

ISLAM AND DEVELOPMENT²¹

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Technological backwardness is considered as the foremost problem in *Dār ul Islām* to which the remedy of “development” must be applied. The slogan is industrialisation and more industrialisation – the more the better – regardless of consequent environmental and aesthetic degradation. The question is no longer “if” or “which but only “how?” All this has been reduced to slogans and clichés. The aim of “development” is to force the East into the mould of the West – a goal nearly attained by Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong-Kong and Singapore with Malaysia and Indonesia, despite recent economic collapse, avidly aspiring to membership into the exclusive club of the so-called “advanced” countries.

The question posed by so many modernists and secularist Muslim intellectuals is why *Dār ul Islām* after two centuries of such intensive westernization, still remains so backward? They find that answer in the Muslim mentality of the last five centuries of decline and decadence. For them the prime culprit is *taqlīd* or the reverence and authority of the past which they assume must be relegated to history and not allowed and decisive role in the present or future. The remedy they propose is to discard twelve centuries of the so-called “medieval” period of “decadence” and concentrate on the pristine Islam of the Holy Prophet upon who be peace and the *ĀaĀābah* or Companions. If we could only be good Muslims in that sense, following closely in the footsteps of Sir Sayyid AĀamad Khān (1819-1898) and Muftī Shaikh MuĀammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) and their modernist and revivalist successors, they suppose all our problems of backwardness would automatically vanish.

Unfortunately, our situation is much more complicated than that. The whole concept of unlimited development, meaning unrestricted economic growth and industrialisation, based on progressive evolutionism, is going to Islam and never attempted in pre-colonial days, notwithstanding notable public works and charitable institutions constructed by benevolent monarchs.

21 This essay is an unpublished rejoinder to Dr. Wilfred Murad Hoffman’s article, “Backwardness and Rationality in the Muslim World”, *Encounters. Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*, Leicester, U.K. March 1996.

Charles Darwin, later applied by Herbert Spencer, are the founders of progressive evolutionism without which the entire edifice would collapse to the ground. The question is never raised “why” we need “development”, much less if we need it at all? The unquestioned acceptance of these criteria for passing judgement upon Muslim lands and peoples is tantamount to submitting Islam to alien values and ideals.

Of course, it is common knowledge that the technological weakness and vulnerability of Muslim lands and peoples caused Muslim submission to colonialism and imperialism. It must not be forgotten, however, that we were far from unique but shared the identical plight with ALL the indigenous peoples of Asia, Africa, America and Australia as the entire world was systemically plundered for the exclusive profit of the white-man. Of course, it is correct that only with the industrial revolution and consequent technological and military might, was this global subjection possible. The big question is when faced with the dire calamity, what should the Muslims have done? Sir Sayyid AÁmad Khān (1819-1898) and Muftī Shaikh MuÁammad ‘Abduh and their followers preached that only drastic modernisation of Islam and Muslims would make them equals to Europeans. Jamāl ud-Dīn Afghānī (1839-1897) was the first to propose the adoption of modern science and technology as the panacea. But today, all the industrialised areas of the East without exception are merely cultural extensions of the West. The price they had to pay was the virtual annihilation of their traditional civilisation and culture. Mentally they are complete occidentals located only geographically in the East. Are we Muslims prepared to pay such an excessive price for this costly venture? Even supposing development is entirely successful and every single Muslim achieves wealth and luxurious up-to-date living standards, this is no guarantee that the white-man will ever accept us as his equals. The events of recent history are eloquent testimony to the contrary.²²

Nor does any proof exist that development necessarily makes for national strength and independence. During the Gulf War in the winter of 1991, the financial giants of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, despite all their sophisticated weaponry, proved so utterly incapable of defending themselves

²² Despite all their westernization, secularization, and persecution of Islam by those in power, and their pretensions to being a “western” country the Western countries for membership into the European Union unanimously rejected Muslim Turkey!

that they had to call in thousands of American troops, making them virtually occupied countries by the American military, while a poor and backward country like Afghanistan (lacking even a single factory no airforce, navy or even a railroad) successfully resisted the full technological might of the Russian invaders for more than thirteen years (1979-1992) resulting in the break-up of the Soviet Union and the downfall of Communism. Chechniya could be cited as still another outstanding example.

Decadence, stagnation and decline as inevitable stages in a natural ageing process, are not the very worst that can happen to us. Decadence is merely weariness, lassitude and weakness while deviation is outright self-betrayal and collective suicide. For this reason, decadence is far to be preferred to deviation. Pre-colonial Muslims never fell victim to self-betrayal of Islam from within by any industrial or technological revolution while the much-praised “Renaissance” meant the death of traditional Christian civilisation as it had flourished in Europe for more than a thousand years. Spiritually, morally, artistically and socially, the West has been declining ever since, the only major difference being that the decline of the West has expressed itself in frantic over-activity and aimless change while the decline of the East has been passive. The former process is infinitely more harmful and destructive than the latter. The disintegration of modern western culture and society since the mid-60’s has become so obvious to everyone that it really comes as a shock when western-style development is upheld as the only viable model for Muslims.

Modernists in the Arab world habitually castigate the Ottoman Empire for prolonging the era of “medievalism” and “backwardness” on the contrary, Muslim historians should feel grateful that the Ottoman Empire at the height of its power and influence carefully preserved traditional Islamic civilisation for more than an additional four hundred years. Had there been no Ottoman Empire, the Muslim/Arab heartland would certainly have been overrun by western influences during the 16th instead of the 20th century and hardly anything would remain of Islam today.

The sole effective remedy this writer can advise is to follow the wise counsel given in the writings of Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-) as the only way out of our dilemma – that is, a thorough mastery of all western disciplines, afterwards subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny and criticism according to traditional orthodox Islam and the experience of its historic

civilisation. Only by upholding absolute, transcendental spiritual and moral values can objective standards be maintained as to what should be accepted or rejected from the West. This can only be achieved if we shed all traces of inferiority complexes and recover self-confidence and intellectual independence. Idolatry does not only mean worship of wooden or stone images. Ideas and even words can also become objects of idolatrous worship. Certainly we modern Muslims have made the concept of “development” into an idol, thus being guilty of no less than *Shirk*! We can repent to Almighty Allah, not by more and more “development” -- an overdose of the same poison--but by judging societies cultures and ourselves by entirely different criteria. We get ourselves unduly upset and disturbed whenever the western media portrays us as “backward.” At least, the “medieval” world--outlook was religious. What is wrong with “backwardness” when so many others in the so-called “advanced” countries are hastening forward to their self-destruction?