

THE MUSLIM 'UMMAH' AND INTELLECTUAL STAGNATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The essence of carrying out research is to solve one problem or the other, whether real or envisaged. Besides, researches are focused at projecting a better future thereby enhancing socio-economic and political development of a nation or humanity as a whole. Research facilitates civilisation and growth. The Muslim 'Ummah that was once regarded as an autarchy is at present suffering a great deal as a result of lack of functional and industrial driven research project. Despite the vast human and material resources at her disposal, the 'Ummah could neither clothe herself nor feed her populace let alone accommodating them in befitting shelters. This situation suggests that something is wrong, a great problem to be addressed by intellectuals, one which has been left unattended to for quite a long time. Thus, the problem of over dependency on other nations or societies around the world would be reduced to the barest minimum and this would, in the long or short run, provide jobs for the teeming population of youths in the Muslim nations and beyond while at the same time checking the often repeated balance of payment deficit which had continued to be ravaging them. The paper argues that, if youths are properly engaged and their energy is channelled towards a productive cause, societies would be better for it. Attempt is therefore made in this paper to look into the reasons why for this long, Muslims have neglected functional industrial driven research which has made them lag behind their counterparts in the comity of nations, its effects and suggested ways and means by which the problem could be overcome.

Introduction

“The only thing worse than being blind, observed Helen Keller (1880-1968), is having sight but no vision.” There is no doubt that the Muslim 'Ummah of today lack focus owing to a number of reasons. Many reasons have been advanced for the economic, political, social-cultural and intellectual stagnation that had gripped the Muslim world over a certain number of centuries. The present study attempts to unravel not only the causes, the effects and possible way out of the problem; it further argues that intellectual re-awakening of the *Ummah* geared towards functional graduate research is the major potent tool for sustainable development in their societies. In addition, it stresses further that, it would in the long run alleviate poverty if not totally eradicate it, as it would provide jobs for the teeming population of youths in the Muslim world and beyond. The paper observes that the present

situation whereby Muslim nations depend on others for nearly everything thereby resulting into balance of payment deficit would also be put to check. The challenges of attaining functional industrial driven research among the Muslims are looked into and possible remedy suggested in the paper. Observing the lethargy that has gripped the Muslim 'Ummah, Muhammad Asad (1980:2-3) asserts that:

...but it opened to me a new vista on the possibilities of human society being organised with a minimum of internal conflicts and a maximum of real brotherly feeling. The reality, however, of the Islamic life at present appeared to be very far from the ideal possibilities given in the religious teachings of Islam. Whatever in Islam had been progress and movement had become, among the Muslims, indolence and stagnation; whatever in Islam there once had been of generosity and readiness for self-sacrifice, was, among the present day Muslims, perverted into narrow-mindedness and love of an easy life.

Conceptual Framework

The causes of intellectual, political, economic and cultural stagnation of the Muslim world are perceived differently by scholars. To some, the failure of 'ulama to play their civic role from around the 12th century, it has been argued, marked the beginning of intellectual sterility and economic cum political stagnation of the 'ummah owing primarily to stoppage or rather the cessation of *ijtihad* (research) among Muslims and equally because of the dichotomy between the 'ulama and the political class (Ibn Taymiyyah 1263-1328CE), Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Hitherto, public offices used to be occupied by Muslim scholars particularly in the era of *khulafa' Rashidun* and the subsequent golden ones. Heretical Sufi practices, Shiite eschatology and rigidity of law (*Mazahib*) were said to have played significant roles. Hence, the current study agrees with the argument made by Asad that:

To attain that supreme goal of life man is, in Islam, not compelled to renounce the world; no austerities are required to open a secret door to spiritual purification; no pressure is exerted upon the mind to believe incomprehensible dogmas in order that salvation may be secured. Such things are utterly foreign to Islam. It is neither a mystical doctrine nor a philosophy. It is simply a programme of life according to rules of Nature which God has decreed upon His creation and its supreme achievement is the complete co-ordination of the spiritual and material aspect of human life.

