

Notes and Comments

The Intellectual Crisis of the *Ummah*: Revisiting the Past Patterns of Thought

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In the main, there are two ways of explaining the rise and fall of peoples and communities. One is to find an intellectual cause for everything happening in human history at the macro level. This way of thinking is premised on the notion that every historical event is ultimately traceable to the correct or faulty reasoning that went into the making or unmaking of the destiny of a people or society.

Islamic point of view, on the other hand, stresses the moral responsibility of human individuals and collectivity. Every success secured or failure suffered by men must be attributed to the moral success or failure of human beings.

Therefore, we believe that what is oftentimes termed intellectual failure is essentially a moral failure. The subsequent intellectual failure is only an effect, not a cause. Because it is the heart from where emanate all moral choices according to Islamic teachings. The senses follow the directions of the heart. We, therefore, submit that the present intellectual crisis and confusion are a consequence of the understanding of man and his cognitive process and the intellect and moral failure of those who have been placed in the position of leadership in the Muslim community. The individuals also could not be absolved of responsibility for placing such people in the position of leadership. However, since the

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leaders show direction to the common people, they carry a dual responsibility. These leaders have deviated from their supreme moral duty as leaders of the Muslim *Ummah*. The present ills befalling the *Ummah* are consequences of this deviation. When one violates his terms of appointment to an office of honour and prestige, he is beset by the blindness of his reason and rationality. Any amount of material progress then proves insufficient to guide the intellectual tools given to man. We feel that something like that has been responsible for the present predicament of the *Ummah*.

The most important drawback of the Muslim *Ummah* is the acute inferiority complex from which its leaders have been suffering. The causes of this complex are historical. The present leadership is more or less a legacy of the colonial era. The colonial intervention interrupted the natural progress of history in major parts of the Muslim world. Even the few areas and peoples that apparently remained outside the colonial control were not left immune from colonial excesses. This dark period created conditions in which response to the ascendant alien order become the defining factor for the leadership. It either opposed this order or allied itself with it. The present leadership in the Muslim world seems to mentally live in the same colonial climate.

The various crises faced by the *Ummah* are often attributed to political reasons. To some people, the main problem originates from the loss of political power. Some find its origins in the economic mismanagement of human and natural resources of the Muslim world and the resultant decline in GDP, GNP, and lesser amounts of calories consumed by the faithful. Others go beyond these levels and recognize the cause of the whole malaise in the failure of Muslims to maintain the tempo of research in the fields of empirical science and their inability to capture exports' flow in the world market. Those regarded as old-fashioned assign the present helplessness to the simple reason of going away from Islam. Though these people seem to have rightly diagnosed the cause of our ailment, they fall short of defining precisely what deviation from the straight path has been committed which has led to our present predicament. All these explanations might be partly true and tentatively valid in specific contexts.

However, the chief cause of all causes, in our humble view, is the moral failure of the leaders. This failure increased amenability to the inferiority complex from which the present leadership of the *Ummah* has been suffering for some time. The reason for this crippling complex is that the mindset of the Muslim leadership has been shaped by the

circumstances obtained in the major parts of the Muslim world during the colonial period.

When Muslims were delinked from their historical continuity following the onslaught of colonial invasion in the Muslim world, their response to the challenges of the new conditions was defined by an exaggerated perception of the colonial power and a credulous reaction to the colonial manifestations. It seemed to them that the colonizer has filled the whole space of their life-world. Some people even accepted this phenomenon as their permanent fate and surrendered their destiny to it. They tried to adjust themselves to the demands of the colonial project. Others simply refused to have anything to do with the alien powers and tried to live in isolation from the surrounding conditions in the islands that they tried to create for themselves.

The response of both these groups betrayed a lingering perception and fear of the hegemony of the aliens which more or less continued even after the end of colonial administration.

A third group tried to create a synthesis between the demands of the tradition and the requirements of the new challenging conditions of life. However, this group despite its apparent merit did not attempt to critically assess the new developments in any depth and, therefore, failed to adjust current knowledge and experience to the demands of the moral criteria and cultural priorities of Islam. It did not feel the need to challenge Western epistemological presumptions and tried to insert Western components into the cultural scheme of Islam. This is why this group could not deliver much beyond limited and insignificant results.

Yet all these responses were more or less defensive or reactive representing an inhibited mindset. When the period of naked colonization was over, the leaders of the *Ummah* made little effort to revive the dormant germane elements of their culture and to restore their historical continuity and progress. They could not recover from the shock of the colonial nightmare like a bird long imprisoned in a cage remains unable to fly even when freed. They still perceived the locus of power and prestige in the old symbolic remnants of colonial dispensation such as London, Paris, and Stockholm. The attitude of Central Asian leadership to the Russian Federation after their independence is a recent repetition of the same syndrome that typifies the leaders of former colonies.

