

# Has Islam Missed Its Enlightenment?

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## **Abstract**

Reinforced by 9/11, Muslims find themselves increasingly accused of having failed their Enlightenment. The implication is that Islam, being a pre-Enlightenment religion, is archaically a-rational. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a partially unrepeatable European phenomenon (an overdue emancipation from stifling church domination). Part of its import was of a general nature. Its overall rule of rationality promoted a supreme confidence in human reasoning (humanity as the measure of all things), rejection of revelatory religion and metaphysics, separation of Church and State (secularism), belief in a noninterventionist Deity and the law of nature, extreme “scientific” materialism, and the expectation of unlimited “progress.”

While some of its fruits were positive (e.g., the rule of law, liberal democracy, and market economy), other elements led to disaster after Deism gave way to a pervasive agnosticism and atheism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g., colonialism, two world wars, the use of chemical and nuclear weapons, and fascism. Islam may be pre-Enlightenment, but it is an *enlightened* religion. Muslims never conceived of a categorical conflict between science and religion or religion and philosophy.

Right after the September 11 criminal attacks against the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon were carried out, Occidental pundits sought to locate the roots of terrorism in Islam itself or in Islamic civilization in gen-

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eral. True, President George W. Bush, Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder at first were quick to admit that “terrorism has no religion.” Indeed, the German federal president immediately located the real roots of violence in poverty and other monumental injustice by stating: “Peace is the fruit of justice.”

However, when it became clear that no clash of civilizations was about to occur within western countries after all, Islam came under direct suspicion again. Digging deep into all aspects of Islam, Occidentalists, churchmen, and western politicians alike unearthed a plethora of elements that might have contributed to the Osama bin Laden and al-Qa’ida phenomena. These included religious intolerance, previous use of suicidal attacks, and the Qur’anic concept of jihad:

- Had not excommunication (*al-takfir*) and persecution, even of other Muslims, been common from the earliest Kharijyah movement via al-Ma`mun’s pro-Mu‘tazilah inquisition in ‘Abbasid Baghdad to Sayyid Qutb in the twentieth century? This concern was phrased by Joachim Cardinal Meisner of Cologne when, in November 2001, he pointedly wrote in a popular German magazine: “I do not know of a single Muslim country which is tolerant.”<sup>1</sup>
- Did not Shayk al-Jabal in al-Alamut send out political assassins during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to murder various public figures?
- Is not jihad still understood by many Muslims to refer exclusively to warfare?

In the latter respect, alas, many self-appointed interpreters of the Qur’an confused *jus in bello* verses with *jus ad bellum* verses. For example: “Kill them wherever you come across them ...” (2:191), which deals with rules for *conducting* a legitimate war, was taken as a rule that, like “Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight you ...” (2:190), deals with the justification for *entering warfare*. As a result, Islam was painted as a ruthlessly aggressive religion. In this context, the ancient legend of Islam spreading “by fire and the sword” – being as untenable as it is old – was revived.

Far worse, however, were the renewed accusations blaming 9/11 on Islam’s archaic backwardness: Due to the “fact” that it had “missed” its Enlightenment, it had remained a pre-Enlightenment religion. Typically, on September 28, 2001, Karl Cardinal Lehmann of Mayence, titular head of the Catholic Church in Germany, first asserted on German TV that Islam cannot be blamed for what had happened, but then quickly added insidiously that, alas, this religion had missed its Enlightenment.

This was echoed by an Orientalist editorialist of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [FAZ], Germany's most prestigious newspaper. He wrote: "Islam on the whole has not experienced an Enlightenment" and is, therefore, "incapable of self-reflection," adding that "Islam now is largely marginalized and culturally paralyzed in pure imitation (*taqlid*)."<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, another contributor wrote that Islam impedes a structured, pluralistic, and individualistic civil society and prevents a rational development of its jurisprudence.<sup>3</sup> Reactions in other western countries, including the United States, were similar.

Clearly, such accusations are not meant to evoke pity for those structurally anachronistic Muslims. Rather, they seek to remove Islam from its status as an equal among the three monotheistic world religions. If Muslims cannot contradict these vicious assumptions, Islam will be demoted in the West to an intellectually inferior, primitive, premodern, and antimodern set of beliefs, prejudices, and superstitions. A fatal implication would be that such a "religion" cannot even claim equal protection under the constitutional guarantees relating to religion.

This paper tries to refute these accusations in some detail.<sup>4</sup> I am, however, conscious of how difficult it is to deprive people of their culturally founded anti-Islamic prejudices in view of the fact that in the West, knowledge of Islamic history and civilization is as scarce as knowledge about Islam's religious tenets. A reversal of the relevant Occidental attitudes, therefore, can be expected only in the context of redirecting the educational curricula.