According to Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the introduction of dynastic rule weakens the 'ummah which in effect brings about loyalty to ones kinsfolk rather than universal brotherhood encapsulated in the teachings of Islam such that it (the

'Ummah) could not face the challenges posed by the competitors. To Mustafa Naima Effendi (1655-1716) and Ahamd Resmi, the efforts made towards expansion without having enough human and material resources to face the attendant challenges was responsible. Among other reasons advanced by scholars are that the war with Russia between 1768 and 1774 was responsible while others hold that Britain and France were responsible for the eventual collapse of Ottoman Empire after World War I. Muhammad Asad on the other hand observes that:

Economic have ceased to be local. Their characters have become world-wide. They ignore, at least in their tendencies, the political boundaries and geographical spaces. They carry with themselves and this possibly is even more important than the purely material side of the problem-the ever-increasing necessity of a transfer not only of goods, but also of thoughts and cultural currents. But while those two forces, the economical and cultural often go hand in hand, there is a difference in their dynamic rules. The elementary laws of economics require that the exchange of goods between nations be mutual. But on the cultural field this iron rule of exchange is not a necessity at least, not always a visible one; that is to say, the transfer of ideas and cultural influences is not necessarily based on the principle of give and take. It lies in human nature that nations and civilizations which are politically and economically more virile, exert a strong fascination on the weaker and less active ones and influence them in the intellectual and social sphere without being influenced themselves. Such is the situation today as regards the relations between the Western and Muslim Worlds.

The assertion made above by Asad is a true reflection of the situation of the Muslims in the contemporary times and it re-echoes the Khaldunian theory of the rise and fall of nations and or civilizations, that the vanquished always look up to his victor for inspiration. Patmawati (2008) cites that Monzer Kahf stresses that zakat is unable to overcome poverty in the Muslim societies of today as it acts merely as a tool of income distribution whereas poverty among Islamic nations is due to productivity and low economic development. Political scheming as well as racial loyalty masquerading itself in the form of dynastic hegemony and nation states was observed to be responsible. Lapidus postulates that integration of culture during Saljuq and afterwards the Mongol eras created a new social identity or outlook (Arab-Persian-Turkish) tradition which overtook the universal outlook or brotherhood of orthopraxy Islam. The observation of Ladipus therefore depicts a syncretic blemish of orthopraxy with extraneous elements. Yet to Quartaert, Arab, Turk, Armenian and Kurdish national activities were not the real reasons for the decline. Itzkowitz argues that rigid conservatism was responsible. Bernard Lewis is however, of the opinion that the Ottoman Empire could not have declined but was

overtaken by the West. This opinion, as it seems, is in consonance with the observation made by Asad in the last quotation and this resonates well with the findings of this paper.

Renewal (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*) occasioned by *ijtihad* are therefore strongly advocated in the Muslim nations, a significant pointer to which is the recent spring in the Arab/Muslim world. Not a sustainable development that cater for only a balance diet is required by Muslims but one that ensures balanced life as human life cannot be sustained by only bread and cake. This follows from the fact that Islam does not allow the dichotomy of life into watertight compartment of spiritual and temporal or rather religious and secular confines. Why the dearth of functional and industrial driven research among Muslims? What are the implications of this for Muslims and the rest of the world? These and similar other questions forms the major milestone guiding the study. The Muslim intellectuals as used in this treatise is not to be understood in its traditional usage, it rather refers to all those who qualify and or are capable of doing independent study or research that are guided by Islamic principles whether on theology or jurisprudence, physical, life and or social sciences, public or business administration, global or national security, family or public life et cetera. In short, all fields of human endeavour as long as they do not contravene any of the established principles of Islam and its law-*Shari'ah* as well as those of its lofty goals otherwise called *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* are included. It should even be noted, that Islam encourages and facilitates multidisciplinary/multifaceted approach to knowledge cultivation and dissemination and frowns at hoarding it.

By functional and industrial driven research, we mean researches that is not only useful and beneficial to people based on the five principal elements of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* but facilitates industrial usage by means of which job are provided, economy boosted and sustainable development guaranteed. Besides, the intended research must be, based on the principle of *al-Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, environmental friendly since anything that alter the nature or rather the nature of the atmosphere and its contents negatively cannot be compliant with the fundamental principles of *al-Maqasid al-Shari'ah*.