In short, our leadership generally failed to rediscover its real roots and revive its own distinctive ethos. On the contrary, it defined its new sociopolitical order in terms determined by colonial rule. Its rulers took pride in wearing the shoes left by the colonial usurpers. Muslim

leadership could not bring back the old order in all its expanses. It failed to remember the fact that the supreme status of the *Ummah* had been defined as a harbinger of peace, justice, and harmony for the entire humanity. Far from recognizing this status, it accepted its fate as a shrunk community and a reduced entity in the global scheme determined by the league of erstwhile colonizers. It failed to heed the call of the Qur'ān which demanded from its followers to bear witness to the truth revealed in this last Book of guidance and on that account the Qur'ān had granted the Muslim community the noble status of the best community raised for mankind. Instead, it remained hostage to the colonial conditions of life. The continuous hostility of many religious groups towards the rulers of the Muslim countries betrays this typical mindset.

It has been a divine practice that those individuals and groups who carried out the divinely ordained function of inviting people to the straight path, enjoining good and forbidding evil, always enjoyed unchallenged prestige and commanded a high degree of moral repute and dignity in this world. When Muslims abandoned this supreme function, they lost this prestige and dignity. Therefore, it is the act of abdicating the foremost obligation of the *Ummah* on behalf of the Prophet (peace be on him) which is the main cause of all the crises besetting this *Ummah*.

The present state of fear faced by the Muslims everywhere is mainly due to the monumental failure of their leadership to recognize their supreme mission of calling and thereby regain their real status in history. Our leadership has unconsciously abdicated this status which was granted to the *Ummah* by the Qur'ān. This status essentially consisted in being the torch-bearer of the life-giving, life-affirming message of Islam, the message of hope and felicity for the entire humanity.

At present, we need to refresh in our minds the status granted to the Muslim *Ummah* by the Qur'ān. The emphatic declaration of the Qur'ān that "indeed you were the best community raised for mankind. You enjoin good and forbid evil and maintain faith in Allah," clearly spells out the solemn collective duty of the Muslim *Ummah* which has been entrusted to it by the Prophet (peace be on him).

At a time when Muslims were much weaker in material terms, they enjoyed this dignified status because they fulfilled their mission as the best community raised for mankind. In all periods of history, the Muslims stood on high moral ground and enjoyed the lofty locus of the best community so long as they recognized their basic vocation and

fulfilled its requirements. A constant consciousness of this supreme collective obligation helped them maintain an attitude of sincerity and altruism towards humanity at large, enabling them to keep the channel of communication and dialogue open with all manner of people.

The Muslims could never regain their lost status in the world so long as they remain hostage to the terms of engagement with humanity defined by others. This state of mind has pushed the Muslims into a thankless endless condition of mutual phobia, hostility, and scepticism about the rest of humanity. The first and foremost damage of this fear and hostility towards others is that it has created irremovable barriers between them and the Prophet's larger audience, the entire humanity.

The second damage of this mindset has been to perceive this world and its inhabitants in the prevailing Western mode of thinking. The West perceives this world and humanity in its typical Darwinian terms. It regards constant conflict and competition as the natural state of human life and the world of nature. Under this so-called law of life, the world and all its inhabitants must live in a constant state of mutual conflict. Only the fittest could survive here. The rest are destined to perish. However, to safeguard their mutual interests, human beings have agreed to a so-called social contract. Under the terms of this fictitious contract, they have agreed to surrender a portion of their inherent freedom to be exercised on their behalf by the collective agency of the state. Otherwise, all will suffer on account of the chaos that will ensue from the conflicting interests of free self-serving individuals. However, this fiction of social contract is confined to the narrow framework of a nation-state. In their mutual relations, the states also remain at loggerheads with each other under the compulsions of the same Darwinian law. The only exception to this inherent conflict among nation-states is again safeguarding their national interest. This worldview rests on the notion of essential conflict in the human concourse at all levels except where a truce is necessary to procure the selfish interests of individuals, groups, and nations.

Islam maintains a positive view of human beings and regards them as free from any pre-natal moral disadvantage. It considers them as the best creatures of God created in the finest of forms. Every individual man and woman is recognized as a potential vicegerent of Allah who has been invested with a good nature prone to altruism with an inherent capacity for cooperation with other human beings. Thus, Islam rejects the Western view of the conflictual nature of man.