## The Enlightenment as a Failed Project

### *The Enlightenment Phenomenon*<sup>5</sup>

Although prepared by important figures of the previous century, among them René Descartes (d. 1650), Gottfried Leibniz (d. 1716), Issac Newton (d. 1727), and Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677), the Enlightenment was essentially an eighteenth-century phenomenon that has continued to have far-reaching effects. Epitomized by Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, its guiding assumptions can be summed up as follows:

- Supreme confidence in human reasoning to a point where humanity was considered the measure of all things.
- Rejection of dogmatism, ecclesiastic ritualism, clericalism, and revealed religion (François Voltaire, Gotthold Lessing, and Frederick II) and their replacement by secularism (separation of Church and

State), the rule of law, and democracy (Baron Montesquieu and John Locke).

- Belief in a Supreme Being (Deism) and the Law of Nature.
- Rejection of metaphysics and reduction of philosophy to epistemology (David Hume and Immanuel Kant).
- Scientific method, leading to extreme materialism (Julien La Mettrie).
- Expectation of unlimited progress.

To be fair, in some respects the Enlightenment did advance humanity in the right direction. For example, it emancipated people from stifling Church rule and despotic oppression and ushered in the rule of law and democracy, the scientific principle, and the epistemological revolution as embodied in Kant's *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*.<sup>6</sup>

In other respects, however, the Enlightenment had devastating consequences. These will be examined in a later section.

### *The Enlightenment in Islam*

The Enlightenment's overall umbrella concept is rationality applied to all facets of life: politics, economics, society, philosophy, and religion. If this is so, Islam is the enlightened religion *par excellence* thanks to the Qur'an's incessant appeals to observe, reflect, use one's mind, and calculate advantages and disadvantages. In fact, the Qur'an is the only so-called holy script that makes such appeals.

Throughout history, Muslims mostly lived up to this appeal. This is proven by the spectacular development of the natural sciences during the `Abbasid period and in Andalusia and Sicily. Advances in all fields of science were such that Islamic culture globalized Europe for centuries, from the early Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The same cannot be said for Muslim human sciences, however, because there was a similar unidirectional crossover effect. For example, it can be stated that Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) was the first fully rational historian in history and the first modern sociologist – and all this in the fifteenth century.

Islamic philosophy has been enlightened since the beginning, for Muslims never considered philosophical inquiry to be in categorical conflict with religion. In fact, the epistemological revolution achieved by Hume (d. 1776) and Kant (d. 1804) in Europe was achieved 900 years earlier by al-Ash`ari (d. 935/36) in his decisive defeat of Mu`tazilah metaphysical speculation. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) was the most prominent figure in this respect, and his commentaries on Aristotle had sensational effects in European universities.

Scientific principles, such as methodological rationality, were applied by Muslims to the very sources of Islam: the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Shari'ah. From Zayd ibn Thabit's collecting of the Qur'anic text to al-Zamakhshari's linguistic commenting upon it, Muslim scholars, contrary to western assumptions, continuously submitted their holy script to rational scrutiny by identifying the circumstances of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*), the role of Isra'iliyat (Jewish legends and accounts of past events), and the issue of abrogation (*naskh*). This process still continues by means of indepth studies of the Qur'an's overall principles, its intricate internal structure, and the relationship between sound and content.<sup>7</sup>

*The Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, published by the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, gives ample evidence of how ready the Muslim world is to submit its holy script to the historical-critical research process that has deauthenticated most of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. That the Qur'an has not collapsed under historical and rational scrutiny, as the Bible has, is not due to inadequate zeal or methodology, but to the Qur'an's supreme degree of authentication.

The same can be said for the method of hadith collecting, even though the Sunnah cannot – and does not – enjoy the same degree of unquestionable authenticity as the Qur'an. Again, the Muslims' method of verifying traditions, including the study of *isnad* and the credibility of people appearing in that *isnad* (*ilm al-rijal*) were rational and without historical precedent. Indeed, it can be said that the onslaught against the Sunnah, sweepingly carried out by Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, and lately by a veritable pro-Zionist “gang” (e.g., John Warnsborough, Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, Andrew Rippin, and “Ibn Warraq”) has been rejected as unscientific even by most mainstream Orientalists. In fact, Harald Motzki proves, in his fabulous study *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, that the earliest orally transmitted Islamic heritage is highly reliable.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of its rationality, Islamic jurisprudence is second to no other major system of law, be it Roman, French, or British-American common law. Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820) may be considered the first eminent scholar of theoretical jurisprudence. In terms of its scholarly exposition at that particular time, Ibn Rushd's (d. 1198) *Al-Bidayat al-Mujtahid* was without parallel in the West. Furthermore, Islamic legal history is characterized by scholarly tolerance to a degree unknown in any other legal system, old or new. It has been – and remains – inconceivable in the Occident that four

(and more) legal schools (*madhahib*) could peacefully coexist as they did, for instance, in the Makkan *haram*.