Postgraduate studies and programmes in Muslim Nations: the ideals and realities

According to available global demography, the Muslim population is put between 1.7 billion or 1/4 of the world population. The most disheartening part of it is that the annual GDP of all the 57 Muslim nations is less than 2trillion USD whereas America alone has a GDP of 10.4 trillion USD. Furthermore, while China has an annual GDP of 5.7 trillion, Japan on the other hand has 3.5 trillion, Germany and

India have 2.1 and 3 trillion USD respectively based on purchasing power parity (PPP). Despite the large number of Muslims, particularly the youth as well as vast resources endowed their nations by God, less than 5% of global products and services are produced and rendered by them. The question that may well be posed, therefore, is that, 'are Muslims poor because of the current state of education and research output in their nations?' The answer is in the affirmative considering a number of issues or factors. Nations are poor not because they lack resources but due to lack of ideas. Ideas not money or resources eradicate poverty. This further establishes the fact that Muslim nations are poor because of lack of functional industrial based research.

In all the 57 OIC member states, there are less than 700 universities (invariably for 1.7 billion Muslims) whereas India with a population of about 1.2 billion has a total of 8,407 universities. Available data show that the US has 5,758 universities. The gap is as wide as the gap between the West and the East in terms of development and quality of life. It is therefore clear, that while the rest of the world is giving priority attention to education and functional research, Muslims on the other hand are paying lip service to it. The result is what we are now seeing all around us. While the Muslim world has only managed to produce 8 Nobel Laureates over the past 109 years, the Jews with a population of about 14 million people across the globe have produced 167. No wonder therefore, that from schoolboys to university dons, question about what is wrong with the Muslims have been raised across the globe.

Findings made through this study reveal that most Muslims nations only pay lip service to education and fail to realise the vital roles it plays in nation building. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of these nations do not pay appropriate attention to research funding by way of grants, scholarships, loans and awards and accolades for ground breaking research. The study further shows that Malaysia and few other members of the 57 OIC states pay serious attention to it and no wonder therefore that it (Malaysia) is becoming the intellectual and commercial hub of the Muslim world in particular and the world as a whole. The most appalling and pathetic part of it is that, some of these states rather than investing in education and attracting best brain into their universities and colleges prefer to invest in entertainment/sport industries by buying clubs in Europe and elsewhere which would not boost their economy nor aid sustainable development of their respective countries. The implication of this as it has been observed over the years, is that the bulk of the labour forces of the affected nations are expatriates drawn majorly from Europe and America. Besides, those nations are rendezvous for finished goods produced in other countries. The question that may well be posed, one that is germane and apposite to

the present study is 'can a country attain sustainable development when close to 80% of her labour force are expatriates? Another poser closely related to that is 'can a nation develop without developing her citizens with the needed skills for nation building? And finally, 'can there be sustainable development without functional and industrial driven research? Obviously, the answers to the questions are No! The onus is therefore on the authorities in the Muslim nations to give priority attention to education in general and research in particular. This is imperative given the fact that no serious (ground breaking) research could be done without fund and it is always difficult for scholars or researchers to unravel their curiosity or ideas without funding bearing in mind the paucity of their income.

It was realised in the course of the study that one major problem with most of the Muslim nations is the availability of natural resources in abundance particularly the crude oil which had rendered their citizens to be indolent. Of course, natural resources are special blessings, yet special blessings or success need to be managed for if it is not properly managed it may turn to curse rather than blessings as it is the case in many of the oil rich states around the world; majority of which are Muslim populated nations.

One of the prominent challenges to functional and industrial driven research therefore in the 'Ummah of today, is the life of ease they are headlong into. The situation is pathetic such that if it is allowed by Islam to hire someone to be praying on ones behalf some Muslims could have been happily doing that. How then can one, under this pomp and pageantry think and engage in serious time consuming and stressful endeavour. In his *Time Management in Islam* Mustafa Tahan laments that while people in the West combine day and night to pursue their livelihood, Muslims today unlike their forebears use a greater part of their day to sleep. There is therefore need for collective/concerted resolve by those in authority as well as their citizens to overcome this apathy. Perhaps Muslim oil rich nations need to reflect for a little while and ask themselves a fundamental question. What is going to become of those states if tomorrow an alternative to petroleum as a major source of energy is discovered? Now that many countries are pursuing and are already using bio-fuel as an alternative source of power to petroleum what survival strategy are the oil rich monolithic economy (states) putting in place? The questions are inexhaustible. A discerning mind could therefore be able to see the urgent need for functional and industrial driven research.

