Why Did the Muslim World Decline While the Civilized World Advanced?

Today there is a large gap between Europe and the Muslim world. The former, determined never to step down, has established itself on the thrones of leadership, politics, and governance; occupied the treasures of the whole world; and concentrated all power in its own hand. The latter, like a captive, was deprived of all political life, and cannot even manage its own affairs. Like a convict, the Muslim world remains everywhere under someone else's control.

There must be a reason for this disparity. While there may be secondary reasons, the real reason is one. However, it is difficult to demonstrate it clearly. It is often difficult to determine properly the real reasons in historical facts and social situations. The civilized world has striven, through the power of the sciences and education, to subjugate both nature and nations. At the same time, the Muslim world has remained inert and remiss. For this reason, the Muslim world declined while the civilized world advanced.

Was that the main reason?

If this was the main reason, what accounts for the former's striving and the latter's inertia?

The light of the sciences and education started in the civilized world in the eighth century. Why then did it remain weak for so many centuries? Why did it die out each time it arose? Why didn't it come to life until the sixteenth century? Why couldn't the effects of progress become widespread [until then]?

Beginning in early sixteenth century Germany, the mind of the civilized world freed itself through


the [Protestant] Reformation from religious restrictions and the captivity of the clergy, allowing science and knowledge to breathe freely.

The Reformation, beginning with small issues, rapidly gained great power and provided crucially important ingredients for the civilized world: humans attained their humanity, reason achieved its autonomy, its independence, its freedom, its power. From that time on, human reason moved quickly, unchecked, and began to conquer all the treasures of nature. Mankind recovered its powers of understanding, its powers of action, from the hands of the Catholic clergy and began to move eagerly on the path of science and action. Progress was impossible when reason was imprisoned by popes within the walls of the church. In recent centuries, the works of progress developed rapidly.

The civilized world progressed by saving reason from church authority. At the same time, Muslim madrasas [schools] were busy studying the commentaries of medieval theology [kalām]. Muslim writers were addicted to, and were proud of, writing commentaries on such texts. At that time, the mind of the Muslims was captive in the hands of unoriginal jurisprudents and philosophers. It must have been this widespread stoppage of brains that caused the mind of the Muslim world to remain lifeless and motionless, and therefore to decline.

The days of the great reformer Martin Luther [German founder of Protestantism, 1483–1546] coincided with the days of the greatest of the Ottoman sultans, Sulayman the Magnificent [1494–1566]. At that time Christian states were weaker than the [Ottoman] Islamic state. However, through reformers like Martin Luther, the Christian world entered on the path of progress; meanwhile, through religious scholars and leaders such as Ibn Kemal [Kemalpaşazade], Turkish scholar, circa 1468–1534 and [Mehmed] Ebussu‘ud [Efendi, Turkish religious leader, circa 1491–1574], the Muslim world went into decline. That is, while the civilized world progressed through the freedom of reason, through the captivity of reason the Muslim world declined.

As if prophesying these great historical facts, the blind Muslim philosopher Abu al-‘Ala‘ [al-Ma’arri, Arab poet, 973–1057] said in his Luzumiyiyat [Necessities]:

They progressed but we went to sleep.
They rose up thanks to our decline.

The ways of progress naturally differ from the beds of ignorance.

If a person’s mind becomes captive and is deprived of reason and judgment, it weakens the will for activity, and that person suffers the sickness of inertia. Then even a weak thing can have a great influence on that person.

It must be for this reason that monastic ideas, spread by dervishes—sermons ceaselessly cursing this-worldly life, thoughts seeking comfort and happiness in poverty, Sufi philosophy seeing Satan’s work in everything—become influential on the minds and hearts of Muslims suffering from captivity.

For this reason, the Muslim world languished in inertia, intellectually and physically. For this reason, the Muslim world went into decline, while the civilized world progressed. For this reason, a big gap opened between the Muslim world and the civilized world. For this reason, one descended into captivity, while the other was promoted to the honor of rulership.

This is my approach in this matter. This opinion became clear in my mind after studying the political and cultural history of Islam. My conviction became even clearer when I read the works of authors writing about the reasons for the [Muslims'] contemporary situation and remedies for recovery.

