

## Muslim Worlds' Missed Opportunity

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### ABSTRACT

*The longing to recapture the glorious past of Islam is almost universal in the Muslim world. An accurate diagnosis of failed experiences in the past and a methodology to exploit any emerging opportunities are essential to achieve this objective. An opportunity arose in the recent past that should have been thoughtfully utilised in this venture. How and why did the Muslim world squandered that opportunity and what are the consequences? Is a return to the past glory ever possible?*

*Keywords: Mu'tazilism, mytho-historical, progressivism, rationalism, techno-scientific*

In the classical Islamic binary of *Dharul Islam* (the abode of peace) and *Dharul Harb* (the abode of war) it is the Muslim majority countries today that seem paradoxically to represent the latter. Except perhaps the tiny sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in Southeast Asia, practically every other Muslim country in the world is embroiled in some form of political and civil unrest, war and violence which, apart from thwarting national economic development, is also denying the whole Muslim world the opportunity to explore collectively the real reasons why the rest of the world has gone so far ahead of the Muslims in terms of scientific advancement, modernity and progress. While not disputing the relevance of specific causes and circumstances for the problems in each of the Muslim countries this article focuses on one macro issue that is fundamental to the current malaise. It refers to a particular thought paradigm or mindset that has continued for over a millennium that slows down progress in the Muslim quarter in relation to the rest of the world. This mindset has kept the Muslim world in a chequered state of techno-scientific backwardness in spite of the enormous wealth that it has enjoyed over recent decades.

### Contesting Diagnoses

From the time of the decline of the Ottoman Caliphate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century until it was abolished in 1924 and to the present day Muslim elites of both secular and religious orientation had been grappling with the question "What Went Wrong?", a question that captured the title of a book by Bernard Lewis, published in 2002. How was it that the world Muslim community or *umma* that remained so strong, vibrant, progressive and productive since it established a caliphate in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and that produced a civilization which lasted for nearly a millennium progressively became weak, stagnant, backward and unproductive? Erudite Muslims wonder how the *umma* eventually lost not only its political power and military might but also its economic vibrancy and cultural vitality. How did it become politically subjugated, economically exploited and culturally overpowered by a newly awakened Christian Europe? This fundamental and intellectually vexing question provoked a process of self-interrogation and at times heated debates and partisan controversies. However, the diagnostic answers they produced within the *umma* could

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be grouped under three categories: religious dogmatism, secular scientism and religious-scientism.

Religious dogmatism, advanced primarily by Islamic spiritual activists and theologians of reputable institutions and religious establishments reduced the answer simply to the *umma's* neglect of Islam and its doctrinaire teachings. Back to the Islam of the Prophet and his companions, the *salaf*, was their proposed solution to arrest the decline. This argument, originally initiated by Ahmed ibn Hanbal (d. 855), the father of Hanbalism, one of the four eponymous schools of Islamic jurisprudence, most eloquently expressed later by the thirteenth-century Damascene theologian and public intellectual Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and was militantly operationalized by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) and his followers in coalition with the Saudi ruling regime. Thus Wahhabi Salafism today represents the most influential, resourceful and state supported transnational Muslim ideology that advocates religious dogmatism in its purist, as opposed to its modernist version, as the ultimate solution to the Muslim world's malaise. In fact, this argument at least in theory unites all Islamist groups, both moderates and extremists, in spite of their methodological differences.

The secular scientific argument found its practical embodiment in the reforms of the 'father' of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) who identified the main cause for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and for the backwardness of Muslims solely in the religion of Islam and its traditions, and hence his avid determination to secularise Turkey on the model of Western Europe and particularly of France. His radical and unique reforms, which aimed to create a "culturally unitary, Westernized, secular society in which state institutions and the military play a tutelary role as guarantors of ... democracy" (White 2014: 3) have gained the moniker, Kemalism. In its more sanitised or diluted version, Kemalism also found its way into Egypt under Gamal Abdal Nasser and other authoritarian regimes in Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Tunisia. Kemalism, in essence, is the antithesis of Wahhabi Salafism. They represent the two extremes of the reformation spectrum in the Muslim world.