The prospects and challenges of functional and industrial driven research among Muslims

There are several challenges mitigating functional and industrial driven research in Muslim world of today. However, much as there are challenges there are equally

opportunities that could be exploited which only need visionary leadership. Prominent among the challenges are:

v ***Political instability***

One major problem across the Muslim world today is that of political instability and leadership tussle. The recent/on-going Arab spring is an eloquent evidence of political turmoil in the Muslim world. There cannot be development without political stability for this is a *sine qua non* for establishing a congenial atmosphere not only for education and research but for socio-economic development of a nation. There is no gain saying the fact that all the developed nations around the world are politically stable. To do functional and industrial driven research, Muslim nations need to be politically stable and hence, the need to allow the rule of law to take its proper course in public sphere. Recourse could be taken to the teachings of Islam on public administration by following the prophetic precepts and exemplary styles of the *Khulafa' Rashidun*.

v ***Corruption***

Corruption is a hydra headed dragon or cankerworm that had eaten deep down into the body polity of several Muslim nations which has wrung and wrung them down from the ladder of developed nations. It is however unfortunate, that this is the obtainable situation in spite of Islamic teachings against it. Hence, proper adherence to the principles of Islam is the right solution to this problem.

v ***Inadequate funding***

Funding is a vital aspect of research and in fact education as well as every other matter. However, many Muslim nations have failed to give adequate and appropriate attention to funding education and research. There is no excuse whatsoever for Muslim nations not to give adequate attention to education based on the teachings of Islam and equally as most of them are oil rich states. Besides, ignorance is a noble disease, while it helps other religions to grow it kills Islam and the Muslims. Investing in education is investing in the future and ensuring growth and development of a nation.

v ***Lack of conducive environment***

It is not surprising that most of the Muslim nations are not conducive for learning and research owing to problems or challenges earlier mentioned. Political instability, corruption and improper funding will no doubt, sum up to unsuitable environment. Erratic power supply, dilapidated social infrastructure and public utility are all the end result of maladministration and corruption. Hence, solution must be proffered to

them in order to pave way for functional education and industrial driven research and thereby sustainable development.

v *Problem of brain drain*

It is very common nowadays that most of the Muslim scholars and intellectuals owing majorly to the political instability and economic situations in their respective nations look for greener pasture especially in Europe and America. This is a serious problem as professionals who are supposed to constitute skilled workers, technocrats and leaders in their countries and ensure their economic well-being and sustainable development are mostly at large. The only way by which the situation could be reversed is to create conducive environment and give certain incentives to them to return home. By so doing, the brain drain could be turned to brain gain as those in Diaspora return home to make laudable contribution to the betterment of their lands.

v *Attitudinal behaviour*

It has been observed in the subsequent paragraphs, that free access to fund, thanks to natural resources especially the crude oil had rendered a great number of Muslim youths to be indolent. This is further buttressed by the quote from Muhammad Asad about the present situation in the Muslim world and life. The Muslim youths most particularly from the oil rich nations need to take time to reflect on the questions posed earlier about their preparation for eventual scrapping of crude oil as a major source of energy.

v *External interference*

Whether ruse or reality, several people are of the opinion that the situation in the Muslim world is masterminded by certain external forces. Such people are apt at giving example of war against terrorism as a war against Islam and the Muslims, and therefore an attempt to derail and draw them back from having a focus. For example, it was mentioned that before 9/11 most Muslim universities used to offer scholarship or tuition free education to their students. However, after the dastardly act had occurred, all that had stopped. Neo-colonization which is an attempt by the old colonial masters to still maintain their grip on their old colonies for economic, social and political reasons is observed to be part of the challenges while the 'Ummah is yet to overcome the effect of imperialism itself.

v *Lack of motivation*

It is a common place that the few Muslim youths who have flair for independent studies and strenuous work lack motivation or incentives in form of scholarship, grant and recognition from appropriate authority. This is one of the manifestations of bad governance, corruption and inadequate funding that was mentioned above. This is unfortunately one of the responsibilities of the leaders which could be attended to

by well organised *Zakat* and *Sadaqah*, *Waqf* and other related systems if they have not become moribund.

v *Having alternative source*

Since most of the Muslim nations are blessed with abundant natural resources which yield ready income with little to no efforts on their part and since such income could be used to acquire whatever is it that they needed from other nations especially from Europe, America and China, they give up the urge to struggle and give in to indolence. The value of human life lies in his/her contribution to the well-being of humanity. No wonder therefore, that the Prophet establishes that the best of men is he who brings the best of benefit to them. The wisdom in this dictum needs to be understood by the Muslim youths of the contemporary times.