Because of the belief that strengthened in my heart, I began to act, consciously or unconsciously. Whatever I wrote, whatever I said, it was all with the guidance of this belief. In every word of mine, in every line I wrote, I had only one thought: to free reason from its captivity; to demolish the confines built by the madhhab [schools of Islamic law]; to break the restrictions of the madhhab completely; to liberate our free will and willpower from their weakness. That is, to free our reason and to strengthen our willpower.

This was my sole purpose, for the main reason for the current situation of the whole Muslim world was the captivity of reason and weakness of willpower.

I certainly believe in the righteousness, greatness, holiness, and heavenliness of Islam. For this reason, the teachings of such a holy religion as Islam should not be confined to the narrow circles of the madhhab. It is a great error to confine Islam to such narrow circles. This is the reason that I deny the limitations of the madhhab.

According to Islam, reason did not used to be confined. It was unrestrained and respected as the proof of the divine. Islamic governments viewed the freedom of reason and thought as fundamental rights,
as natural rights. In the age of the salaf [the pious ancestors; the first Muslims], there was no narrowness favoring any single madhhab. Abandoning reason, confining its power, seeing sciences and education as enemies and cursing its members, labeling freedom as unbelief—all of this insanity must have spread to Islamic philosophers from the Inquisition courts, which continued in the Catholic world for seven centuries. Otherwise, such insanity could never have been reconciled with the spirit of Islam.

The brutality of the Inquisition spread easily into the blood of Islamic philosophers, poisoned by disputes, into the hearts of philosophers swollen with the desire to maintain appearances and break minds. In the name of religion, the Islamic philosophers imposed this brutality on the Muslim world. This calamity, introduced in the name of religion, took root in the minds and hearts [of Muslims]. For this reason, the mind of the Islamic world, its willpower, virtually all its strength became captive. This captivity was the main cause of all disorders and calamities.

Escaping this captivity is the only way to enter onto the path of healthiness. Without freeing mind and willpower, all other remedies are useless and fruitless.

For this reason, I pursued a career of freedom in reasoning, thought, and understanding. I denied the restrictions favored by the followers of the madhhab and stood courageously against the experts of the madhhab in many matters. This was not intended to suggest that the great ones of the past were in error, but to demonstrate my belief in the freedom of thought and reason, my belief in Islam’s sublime expansiveness.

I devoted myself to this career, which was like a prologue to our salvation from captivity. It was not harmful for the future, but certainly useful.

I limited myself to writing novels and such, because I doubted my poetic abilities would produce great literature, my mind would produce great thoughts, and my heart would produce great emotions. I saw no use in introducing small thoughts and low feelings into readers’ hearts.

I presented many issues to the Muslims of Russia to destroy and demolish the restrictions imposed upon the human mind, willpower, and thought by the experts of the madhhab. Surely my intentions were good. If this goal is achieved, its benefits would be great. None of these were minor issues. In view of the situation of our society, in view of the continuous development of the teachings of Islam, all of these issues were definitely important. Certainly, these issues were more beautiful than love stories and other erotic works, and without their ill effects.

I would like, God willing, to discuss some of the most important of these matters in the next chapter. To conclude this chapter, allow me to present my opinion of our contemporary literature.

In my opinion, the language of our literature is not very correct. Our literature is full of errors of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. If today’s writers corrupt our language through negligence, the language developed by our ancestors will deteriorate. The branches of Turki, originally derived from a single source, will bear no fruit for [Pan-Turkic] unity, and will grow further and further apart.

In my opinion, our contemporary literary production is not suitable to our needs. Love stories, translations from other nations’ novels, frivolous and foolish works, and eroticism—none of this is suitable to our needs.

The civilized world has everything. Our future will not please us if we—who are weak in all respects, with all our needs unmet—imitate only the play and games of the civilized world, if we close our ears to the lessons of the civilized world’s “bitter experience,” if we close our eyes to the causes of ever-increasing murder, dissipation, poverty, and illness.

What we need today is to restrict our literature to serious works; to adopt with all our strength what we need from the civilized world, such as science, education, and industry; to put aside plays and novels; to educate our children with the spirit of trade, agriculture, and activity.

In my opinion, this alone is the path to salvation and the road to progress.