In between religious dogmatism and secular scientism falls the third category, namely religious-scientism. The arguments under this category, which sounds like an oxymoron, approach Islam in a new light. It identifies the cause of the decline not in Islam *per se* but in the rigidified and corrupt "Mullah Islam", a derogatory epithet coined and popularised by Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938). Iqbal, the philosopher poet from pre-Pakistan Indian subcontinent, wanted to separate and castigate the obscurantist Islam preached by the imams from the original and scientific Islam enshrined in the Quran. This argument, propagated by a variety of "balanced reformers" (Lauziere 2016), such as the peripatetic preacher Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897), the controversial modernist Rashid Rida (1865-1935), the neo-Mu'tazilite Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), the Islamist theorist Sayyid Qutib (1906-1966) and several others, finds no contradiction between the Quranic Islam and natural science based on rationalism. Historically this argument actually receives its authenticity from the writings of a group of Islamic philosophers, theologians and scientists known as the Mu'tazilites ("those who keep themselves apart" Hourani (1991: 63) who flourished during the first half of the Abbasid Caliphate. They were the pioneers of Islamic rationalism and their philosophy, in turn, owed its origins to the Aristotelian and Platonic thoughts of ancient Greece. Coincidentally, it may be asserted that it was also during the period of the Mu'tazilites that the grandeur of Islamic civilization reached its pinnacle.

### Indisputable Fact

Irrespective of the relative validity or otherwise of these arguments and counter arguments the indisputable fact is that the world of Islam, which remained so strong, vibrant and progressive when Europe was in slumber lost all of it when the latter awoke and commenced its forward march. Unshackled and liberated from centuries of a Church imposed orthodoxy, the West

embraced with open arms the power and utility of critical thinking and rationalism, which ultimately pushed the West into a culture of scientific progress and modernity. Joel Mokyr, a renowned macroeconomic historian, calls this phenomenon, “*A Culture of Growth*” (Mokyr 2017). While the West never turned its back on the idea of progress once it broke away from the prism of the past the Muslims on the other hand, who pioneered progressive thinking, endeared with a vengeance, since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a culture of orthodoxy in which they are still deeply immersed and are staunchly refusing to come out. The malaise of the Muslims is a self-inflicted wound, which because of prolonged neglect now requires according to some intellectuals an almost radical but mental surgery.

### Idea of Progress

The idea of progress is a future oriented mental project that is not heavenly ordained but develops from human endeavour to apply reason to understand the present and to explore the ways and means of changing it for a better future. The progress of any society therefore depends on its accumulated stock and growth of “propositional” or scientific and “prescriptive” or technological knowledge, “conducted as a collaborative project within a competitive system” (Mokyr 2017: 247). The existence of a “competitive system”, which implies the freedom to think and express, is sine qua non to the growth of knowledge. That system creates a market for ideas in which the qualitatively superior ones will have greater demand and longevity while the mediocre will lose appeal and disappear from the market. It is the hurdles that prevent the growth of such a competitive market for ideas in the Muslim countries that inhibit the development of a culture of growth. Moreover, progress is not necessarily confined to economic development alone as generally understood in the Muslim world but covers the entire spectrum of political, social and cultural dimensions of human life.

From the experience of the West since the seventeenth century Mokyr signifies the role played by two developments that provided incentives for the growth of knowledge: one, a “polycentric political environment” in which the scholars and the literati were able to move across national borders when their words and works went against received wisdom, and consequently angered the rulers and their establishment; two, “a transnational Republic of Letters”, an invisible academy that facilitated intellectual entrepreneurs and “culture producers” to generate knowledge either through individual effort or in collaboration with others. From this academy intellectual “superstars” were born in Europe whose innovative ideas and experiments set the tone for the future industrial revolution, political transformation and economic advancement. The polycentric political environment was the product of the system of nation states that resulted from the Treaty of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648; and the Republic of Letters was a cosmopolitan elite phenomenon which created, shared, debated and preserved knowledge which ultimately heralded the European Enlightenment (Mokyr 2017: pp. 179-224) and paved the way towards progress.