Tailoring functional/industrial research for sustainable development

Each nation and indeed every society has her specific area of priority at a particular time. No wonder therefore, that education policy, vision and objective of an individual state change from time to time owing to evaluation and the need of the moment. It is high time, therefore, for Muslim nations to direct or focus their researches towards industrialisation in order to create jobs, alleviate poverty, improve standard of living of their subjects and ensure sustainable development. To achieve all these, there is need to create congenial or enabling environment, stable political, social and economic environment, award of scholarships, research grants, soft loans to university lecturers and their students, give recognition to laudable achievements by way of awarding laurels and accolades to those who deserve it. Above all, experts from other parts of the world should be attracted to their universities and colleges in order to tap from their experience and expertise. To do this, as earlier observed, a good condition of service, congenial atmosphere and state of the art facilities must be provided.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, we have examined the situation in the Muslim world with regards to graduate studies and the need for functional industrial driven research. The findings revealed among others, that the overall GDP of all the so-called Muslim nations is far less than certain individual nations like the US, China, Japan, India and Germany. The total number of universities in the 57 member states of OIC is also embarrassingly less than those of India and the US yet there is no basis for comparing the quality of human and material resources in the universities of the Muslim world of today with those of others. In conclusion, based on the observations mentioned above, the differences between the Muslim world and the

West in terms of development and quality of life of their respective citizenry is a manifestation of the differences between their educational policy and research output. Answers as to why this is the obtained were provided and recommendations were also given. It is pertinent for authorities in the Muslim nations to reverse the present situation and give education and research funding the priority attention it deserves in order to create jobs, alleviate poverty, improve the quality of living of their subjects and facilitate sustainable development of their respective nations. The present state of zero production and over dependence on crude oil and on other nations need to be reviewed. The problem of brain drain could be turned to brain gain by providing congenial atmosphere and making condition of service attractive such that not only would their citizens abroad be encouraged to return home to make their contribution but expatriates would equally be enticed to serve humanity via their institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the finding made so far, the following recommendations are made; that:

- ***Political stability***

There should be a collective resolve on the part of all the stakeholders in order to ensure sustainable development. Political institution should be built based on the political precepts of the Prophet and those of his companions.

- ***Appropriate/adequate funding of education and research***

The fiscal policy of individual Muslim nation should make adequate provision for education and research and misappropriation of such fund should be prevented by appropriate law and in the event of breach, they should be punished.

- ***Jihad against corruption***

War should be waged against corruption by prevention and punishment of whosoever defaults no matter how highly placed and respected he might be in the society.

- ***Islamization of the body existing knowledge***

While the body of the existing knowledge should be Islamized, new ones should be cultivated and disseminated according to the precepts of Islam. However, caution should be exercised not to be over engrossed in the Islamisation project to the utter neglect of cultivation of new ones as it should be borne in mind that others would stop cultivating new knowledge. It is true that knowledge is colourless, timeless and non-ideological bias, yet, it assumes the culture and ideology of the people and environment under which it is cultivated. In essence, much attention should be paid

to cultivation of knowledge rather than islamising those cultivated by others.

- ***Reversing brain drain to brain gain***

While congenial environment should be provided for scholars to contribute to their economies, those who had migrated should be invited back home with incentives so that they may contribute to their economies with additional experience they have garnered abroad.

- ***Creating enabling environment***

This includes political stability, attractive condition of service, state of the art facilities, security of life and properties, functional public utilities, etc all of which should be catered for in order to facilitate sustainable development via education and functional industrial driven research. This will help to retain the professional and even attract expatriate to contribute to sustainable development of the nations.

- ***Mentoring***

Professors or university and college dons should try to mentor the up-coming generation of scholars who are going to take over from them as a kind of succession plan aimed at sustainable development of their respective nations and humanity as a whole.

- ***Awards and recognitions for laudable contributions***

As a means of encouragement and incentive, those who excel in their chosen field and or careers should be recognised and awarded laurel and accolades. This will encourage others.

- ***Establishment of more universities and colleges***

Based on the result avail by this study, the Muslim world is far short of the number of universities and colleges to meet up with the education and research need of the Muslim world hence, while the existing ones should be upgraded there is need for more universities and colleges to be established.

- There should be technical and academic exchange between Muslim nations and beyond in order to exchange ideas and cross fertilize them.

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