

ISLAM'S FORSAKEN RENAISSANCE

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Children often play a game where they sit in a circle and one whispers something to his neighbor, who then whispers that information to the next child, and so on, around to the beginning again. By the time the last child whispers the information to the first, it is often totally different from what was originally said. Something like that seems to have happened within Islam. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, brought one - and only one - religion. Yet today we have perhaps up to a thousand religions that all claim to be Islam. Divided by their different interpretations, Muslims do not play the role they once did in the world; instead, they are weakened and victimized. The Shia/Sunni schism, for example, is so deep that each side condemns followers of the other as apostates, or kafir. The belief that another group's religion is not Islam, and that its followers are not true Muslims, has historically fuelled internecine wars and conflicts in which millions have died - and continue to die. Even among the Sunnis and Shias there are further divisions. The Sunnis have four imams and the Shias have twelve; their teachings all differ. Then there are other divisions, including the Druze, the Alawites, and the Wahabis. We are also taught by our ulamas (religious instructors) that their teachings must not be questioned: Islam is a faith which must be believed without question and logic or reason plays no part in it. But what is it that we must believe when each branch of Islam thinks the other one is "wrong"? The Qur'an, after all, is one book -- not two or three, nor a thousand. And according to the Qur'an, a Muslim is anyone who bears witness that "there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is his Rasul (messenger)." If no other qualification is added, then all those who subscribe to these precepts must be regarded as Muslims. But because we Muslims like to add qualifications that often derive from sources other than the Qur'an, our religion's unity has been broken. Perhaps the greatest problem of all today is the progressive isolation of Islamic scholarship - and much of the rest of Islamic life - from the rest of the modern world. We live in an age of science in which people can see around corners, hear and see things happening in outer space, and clone animals. And all of these things seem to contradict our belief in the Qur'an. But this is so only because those who interpret the Qur'an are learned only in religion, and in religious laws and practices; thus they are usually unable to understand today's scientific miracles. The fatwas (legal opinions concerning Islamic law) that they issue appear unreasonable and cannot be accepted by those with even basic scientific knowledge. One learned religious teacher, for example, refused to believe that a man had landed on the moon. Others assert that the world was created 2,000 years ago. The age of the universe, or measurements of the size of our own galaxy in light years, are ideas that ulamas (Islamic instructors) who are exclusively trained in religion cannot comprehend. This failure is largely responsible for the sad plight of so many Muslims. Today's oppression, the killings and the humiliations of Muslims, occurs because we are weak, unlike many Muslims of the past. We can feel victimized and criticize the oppressors, but to stop them we need to look at ourselves and must change for our own good. We cannot ask

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our detractors to change, so that Muslims benefit. So what do we need to do? In the past, Muslims were strong because they were learned. Muhammad's injunction was to read, but the Qur'an does not say what to read. Indeed, there was no "Muslim scholarship" at the time, so to read meant to read whatever was available. Thus early Muslims read the works of the great Greek scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers; they also studied the works of the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. The result was a great flowering of science and mathematics. Muslim scholars added significantly to the body of world knowledge and developed new disciplines, such as astronomy, geography, and new branches of mathematics. They introduced numerals, enabling simple and limitless calculations. But around the fifteenth century, Muslim intellectuals began to curb scientific studies and to focus on religion alone, insisting that only those who study religion - particularly Islamic jurisprudence - would gain merit in the afterlife. The result was a widespread Muslim intellectual regression at the very moment when the rest of Europe began embracing scientific and mathematical knowledge. And so, as Muslims were intellectually regressing, Europeans began their renaissance, developing improved ways of meeting their societal and economic needs -- including the manufacture of weapons that eventually allowed them to dominate the world. By contrast, Muslims became fatally weakened in their ability to defend themselves by neglecting, even rejecting, the study of allegedly "secular" sciences and mathematics. This cultural myopia remains a fundamental source of the oppression suffered by Muslims today. Many Muslims still condemn the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kamal, because he tried to modernize his country. But would Turkey be Muslim today without Ataturk? Mustafa Kamal's clear-sightedness saved Islam in Turkey and saved Turkey for Islam. Failure to understand and interpret the true and fundamental message of the Qur'an has brought only misfortune to Muslims. By limiting our reading to religious works and neglecting modern science, we destroyed Islamic civilization and lost our way in the world. The Qur'an says, "Allah will not change our unfortunate situation unless we make the effort to change it." Many Muslims continue to ignore this and instead merely pray to Allah to save us, to bring back our lost glory. But the Qur'an is not a talisman to be hung around our necks for protection against evil. Allah helps those who improve their minds.

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