In the case of Islam and Muslims there were, especially during the first two and a half centuries from 750 CE of the Abbasid Caliphate, signs of an emerging competitive market for ideas and the existence of a rudimentary Republic of Letters. It was this phenomenon that made the Abbasid Caliphate so glorious and uniquely memorable in the history of Islam. Frederick Starr, in the opening chapter of his fascinating book *Lost Enlightenment* (Starr 2013: 1), describes a correspondence in the year 999 between two young men who together would later become “the greatest scientific minds between antiquity and Renaissance” (Starr 2013: 2); one, a twenty-eight years old Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973-1048) born in today’s Turkmenistan, and the other, the eighteen years old Abu Ali al-Husayn ibn Sina (c. 980-1037) from Uzbekistan. Separated by a distance of over 250 miles these two budding intellectuals were engaged in a series of debate over matters relating to philosophy and science which, in the context of the then Islamic intellectual environment, was bordering heresy. These two savants were

emblematic of the group of philosophers and scientists from the theological school of Mu'tazilism. This school of theology started by Wasil ibn 'Ata (d. 748) in the Umayyad era and blossomed during the Abbasid era championed the primacy of reason over revelation, which was condemned as heresy by the ruling religious orthodoxy. Yet, it was from this school that Islam produced some of its most brilliant minds in science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, philosophy and many other fields, and whose works later became the source material for many of Europe's own scholars to take off from where the Muslims left and make their respective contribution to the world of knowledge.

Apart from the material wealth and cultural glory that the Abbasid caliphate was able to accumulate and achieve, and which has received almost legendary coverage in the historical writings of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, the knowledge revolution that was spearheaded by the Mu'tazilite philosophers and rationalists or the pioneer "*Defenders of Reason in Islam*" (Martin, Woodward & 2003), which initiated a movement to secularize knowledge by critically examining the religiously inspired received wisdom, has not received sufficient attention in explaining the Abbasid civilization. Legitimized by Caliph Al-Ma'mun in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and facilitated by his *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) – not an academy of sciences as popularly understood but perhaps "a major library" (Starr 2013: 144) or just an imposing name for "the collective institutional and imperial expression of early Abbasid intellectual ambition and official state policy" (Lyons 2009: 63) - the translation movement that flourished under the auspices of this grand institution, and, the debates and writings of the rationalists, transformed Baghdad into a magnet for scholars and an epicentre of free thinking and critical research. The Muslim world underwent an era of intellectual Hellenization. It was this intellectual dimension of the early Abbasid regime more than its economic wealth that became the envy of outsiders, particularly of Christendom. Later, when Europe began to adopt the Mu'tazilite path and embarked on its own struggle to secularize knowledge and liberate it from the shackles of the Church, as Mokyr elaborates, it entered its era of Enlightenment and progress from which it has not stepped back until now. While many Western writers tried to belittle the Islamic link to European Renaissance and Enlightenment in order to stamp the European phenomenon with a seal totally spontaneous and indigenous to Europe, majority of Muslim scholars on the other hand, constrained by the fear of adverse reprisal from Islamic orthodoxy, have made Mu'tazilism an "unthinkable" subject. However, while western historians such as Jack Goody (2006), Peter Frankopan (2015), David L. Lewis (2008) and others are now rewriting this history there has not been a similar revision from the Muslim side.