True, there have been times in Islamic history when emotions swept rationality aside and scholarly tolerance faded. This was the case, for instance, during al-Ma'mun's (d. 833) inquisition, when he tried to impose the Mu'tazilah's teachings as binding doctrine, and also under the Mongol threat, when even Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328) would find himself imprisoned for his legal views. But these exceptions only highlight the extraordinary role of rationality in the course of Islamic history as a whole.

## **The Enlightenment's Long-term Effects**

### *Catastrophic Developments*

The majority of the Enlightenment's six constitutive elements listed above had disastrous consequences. For example, overestimating human reasoning and the cosmic validity of human logic, combined with the fatal assumption that humanity was the measure of all things and scientific materialism, led to a general decline of religion and the appearance of a ruthless cult of efficiency. While all the main figures of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment were Deists who somehow still believed in the existence of (a sort of clock-maker) God, a supreme cause of all being, their nineteenth-century successors virtually all became atheists or at least agnostics: Ludwig Feuerbach (d. 1872), Karl Marx (d. 1883), Friedrich Engels (d. 1895), Charles Darwin (d. 1882), and Sigmund Freud (d. 1939). Hardly had Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) proclaimed the death of God than humanity deified itself either individually (in capitalism) or collectively (in communism).

The rejection of the concept of divine law, when combined with the idea that the basis of law is found in nature, produced the lawlessness of fascism and communism, since what was called natural law was, in reality, made by people and thus was at the disposition either of majorities or totalitarian rulers. International human rights conventions were a reaction to this dismal development. However, they proved more open to infringement than norms considered divine, like those found in the Shari`ah.

The Enlightenment's sense of unlimited progress also had far-reaching consequences. Tradition (and thus the core of all established religions) was discarded at an ever-increasing speed, and the notion of sacredness virtually disappeared. Rather change – any innovation – was welcomed as positive in and of itself. Toward the end of the nineteenth

century, many people expected “paradise on Earth” to be imminent once the last scientific riddles (e.g., the nature of life, consciousness, and gravitation) had been solved.

In the twentieth century, a deep disillusionment set in when it became clear that barbarian instincts had survived under a thin layer of humanistic civilization. During two savage world wars, chemical and nuclear weapons were used and tens of millions of people perished. In between these bloody wars, equally fanatic totalitarian systems arose: fascism (Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Greece) and communism (Russia, Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, Algeria, Egypt, Cambodia, Congo, and Vietnam). These systems also slaughtered millions of people in racial and class warfare, respectively. And all these brutal phenomena were the final result of an extreme inhumane rationalism divorced from transcendental ethics. This is certainly true of the Holocaust, the cold-blooded, bureaucratic, and industrialized extermination of Jews under Hitler.

Such major disasters are behind us. But other long-term negative results of the Enlightenment continue to linger on, such as consumerism, the further decline of religiosity, wholesale environmental destruction, the widening gap between rich and poor, and neocolonialist cultural domination (globalization), all of which follow a commanding commercial or technical “logic.”

## **The Muslim Response**

Given the Enlightenment’s partially disastrous record of thought in real life, it requires a considerable amount of gall to invite Muslims to follow suit or to accuse them with moral overtones of not doing so. How can someone who slid down a slippery slope expect others to do the same? In reality, Muslims have every reason to be proud of the fact that no major twentieth-century disaster took place inside the Muslim world or between Muslims. Also, before urging Muslims to become as secular as Europe, Europeans should complain about the stark public role of religion in their model country: the United States. Indeed, what have Muslims “missed”?

One must realize in this context that the western accusation of insufficient Muslim secularism is related to the West’s incomprehension of the Qur’an’s nature. This is due to the fact that the very idea of revelation is now considered almost quaint among western intellectuals, and that they cannot divorce themselves from their own reductionist definition of religion as something entirely private, subjective, and marginal.

## The Spirit's Reemergence

### *Platonism Revisited*

People who believe that Islam “missed” its Enlightenment and, therefore, ask Muslims “finally to catch up” reveal their ignorance of the scientific revolutions of the twentieth century, ever since Max Planck in 1900 scribbled his quantum theory formula on a postcard to one of his friends.