Those of our leaders who have uncritically espoused this conflictual worldview include both traditionists and modernists. Both have gone far

away from the path of Islam. Some people might suppose that by emphasizing the supreme altruistic function of the *Ummah*, we are dismissing the doctrine of *jihād* from the framework of the *sharīah*. We are not. For *jihād* is an institution, which is an integral part of the *sharīah*. However, it is linked to the total scheme of Islam and, therefore, must be regulated by an elaborate set of norms and principles and is always subject to definite conditions. More than any other thing, *jihād* is waged, not for control over men and their resources, but for facilitating the performance of the main duties assigned to the *Ummah* namely, inviting people to the straight path of truth, peace, and justice. In other words, *jihād* involves the use of all means including force, if necessary, to defend the mission/right of the *Ummah* to carry out the functions of enjoining good and forbidding evil, extending to humanity the perpetual invitation to Islam on behalf of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), promoting justice, and opposing oppression in all forms. Even beyond this scope, the Muslims can and should cooperate with non-Muslims in pursuing shared goals of making this common habitat an abode of peace, mutual understanding, and harmony.

It has happened many times in history that the pursuit of *da‘wah* and *jihād* resulted in the voluntary mass conversions of new peoples into the fold of Islam. Soon these converts assumed the leadership of the *Ummah* while the original preachers became their willing followers. Little wonder that the leadership of the *Ummah* had been alternating among diverse stocks of humanity throughout history. If this were not the case, this leadership would have been monopolized by the Arabs till this moment.

At present, the whole perspective of our leadership seems to have become hostage to an endless conflict with the former colonial powers and their allies. The result of this engagement is that our leaders find no time to look inwardly into themselves and recollect the time and circumstances when they were disoriented from their straight path. They look at life as the recurrent compulsion of responding to the West as friends or foes. Being obsessed with this love or hate relationship with an entity that is pursuing a conscious and clear agenda of its own, our leaders have allowed themselves to remain hostage to the dynamics of the Western power game.

They have seldom thought of revisiting the whole power game into which they have been cleverly entangled. Quite obviously, the priorities of the power game impose themselves on those who take this game for granted. The unconscious pursuit of this path has increased the distance

between them and the cultural mission assigned by the Qur'ān and bequeathed by the Prophet (peace be on him) to the *Ummah*.

We are not suggesting here any Buddhist sort of escapism. What we are trying to emphasize is that Muslims have certain collective obligations that override all other momentary conditions of war and peace. The foremost duty of the *Ummah* shall always remain to bear testimony to the truth of Islam according to the clear verdict of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān supplies the details of the programme of life which is geared to the fulfilment of this cultural mission. It guides to meet all the challenges that the Muslim community might face in carrying out this mission. This mission is the *raison d'être* of their presence on the stage of history as expounded and reiterated in the Qur'ān and objectified in the Prophet's pattern of life. But we have almost forgotten what tremendous energy, inner force, and profound wisdom are available to us in this infinite Book of Allah. The Qur'ān could invest us with the same inner force, which it supplied to our early elders so long as they remained faithful to this cultural mission.

The primary requirement of this mission is to order individual and collective life on the pattern prescribed in the Book of Allah since it is an essential ingredient of this testimony which the followers of Islam have to bear at all times and climes. This ordering of life depends on educating the Muslims and training them to lead an Islamic life free from all inhibitions and complexes to present to the world a living example of Islamic life. The point of culmination in this education is acquiring the ability to call humanity to the abode of peace. This later aspect calls for a critical understanding of the current modes of thought and behaviour and developing a common lexicon for communicating with humanity at large which is the potential *Ummah* of the Prophet (peace be on him).

It should be kept in mind that there are strong Satanic forces that constantly strive to keep Muslims engaged in real or perceived battles with the rest of the world to foreclose the avenues of a healthy and friendly communication of Muslims with humanity. You will notice that whenever there passes a period of peace or truce and it seems the world is now listening to the voice of Islam, some crisis is artificiality created by clandestine forces to create a rift between Muslims and the rest of humanity.

Once I asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, "Sir! The closest religion to Christianity is Islam which confirms Jesus and Mary and affirms the Evangelical scripture while Judaism is the farthest faith from Christianity which falsifies all the three as an essential ingredient of its creed. But how come you are closest to the Jews but farthest from the

Muslims?” His holiness could only shoot a sharp glance in reply. To save the revered guest from embarrassment, I added, “Sir! You are by no means obliged to answer this question! It was meant only to give you something to reflect upon during the rest of your life.”

Unless Muslim leaders return to the Qur’ān seriously, take a stock of their recent past, and crave for seeking genuine guidance from this Book to redefine their status and role in life, they will be continuously thrown by the tides of adversity from one tempest to another. They will never be able to reach the shore of peace, a peace with themselves and with others.

According to the Prophet (peace be on him), the Qur’ān is a book that raises the communities to heights and throws them down when they break their pledge to it. We need to refresh Iqbal’s message:

گرتومی خواهی مسلمان زیستن

نیست ممکن جز بقرا آن زیستن

If you want to live as a Muslim, then this is impossible without living by the Qur’ān.

It is time for our intellectual, spiritual, and political leaders to make a sincere come back to the Qur’ān, recognize its irreplaceable place in their lives and redefine their status and role in the light of its manifest guidance.

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