Mu'tazilism faced its challenge under the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861) and orthodoxy regained its ascendancy after him culminating in al-Ghazzali's (d. 1111) relentless attack on philosophy and the philosophers. Free thinkers in Islam were condemned as *zanadiqa* or heretics. This ascendancy of orthodoxy and orthopraxy backed by political power has constricted if not completely crippled freedom of thought and growth of a competitive market for ideas in the Muslim world. It is a long and tragic history narrated only briefly by Robert R. Reilly (Reilly, *op.cit*). In spite of several intermittent reform movements a fundamental fear of critical thinking and a hardened opposition against secular rationalism has kept the world of Islam on the margin of progress. After surveying a wave of late Islamic enlightenment that ushered in in the nineteenth century Istanbul, Cairo and Tehran, which led to "great movements of thought, modes of living, and political organisation", Christopher De Bellaigue concludes that in the end they amounted to no more than "a weight of tradition and conservatism (which) they were supposed to overturn" (De Bellaigue 2017).

### **A New Opportunity**

However, an opportunity arose in the 1980s which could have helped to reverse the situation had the rulers of the Muslim world and their intellectual advisers were prepared to take up the

challenge, unburdened by the weight of past history. The financial wealth that poured into the oil-rich Arab nations from the end of the 1970s and the world-wide recognition that these nations received simply because of their virtual monopoly over a crucial source of industrial energy promised a fabulous financial bonanza. While the majority of developing countries at that time were capital starved and had to depend on foreign donors and investors to finance their development programs, which kept them in a continuous state of economic and financial dependency, the hydrocarbon-blessed Muslim nations were turned overnight into capital surplus countries which automatically bestowed upon them a hitherto undreamt of economic freedom and opportunity to design their own path towards scientific progress and modernity. Unfortunately, as will be elaborated in the rest of this article, this opportunity appears to have been squandered by the rulers and their backers because of the unwillingness or inability to unshackle their minds from the crippling fetters of religious orthodoxy and social conservatism. An arrogant refusal to learn critical lessons from history appears to be one of the fundamental reasons why this disappointment occurred which kept the Muslim world at the periphery of this techno-scientific world. This refusal to learn is in essence the unavoidable consequence of a religiously designed and politically nurtured “mytho-historical mind” as coined by Mohammed Arkoun to describe the “collective *psyche* which has not yet been emancipated from a mytho-historical mode” (Arkoun 2006: 9), which became even more obdurate after the financial boom. The so called Islamic resurgence and the Islamization projects into which different quarters of the Muslim world were drawn into after the 1970s, although was an immediate and direct outcome of the newly found wealth, yet, it lamentably deprived the Muslims of a golden opportunity to take at least the critical steps to reclaim their lost world leadership. Apart from the development of an Islamic Banking and Finance industry whose Islamicness has been questioned by economists and scholars like Mahmoud El-Gamal (2006) and Wael B. Hallaq (2013), and the establishment of a few International Islamic universities, none of which has secured a place in the top one hundred universities in the world, the Islamization project has failed to turn the tide.

### A Grand Neglect

This grand neglect by mainstream Islam to recognize the crucial significance of secularizing knowledge to create an intellectual, social and political environment that would facilitate scientific progress and modernity has meant the furtherance and dominance of the mytho-historical mindset that equates secularization of knowledge with heresy. Intellectual de-hellenization that began in the 12<sup>th</sup> century eventually led to the “The Closing of the Muslim Mind” (Ali 2007; Reilly 2011). The Islamic resurgence that ushered in in the 1980s, and which proudly proclaimed that “Islam is the answer” ended up producing salafism, a religious purification movement with multiple shades and shapes, as clinically presented by Henri Lauziere in his historical analysis of this phenomenon (Lauziere 2016), but failed to open the mental closure.

This is not to deny the extraordinarily rapid economic transformation experienced by the oil rich states during the past three decades or more. However, that transformation was simply an attempt to replicate, at colossal cost, the West’s outer form of modernity as exemplified by the ultramodern Arab metropolitan centres and the consumerist ideology of their citizenry but not the West’s inner spirit of enquiry and secularity that brought forth the outer modernity. The techno-scientific mindset of the West that engineered its modernity was not allowed to impinge upon the mytho-historical mindset of Muslims.