This is not the place to go into detail. It can, however, be proven that developments in metamathematics (Gottlob Frege’s quantum logics, Kurt Gödel’s Law of Incompleteness [1931], Newton da Costa’s fuzzy logic), microphysics (subatomic particle zoo, quantum theory, Albert Einstein’s relativity of time and space, Werner Heisenberg’s indeterminacy, and Edward Witten’s string theory), cosmology (black holes, Big Bang?, Big Crunch?), biochemistry, brain research, and chaos theory have led to a paradigm shift that makes nineteenth-century materialism look crudely naïve.

At a minimum, modern scientists have become much less optimistic as far as limitless progress is concerned. Most are much less certain about the possibility of arriving at objective truth, if only because of the interference involved in observation and the unreliability of the concept of causality (e.g., Richard Kuhn, Karl Popper, Hans-Peter Dürr, Roger Penrose, Steven Weinberg, Henri Atlan, and Richard Rorty). Their attitude is a desperate relativism and a “defeatist concept of reason” (Habermas) epitomized by Paul Feyerabend, famous for coining the postmodern motto “Anything goes!”

For them, the best we can do cognitively is to play “language games” à la Ludwig Wittgenstein, meaning that we should not take any result of research or philosophical inquiry seriously. In fact, especially in the case of subatomic physics with its 10-dimensional (!) super-string theory, we see an unverifiable mathematical construct that might as well be taught at a faculty not of physics but of religion.

Thus it is no wonder that a high percentage of modern science’s intellectual giants turned religious, including David Bohm, Niels Bohr, John Eccles, Sir Arthur Eddington, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Ernst Jordan, Wolfgang Pauli, Max Planck, Erwin Schrödinger, and Carl F. von Weizsäcker. Exceptions like Paul Dirac and Stephen Hawking only prove that rule.

In some cases this meant a flirtation with pantheism<sup>9</sup> or a resumption of an idealist monism (there is nothing but spirit) in a neo-Platonist fashion.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, for “mystics of the One,” it meant a fusion with Eastern esotericism, particularly Buddhism, Hinduism, and Tibetan mysti-



cism (e.g., Schrödinger, Bohm, and Fritjof Capra).<sup>11</sup> But for almost all key modern scientists, it meant a respiritualization.

Einstein put it succinctly when stating: “Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.” Eddington agreed: “I am not convinced that a mathematician understands the world better than poets or mystics; perhaps he is only better in arithmetic.” Heisenberg, at the end of his life, came to the conclusion that thinking and being are one and the same. For him, as for many others, the post-Newtonian new physics is a new form of metaphysics that can speak about reality only allegorically – like religion. Max Planck summed up the situation best: “With religious people, God appears at the beginning of their thinking, with natural scientists at the end.”

## Conclusion

This is where we are at the beginning of the third millennium CE: Western natural scientists have reversed most of the Enlightenment’s founding assumptions – its optimism, faith in human reasoning, materialism, and its faith in progress. This means that being up-to-date in this postmodern world does not mean subscribing to an already outdated modernism; rather, it means subscribing to the current wave of respiritualization of knowledge. Thus the task before us is a re-Islamization of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

This amounts to a triumphant vindication of Islam’s worldview. Thus, rather than asking Muslims to repeat the mistakes of the Enlightenment, Muslims should ask the West to consider the results of the twentieth-century’s various scientific revolutions. There is always a time lag between scientific innovation and the filtering down of its consequences to the general public. So let’s be patient. One day it may dawn upon Europe that Islam has been right all along.

## Notes

1. *Die Bunte*, no. 47 (2000): 50.
2. Wolfgang Günther Lerch, “Unfähig zur Selbstreflexion,” *FAZ* (24 Nov. 2001).
3. Karen Horn, “Hemmschuh, Wenig individuelle Freiheit im Islam,” *FAZ* (18 Mar. 2002).
4. For more details, see Murad Hofmann, *Khua’ al-Dhat wa al-Admighat al-Musta’marah* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2002).
5. Called *Les Lumières* in French and *Die Aufklärung* in German.
6. *Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in Königsberg in 1787.
7. Among the major Muslim contributions are Fathi Osman, *Concepts of the Qur’an* (Los Angeles: MVI Publications, 1997); Ahmed al-Imam, *Variant*

*Readings of the Qur'an* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1998); and Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996).

8. Harold Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
9. Called *cosmic religiosity* by Einstein.
10. Heisenberg once concluded that “modern physics has definitely decided for Plato.”
11. Most typical for new age physics is Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Boulder: Shambhala 1975, 1983).
12. A program that has been on the agenda of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (Herndon, VA) for decades.