

Book Reviews

Muslim Intellectual Deficit: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology

Tauseef Ahmad Parray

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It is no exaggeration to say that some of the greatest intellectual movements in the annals of human civilization were launched under the aegis of Islam. Islamic contributions to the promotion of knowledge and learning are noteworthy. Franz Rosenthal, for one, perceptively observed that Islam's lasting and invaluable gift to humankind is that it made the hidden treasures of knowledge available to all sectors of society. The intellectual revolution ushered in under the direction of Islamic civilization blossomed and came to fruition through the central importance attached to the arts of language. (The earliest verses of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet, for example, highlighted their crucial significance.) The importance attached to learning and the transmission and dissemination of knowledge was institutionalized through a wide network of schools, colleges, universities, libraries, observatories, and medical residencies in the Islamic world. The selfless devotion of individual scholars, the munificence of private donors, waqf endowments, and royal patronage played a central role in the inception and maintenance of these institutions.

For Muslim intellectuals, the question of intellectual decay has long been worrying, yielding repeated efforts to analyze and diagnose the historical and spiritual factors responsible for the stagnation and decline of the Muslim world. Parray's introduction highlights Qur'anic terms key to his effort, including *furqān* (distinction), *dhikr* (remembrance), and *hudā* (guidance), which also signal how he reads the scripture. He quotes Mustansir Mir, renowned Pakistani expert on Qur'anic studies, who says of the various aspects under which the Qur'an presents itself, that these names "not only represent so many facets of the Islamic scripture, but they also make up, when seen as inter-related and inter-connected, a coherent and

meaningful statement in their own right, shedding light on the ethos, orientation, and function of the scripture” (18).

Parray devotes Chapter 1 to the “Islamic concept of knowledge” (*‘ilm*), and explains that the Qur’an gives due importance to knowledge for accomplishment, attainment, and success in life (as evident too across Muslim history). Numerous Qur’anic verses encourage Muslims to be equipped with knowledge and understanding, giving a religious mandate to learn. Unfortunately the author does not quote prophetic traditions or other Islamic sources in this chapter. Nor is it fully clear what substantively comprises “knowledge”.

Chapter 2 addresses “Muslim Intellectual Contribution in ‘the Golden Age’”, which the author understands as the Abbasid period. A time of economic prosperity and intellectual awakening, Parray believes Muslim culture and civilization was then at its zenith. Notably, this was when Muslims gained access to the Greek medical tradition of Hippocrates and Galen through translations of their works in the seventh and eighth centuries. These initiatives by Muslims had effects beyond textual transmission, as seen in the different aspects of the healing arts that were developed. The later translation movement of the twelfth century in Latin Europe relied on this work, and affected every known field of science.

In Chapter 3, Parray discusses “what went wrong and where,” locating the roots of decline in the fall of Baghdad and of Muslim rule in Spain (33). He writes that the Nizamiya Madrasa of Nizam ul Mulk was responsible for the division of labor and of the sciences, fostering development among the ‘religious sciences’ alone at the expense of scientific knowledge. He invokes Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi, who held that the “present dualism in Muslim education, its bifurcation into an Islamic and a secular system, must be removed and abolished once and for all.” These “two systems”, namely the Islamic and the Western, must be united and integrated, and the emergent system must be infused with the spirit of Islam and must function as an integral part of its ideological program. Again following al-Faruqi, Parray considers the closing of the ‘gates of *ijtihad*’ and subsequent dependence on *taqlid* to have yielded “the separation of thought from action”.

The author insists that since the end of formal colonialism, most Muslim countries have adopted the ‘Western style’ but have failed to follow their “objectivity and methodology” (47) (chapter 4). He quotes Ziauddin Sardar, who suggests that “to be true to their belief, Muslim societies need to put as much effort into science as they do on prayer; and place science where it belongs: at the very center of Islamic culture” (51). The primary

causes of intellectual decay in the Muslim world being the fall of Muslim rule, schismatic sectarianism, division of knowledge, replacement of *ijtihād* by *taqlīd*, reason vs. revelation debates, and colonialism, it is clear that political and intellectual collapse are interlinked. More concretely, today, Muslims lack suitable academic and research platforms, with meager wages being paid to academicians, resulting in so-called 'brain drain' (53).

In Chapter 5, Parray highlights the activities of modern research institutes, including The Islamic Foundation (Leicester, est. 1972); International Islamic Fiqh Academy (Jeddah, est. 1981); Oxford Center for Islamic Studies (Oxford, est. 1985); Center for Islamic Sciences (Istanbul); Iqbal International Institute for Research and Dialogue (Islamabad). The main purpose for mentioning these institutions is to explore the possibility of emulating their activities elsewhere and so contributing to a full-fledged revival of Islamic knowledge.

The concluding sixth chapter presents possible solutions, even coming up with a six-point remedy: 1) addressing the lack of proper platforms; 2) initiatives to be taken at the community level to establish academic research institutes/centers; 3) proper training for younger researchers; 4) creating a suitable environment for academic engagements; 5) adopting courses for enhancing writing skills in higher and lower educational institutions; and 6) overcoming the lack of fellow-feeling, namely that the *umma* is one's community to whose welfare one should contribute (98). Taken together, he presents a comprehensive diagnosis that looks to the past, rethinks what went wrong and where, and suggests concrete steps by which to resolve this intellectual deficit.

Muslim Intellectual Deficit is by and large well documented, footnotes and references are satisfactory, and the bibliography attached at the end of the book is rich and extensive. Barring some typographical errors, the style of presentation is well-thought. The book will generate soul-searching and introspection.

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