Given this situation the switch from one mindset to another requires nothing short of a revolution in intellectual thought and educational approach, and in the context of the Muslim world it particularly demands a radical change in the form and content of teaching and learning and the way educational institutions are operated. Even though secular education was

introduced from outside during the colonial period, which continued and expanded after decolonization, orthodox religious indoctrination carried out through traditional madrasas and from the pulpit has so calcified the Muslim mind that questioning the piously inherited wisdom of the past has become almost a taboo. The efforts of the balanced reformers through their writings and public lectures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did indeed create a class of intellectuals in the Muslim world who were willing to utilise the power of reason and critical thinking in their approach to religious scriptures and modernity. One would have hoped that the petroleum induced financial boom in the 1980s would carry forward the achievements made until then. On the contrary the rise of Islamism with its Salafist variant pushed the clock back to the seventh century.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, a distinguished physicist from the Quaid-i-Azam University in Pakistan has the following observation about a conference held in Kuwait in 1983 to "identify and remove bottlenecks in the development of science and technology in the Arab world. But a single topic dominated the proceedings: is science Islamic? The Saudis held that pure science tends to produce 'Mu'tazilite tendencies' potentially subversion of belief. Science is profane because it is secular; as such ... it goes against Islamic beliefs. Hence, ... although technology should be promoted for its benefits, pure science ought to be soft pedalled" (Hoodbhoy 1992: 29). It is this anti-science attitude breeding intolerance towards techno-scientific minds that led to the exodus of Muslim intellectuals to the West. The space vacated by them is now occupied by the mytho-historical minds nurtured by the Islamists.

There is no equivalent today in any Muslim country to the *Baitul Hikma* of 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad. Abdelwahab Meddeb, a professor of comparative literature in the University of Paris, reckons that, "There are over four million Arabic-language manuscripts in existence ... Many of these manuscripts have never been studied or published" (Meddeb 2013: 46). Where is the repository in the Muslim world that holds these treasures where scholars can go and study without unhelpful encumbrance? In another work, the same author notes that "the number of translations published each year into Arabic, a language used by three hundred million speakers, is less than into Lithuanian, language of a country which counts scarcely one and a half million inhabitants" (Meddeb 2003: 215-216). How does one compare this pathetic situation with the translation movement of Abbasid Caliphate which induced Muslim savants to travel around the world in search of works composed in foreign languages to be brought home and translated into Arabic? *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*, sponsored by the United Nations, states that "The cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Maa'moun's time (the ninth century) is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year." (AHDR 2002: 78). During the Abbasid era, it was the growth of the knowledge industry that made Arabic the *lingua franca* of scientific knowledge and gave the word dragoman (a derivation from the Arabic *tarjuma* meaning interpreting) to the English vocabulary. It is a pity to see that while the Brigham Young University in Utah, a Mormon academic institution in the United States has engaged in translating the ancient Arabic works into English the International Islamic Universities that sprouted after the oil boom have shown no interest in translating the outstanding works in foreign languages into Arabic, Persian and other languages spoken by Muslims.

China liberated itself from dogmatic Maoism and embraced the market model roughly around the same time as oil-rich Arab nations started enjoying their newly found petro-wealth. In 2011 China started its FAST (Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Radio Telescope) project, the largest of its kind in the world, and completed it in 2016 at an estimated total cost of \$180 million. Whereas Dubai, the richest oil economy, invested around \$1.5 billion to build its Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower and completed in 2010, which is actually a stupendous structure of shameless opulence and haughty achievement of conspicuous consumption. This is one example that demonstrates where the priorities are between China and the Arab world. While FAST depicts the achievement of a techno-scientific mind Burj Khalifa represents the

achievement of a mytho-historical mind trying to recreate the fantasies of the Arabian Nights with hyper technology. China has opened its doors to the best and beautiful Chinese minds currently living in foreign countries to return home, and by offering them lucrative working conditions the Chinese government is encouraging them to contribute to the national goal of achieving world leadership in science and technology. India, another emerging power is catching up fast in competition with China. In contrast, as pointed out earlier, because of intellectual repression and lack of freedom, there is an exodus of talent from the world of Islam, which may have prompted Meddeb to write that, "Arab excellence seems to blossom abroad" and that the "Arabs thrive once they leave their home countries and settle north of the Mediterranean or across the Atlantic, whether in Latin or Anglo-Saxon context" (Meddeb 2013: 39).

