

### Views and Comments

## A Missing Link in the Islamic Renaissance

There is a missing link in Egypt. Although it is one of the strongest pillars upon which we are building our renaissance, we hardly ever perceive its presence in our academic circles. This absence is one of the reasons for the poverty of our scientific and intellectual production.

And what is this missing link? To be precise, it is scholars who combine in their persons elements of both Arab-Islamic culture and the precise scientific European culture. We are in need of more people like them, for we cannot regenerate ourselves without them, and we can only follow this path by making use of their light.

Most of our scholars have only been educated in Arab-Islamic culture. As a result, they are totally ignorant of what is happening in the modern world in relation to the opinions and views being expressed in science, literature, and philosophy. They have not heard of Kant and Bergson, or of Europe's authors and poets, scientists and researchers. At best, these names are mentioned in insignificant magazines, newspapers, and books devoid of any scientific/intellectual value. The other group of our scholars is made up of those who have been educated solely in a foreign culture. They know all about the latest theories in the fields of physics, chemistry, and mathematics which have reached them, and they follow the developments in modern European literature as well as the books and poetry written by Europeans. They are also familiar with the development of philosophical views and their progress up to our time, but, they are totally ignorant of Arab-Islamic culture. If you tell them of Jarīr, al Farazdaq, and al Akhtal, they turn their faces away and avoid you—as if you were talking about a world not our own. If you mention al Kindī, al Farābī, and Ibn Sīnā, they say that they have heard the names but have no more knowledge of them, and that all we receive from them are ambiguous sentences and profound concepts which neither have scientific or intellectual benefit nor enrich or revitalize life.

Yesterday I was talking with a group of these educated people about al Birūnī, the Muslim mathematician who died in 440 AH, and the mathematical and astronomical theories he had discovered. I also mentioned that the German orientalist Sachau had decided that al Birūnī was the most brilliant man the world has ever known, and that this orientalist had called for the establishment of the al Birūnī Society to honor him and to revitalize his memory. The people

in the group told me that most of them had not heard of this name and had not come across it in their readings. They knew all about Descartes, Bacon, Hume, and Stewart, but nothing about Islamic philosophy. They also knew very little about Arab or European literature, or Arab science—all that they knew about Arab culture was what they remembered from the grammar books and literature which they had read during their youth.

These are the two groups which are with us today: the first one is represented by the graduates of al Azhar, Dār al ‘Ulūm, and the schools for training judges in Islamic law, and the second group by those distinguished graduates of modern schools and colleges as well as those who were exchange students in European universities. What is missing here—the missing link—are people well-versed in both Arabic and Islamic sciences who have been able to immerse themselves and benefit from foreign culture. The lack of such a group is the reason for the stagnation in our intellectual and literary life.

In other words, when members of the first group produce something, their production is deficient, for they do not understand the spirit, the language, and the style of the times. They continue to use the old expressions in writing and the old style in literary works. They have frozen their examples in time and thus bore the people with the rules of their grammar. Over and over they repeat their tired examples of rhetorical expression: “I saw a lion in the watering place,” and “The jujube was pinched with cold,” and tens of examples of this nature. Their grammar has bored people to death. And why not, when its themes are “Zayd hit ‘Umar,” and “I saw Zayd fair of face.” People have grown weary of their logic as well. “A human being is an animal. All animals die. Therefore, all humans die,” and “This is a rock. All rocks are solid. Therefore, this is solid.” They complain loudly because the people do not listen to them. And the people complain even more loudly because these scholars do not produce anything new, as they are incapable of presenting what is old in an attractive manner, and because what these scholars present to them has nothing to do with their daily life and environment. Thus, the religious scholars turn away from the people and the people turn away from them. The scholars are content to live in their special milieu and the people are content with them remaining there. Such scholars follow a path which is not the path of other people, and they take as their guide that which is not the guide of other people.

And as for the other group of scholars, its Arab-Islamic culture is tenuous at best. When they want to present something to their people and their ummah, they are unable to do so because they are crippled by their lack of familiarity with what is demanded by the Islamic style and manner. Thus, they are incapable of either writing or translating a book. They have made numerous attempts, but the people do not understand what they want from them. The result has been that they end up insulting their readers and accusing them

of backwardness and decline. The readers then revile them and accuse them of incompetence, of not understanding what they are writing, of living by themselves and for themselves, and of accomplishing nothing.

One result of this is that Arab-Islamic literature, science, and philosophy, in spite of their quality, remain a hidden treasure which is not used. Rather, they await a new generation to digest them and present them anew in a form with which people are familiar. Most Eastern people have been deprived of Western literature, science, and philosophy. The only type which reaches them is the superficial type published in magazines and newspapers that people read to stave off boredom or to put themselves to sleep. Good literature, serious research, and respectable books and journals are few and far between.

The loss of this missing link is due to our educational system's marching on two parallel paths—Arab-Islamic education marches on one path and modern secular education on another, and there are no serious attempts to cause them to intersect.

The only hope for reversing this condition is for us to make it possible for the missing link to appear. This involves a thorough understanding of the two cultures and the ability to drink deeply from two well-springs: taking from literature, science, and philosophy contributed by Arab-Islamic culture and grafting onto it whatever is useful from European culture and methodology, and presenting this material in an eloquent and powerful Arabic prose which transmits the true spirit of Islam.

If this is done, Islamic history may be presented to the masses in a manner consistent with popular tastes, and the people will take pleasure in reading it. Arabic literature will present itself in a new guise to the masses, who in turn will grow accustomed to it and learn to love it. The depths of Islamic philosophy will be probed and readers will emerge from it with hands full of brilliant pearls.

This is why Rifā'ah Pāshā and his school were successful and why they produced a generation which nourished its time. In fact, they overnourished their generation. Rifā'ah had been sent to France after he had finished his studies in al Azhar, where he had immersed himself in the Arabic language and the Islamic sciences. When he absorbed French culture, he put his hand on the two well-springs of modern civilization. He and his school brought to the people what they enjoyed, what they cherished, and what brought them progress. No one since that time has been able to accomplish what he and his followers accomplished.

But our Muslim brothers in India have preceded us in finding this link and using it to their advantage. They have presented Islamic history in a new guise, in the fashion of the Western writers but with an Islamic spirit. They have written about Islam and fiqh in the language, spirit, and style of the times, as Amīr 'Alī and Muḥammad Iqbāl have done. These two

important scholars are thoroughly familiar with European and Islamic culture and their hearts are imbued with love for Islam. They write books which the cultured people read and demand more of, because they like the subjects. Those who are specialists in the natural sciences and chemistry read them and find them to be in agreement with the knowledge in which they were trained, and presented by means of the methods with which they are familiar. They read Muḥammad Iqbāl and find him discussing with equal facility the subtleties in the philosophy of Kant and the wisdom of al Ghazzālī. Then they find him comparing Christianity and Islam with the erudition of an expert in both. Next, Iqbāl will discuss the German poets such as Goethe, and his analysis calls for admiration. He talks about the Mu'tazilah and the Sufis, penetrating their depths, seeking a thorough understanding of their inner cores and then presenting their teachings like the European presents the teachings of European philosophers in a splendid, sweet, and wonderfully appealing manner.

But the Indians, unfortunately, do this work in the English language, a practice which neither nourishes our masses nor satisfies the need of the Arab world. Only on the day that we can partake of this will the missing link be found in the Arab world, like Egypt and Syria. In this manner, the remains/traditions of those who went before us may be revived in the style of those who come after. On that day, the restriction which denies a true meeting of the East and the West will be broken, and on that day the two parallel paths will turn and meet.

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