this state of stagnation in Muslim societies? How can the lost legacy of intellectual development be revived? So what lessons can be learnt from the Muslim medieval history for the modern Muslims? How can a Muslim be modern without losing his identity and Islamic roots?

- a. The present day Muslims are not so confident about the values of Western civilization as their fathers and grandfathers were. They do not accept the West blindly now due to the inner contradictions of the West. Muslims must have the intellectual and moral courage to point out the basic false ideas of our times and make a careful study of them and realize that problems are followed by opportunities; the ability to learn from the past is a great human quality. So ignore the problems and avail the opportunities. Even the contemporary Muslim scholars with exceptions do not have a complete understanding of the fast-paced complexities and contradictions of modern life. The scholars did have financial and political opportunities but they did not have a proper map for a better and comprehensive understanding of the world.
- b. Allah says (13:11) in the Qur’an, “*Verily, God does not change men’s condition unless they change their inner selves; and when God wills people to suffer evil (in consequence of their own evil deeds), there is none who could avert it: for they have none who could protect them from Him.*” The statement in the verse “that which is in themselves” has both a positive and a negative connotation: i.e., God (8:53) does

not withdraw His blessings from men unless their inner selves become depraved, just as He does not bestow His blessings upon willful sinners until they change their inner disposition and become worthy of His grace .

- c. In its wider sense, this is an illustration of the divine law of cause and effect (*sunnat Allah*) which dominates the lives of both individuals and communities, and makes the rise and fall of civilization depend on people's moral qualities and the changes in "inner selves".³⁰ Allah says (74:38) , "[On the of Judgment,] every human being will be held in pledge for whatever [evil] he has wrought"
- d. Trend setting and campaign for cross-cultural fertilization and cooperation are needed which is not possible without peaceful and pluralistic environment with Inter-religious solidarity, responsibility and quality leaders involved in scholastic activities which is also manifested from the al-Ma'mun's life in the Muslim territories. In this age of mind power, Muslims shift their focus and work towards the development of mind power for future betterment.
- e. One of the positive aspects of globalization is that it has given opportunity to meet the East and West, import and export the ideas, exchange the experiences and it is also obvious that powerful ideas and ideologies will influence. Christianity had no place in Roman Empire but became official religion of the empire. Tatar came to destroy Muslim civilization but eventually converted to Islam.
- f. Scientific co-operation between Muslims and Christians is a form of interfaith dialogue. It will also create an environment of collective intellectual consciousness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What is the responsibility of Muslims today given their past and in the face of their future? How can intellectual journey and efforts be initiated when there is one way dimensional flow of everything including the cultural and intellectual ideas from the West? Have Muslims ever exchanged the experiences with the people of other faiths and civilizations? Yes, Cross cultural adaptability among civilizations is also reflected from the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) who traveled to various countries, settled there permanently, learned the language of the native people and adopted the cultural values which were not contradictory to Islamic spirit, married, had children and died there. Islam brought about changes in society based on the principles of gradualism not on radicalism. Islam teaches how to deal with social conservatism and tribal mentality through humanitarian ethics. Kingdom of Muslim Medieval Spain is a model of tolerance, reforms, intellectual renaissance and cultural, social, religious, political and economical interactions and exchanges which can be adopted for future direction by the Muslim communities. In this rapidly changing global society as a result of technological enhancement, urbanization and role of open media there is no escape from it and there is no other planet to go to live. Therefore this is the right time for Muslims to adopt the habit of purposeful, meaningful and valuable sharing with Western experience and expertise for renaissance of Islamic intellectual tradition to overcome the negativity, poverty, ignorance, intolerance from their societies. Training political and religious leaders, social goal setting, psychological counseling, creating connectivity between spiritualism and rationalism, interfaith discourses with a focus on character building and value based education can be helpful for reformation and [r]evolution. As long as Muslim jurists tackled the new emerging issues with *Ijtihad* the Muslim societies worked smoothly. Later when intellectual stagnation came in the society regarding acceptance of healthy changes, the decline at all levels started. The Muslim world needs a team of traditional jurists who are

fully conversant with the modern world. They will be able to deal with the challenges of the West preserving the Islamic traditions. Muslims in general and scholars in particular have to be fully depth with true knowledge of Islam and the Western world to accept or reject the scientific, new ideas of the modern world.

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