"Escape to the West" is the only avenue available to many Muslim intellectuals, thinkers, researchers and writers whose works find no appreciation but often enmity at home. The Islamologist Bassam Tibi, advises "intellectually significant Muslims ... who hope to apply reason to Islamic reform ... to do so in their Western exile, be it Paris or London or Washington" (Tibi 1998: 31). Professor Akbar S. Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies in the American University in Washington, lamented in his 1988 publication, which focussed mainly on the then situation in Pakistan, the colossal brain drain from Muslim countries to the benefit of the West (Ahmed 1988: 204-207). According to him, even the Nobel laureate in physics Abdul Salam although a Pakistani by birth "is a product not of Pakistan but of Western universities" (*op.cit.*, p. 202). The story of the Egyptian Quranic scholar Hamid Abu-Zaid is a telling example of how tyrannical has Islamic orthodoxy become in suppressing critical thinking. Abu-Zaid in his 1995 publication *Naqd al-Khitab al-dini* (Critique of Religious Discourse) in which he suggested along the Mu'tazilite thinking that the Quran was a partially human product because language is a human invention. This free Islamic thinking was deemed by the Egyptian court as heresy and the author was declared an apostate and was compelled by law to divorce his Muslim wife. He had to flee Egypt with her to The Netherlands and lived as an exile until he returned to die in his home country in 2010 (Tibi 2009: 56; Reilly 2011: 194). Another notorious example is that of the Sudanese religious scholar Ustad Mahmud Muhammad Taha who developed the thesis of the Second Message of Islam where he proposed that the entire corpus of the Islamic sharia should be reviewed on the basis of the Quranic verses revealed to the Prophet in Mecca, which were universal in outlook, rather than on the basis of the revelations in Medina, which were addressed to a particular society. The Sudanese judiciary declared him an apostate and executed him in 1985 (an-Na'im, Winter 1988).

The Muslim world today comprises of nearly one fifth of humanity living as majority in fifty-seven countries (fifty-eight if Palestine is included), all of them members of the Organization of Islamic Congress (OIC) – a virtually a voiceless entity in world affairs – and as minorities in almost every part of the world outside the OIC. However, not one single Muslim majority country has so far developed either politically, industrially or militarily to reach the status of at least a regional power like China or for that matter even Israel so that its voice can carry some weight at international level. If for example, a community of Chinese or Jews anywhere in the world were to suffer physically or materially at the hands of a non-Chinese or non-Jewish majority or a state China and Israel are ready to raise their concern at a world forum and the forum can ill afford to ignore their protest. This is not the case in the Muslim world. It is this abject weakness that must have provoked King Abdullah of Jordan in 2001 to question his counterparts: "Our populations are large, our territory vast, and money is not lacking. Why do we not have the means to act upon anything, or even to affect the future of our region?" (Meddeb 2013: 40).

### **Islamization, Islamism and Salafism**

The oil boom as indicated earlier provided the Muslim world headed by the Arab nations a golden opportunity to wake up from its millennium-old slumber, an opportunity that should have been grabbed to bring about the much needed Islamic reformation, which several Muslim thinkers from Al-Afghani to Rida and to Abduh were advocating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A prerequisite for this reformation was to unshackle the Muslim mind from its mytho-historical traps. Bassam Tibi in paraphrasing a thesis advanced by the Syrian thinker Tayeb Tisini wrote, "had heretical Islamic philosophy and sufi Islam been able to gain the upper hand in Islamic history, and had they not been so successfully combated by the *ulama*, they could have made an important contribution to the industrial development of what was at that time a socioeconomically developed Islamic society" (Tibi 1988: 134). Not only industrial development but human development in its entirety would have been enhanced. Tragically heretical Islamic philosophy and sufi Islam are both under attack from the so called Islamic purists who are now propagating their own but dubious "counter enlightenment".

The Islamization project born out of the oil boom reintroduced with vigour the historic combat between religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy on the one hand and the spirit of Mu'tazilite rationalism, better termed scientific intellectualism on the other. In this new phase the inherent contest between the two adversaries acquired a political dimension and turned into a battle for thought control. While Islamism or "religionized politics" (Tibi 2012: 1) or "a movement to reform the political order on the basis of norms, values, laws and institutions enshrined in the traditions of Islam" (Ahmad 2017:33) calls for uncritical obedience to orthodoxy and orthopraxy with no tolerance for intellectual pluralism, scientific intellectualism on the other hand advocates free thinking, believes in heterodoxy and promotes values of democracy. This conflict is openly prevalent both in the sunni and shia sectors of Islam. While the mullahs of Iran champion religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy in Shiism the Wahhabi Salafists anchored in Saudi Arabia with their comprador agents spread out in other regions represent the same in the Sunni world. The philosophy of both groups of Islamists, as Reilly says, "is grounded in a spiritual pathology based upon a theological deformation that has produced a dysfunctional culture" (Reilly 2011: 197). Scientific intellectualism is a victim of this deformed theology.

The contest has become even more complicated by the intervention of foreign powers who are driven by their own geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the Muslim world. As a result, the battle for thought control has taken a detour and turned into an open war between two sectarian theological deformations, one championed by Saudi Arabia and the other by Iran. This war has brought nothing but years of untold violence, bloodshed, death and destruction, and depletion of resources on a grand scale. The Muslim world is now caught up in this sectarian war, an unfortunate outcome of the oil-boom-generated Islamization project. The weapons and technology used in this war of attrition, the modernity displayed by ultramodern Arab cities and the consumption culture that has captured the minds of Muslim youth reflect not any originality or indigenous modernity of the Muslim world but the imitative display of the outward European or Western modernity.

For any society to advance intellectually, economically and even culturally political stability and social harmony are essential prerequisites. Civilizations prosper under the ambience of political tranquillity and social peace. Without that tranquillity and harmony progress becomes spasmodic at best and retarded at worst. The lack of popular legitimacy to many ruling regimes adds more to the instability. Political illegitimacy produces authoritarianism and dictatorships, and often ends in tyranny. Authoritarianism prevails and in limited cases like in East Asia it has at least gained a contractual legitimacy by delivering material comfort to the majority. In the Muslim world at large it is the absence of such legitimacy and the failure of postcolonial development models that has been largely responsible to the rise of Islamism. However, the growth of Islamism, both in its quietist or scholarly and jihadist or violent formats, has only accentuated political instability and social disquiet. As an



ideology of opposition and with totalitarianism in design Islamism has become both a political de-stabilizer and a social disruptor. Global geopolitics entering from outside has made the situation even worse in many Muslim countries. In such a gloomy context what prospect is there for any meaningful reform that can transform the mytho-historical mindset to a techno-scientific mindset?

A radical shift in the mindset requires an ideological transformation in thought. Arkoun's call for the unthinkable and unthought would involve a war of ideology. But the manner in which the world in general and the West in particular has reacted to the challenge of jihadist Islamism has made an ideological war extremely difficult. The fact that Jihadist Islamism has unleashed an infernal wave of extreme violence and horror is beyond dispute. The threat of violence has to be met with counter violence. This is exactly what today's so called war on terrorism and counter terrorism has resulted in. However, the even more darker side of this never ending confrontation from the point of view of Muslim reawakening is the unchallenged ascendancy of the historical religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy and the parallel denigration of Islamic heterodoxy.

Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, captures in a nutshell the direction of change needed in the Muslim mind. "Islam has always been", says he, "the dialogical outcome of Muslim collective consciousness engaging in conversation with the dominant moral and intellectual forces in the world – from a position of power. Having been for over two centuries at the receiving end of European and American imperialism, and having turned their faith into a singular site of ideological resistance to those empires, Muslims will now have to retrieve the habitual dialogue, though not from a position of power but from a position of *care* – care of the other, of the world, that will in turn redefine who and what they are" (Dabashi 2013: 10). In another place he calls for the restoration the historical "cosmopolitan worldliness" under which Muslim civilization flourished (Dabashi 2011: 9-12). The opportunity for that retrieval and restoration has unfortunately been allowed to slip away partly because of the misdirection of the Islamization project discussed earlier and partly because of the conflictual and confrontational environment created by the War on Terror on the one hand and Salafist Jihadism on the other.

In the absence of any alternative and credible world surveys, the Pew Research Centre's opinion poll carried out amongst Muslims in 2011 and updated later on a variety of issues such as terrorism, al-Qaeda and ISIS, violence in defence of Islam, Sharia and assimilation in the West one could clearly detect the dominance of the mytho-historical mind. The blame for allowing this dominance to prevail and become even stronger falls heavily on Muslim intellectuals like Dabashi himself and many others. The flight of the techno-scientific minds from Muslim countries to the West has already been noted. Having sought refuge in the West these thinkers continue to write and publish their thoughts in journals and books that are read and critiqued within their own circle of academics and intellectuals, and their ideas rarely reach the wider Muslim community. While the techno-scientific minds have confined their thoughts within the precincts of academia and research centres, the pulpit, the social media and the public arena are freely occupied by purveyors of mytho-historicism. The communication revolution that heralded the era of so called globalization has provided immense opportunities to pseudo-intellectuals and semi-literate religious marketeers among Muslims to indoctrinate the masses with their own versions of Islamism. The anger of Muslim masses at the injustices committed and humiliation inflicted by Western colonial and post-colonial empires have understandably made them find solace at the false promises and misguidance provided by champions of mytho-historicism. This in essence is the tragic situation of the Muslim world today.

### **Another Opportunity?**

The 'Arab Spring', sparked by the self-immolation of a street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia on January 4, 2011, which soon engulfed Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, where mass protests removed three tyrants in the first three and dragged the fourth into a cauldron of mindless destruction, mortal combat and monumental humanitarian crisis, all without an end in sight, actually started with promises of "hope, trust, fecundity, and rebirth" (Dabashi 2012: xviii). In terms of the sectarian binary of Islam although the Arab Spring was mainly centred in the Sunni region, Dabashi finds its ideological connection with the 2009 Green Movement in Iran (Dabshi 2011: 43-72; 2012: 5-7). In these unfinished revolutions Dabashi also saw an opportunity to "not only the end of militant Islamism but of all absolutist ideologies" (Dabashi 2012: 11). However, as Dabashi expected, counter revolutionary forces have succeeded in restoring the ancient regime in all those hot spots.

Even if the Arab Spring had succeeded in ending militant Islamism and all absolutist ideologies, it is doubtful whether it would have created a mental revolution of the sort discussed in this article. Yet, the collective revolutionary demand for 'freedom, social justice and dignity' chanted by a new generation of Muslims and reverberated in Tahrir Square in Cairo, which also echoed in Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Dubai and beyond also carried an embedded warning to orthodoxy that its controlling power over young minds was coming to an end. In the final analysis the Arab Spring proved to be another missed opportunity.

In concluding his quite illuminating analysis of the need for heresy in Islam, Anouar Majid, a professor of English at the University of New England has expressed the same concerns raised in the foregoing discussion. In his words:

The *zanadiqa* of Islam, as well as Islam's persecuted or neglected philosophers, are also Islam's only hope to break free, finally, from the tyranny of Sunni orthodoxy and carry on the work that had long been cast in Islam's golden trash heap of history. For modernity, in its Islamic sense, is no more than embracing the right critical method and ensuring a society that doesn't punish difference or proscribe intellectual pluralism (Majid 2007: 221-222).

The call for a shift from the mytho-historical mind to a techno-scientific mind is indeed a call for *zanadiqa*. It is the only gateway to recapture the past glory of Islamic civilization.

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