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IS RENAISSANCE POSSIBLE IN ISLAMIC WORLD TODAY?

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Why have I put a question mark? Is there doubt about it? Yes, very much. It would be too simplistic to assume that potential for such a change already exist and it is only a push that is needed to bring about renaissance in the Islamic world. It did not happen even in 19th century when conditions were more enthusiastic, if not outright congenial. Very complex forces are working in contemporary world to admit this kind of change. Any simplistic assumption would not help. I myself stand for renaissance and would like to lead any such movement but I refuse to yield to oversimplifying things which only lead to frustration.

What is renaissance? Renaissance was, to begin with, a literary and architectural movement which began in Florence, Italy in early 16th century. The classical forms prevalent in early Greek period were adopted and they became quite popular. Soon it spread to may European cities it was forms adopted from pre-Christian period, in fact from Roman period when humanistic philosophies were prevalent and no doctrinal Constraints prevented free expressions.

It was so because Christianity, under Roman influences became more superstitious and church. Catholic church had become highly authoritarian and imposed so many doctrinal constraints and hence renaissance movement came as a great relief especially for creative writers, painters and architects. It was a period when a new consciousness was emerging in Europe and great writers, painters and architects were involved in ushering in this movement.

The conditions were very different in Islam and Islamic world. Islam came to create a new consciousness, almost revolutionary in approach with great emphasis on justice and equality. It brought an era of knowledge so much so that the leading thinkers of the time described everything that existed before Islam as an era of ignorance and darkness and the conditions obtaining in Rome before Christianity was very different from the one that obtained in the Arab world before Islam.

The Arabs hardly had knowledge of philosophy or science or arts and architecture before Islam. Most of them could not even count beyond hundred. In all there were not more than 12 persons in Mecca who could read and write. They ere highly proficient only in one form of art i.e. poetry and they had developed their oratorical skills. That is why when Islam came into existence with its great emphasis on knowledge the pre-Islamic era was described by Arabs as an era of darkness and ignorance.

Thus they had hardly anything to learn and revive from pre-Islamic Arab traditions except poetry. It was done during the Umayyad period when pre-Islamic poetry was revived in the form of *Kitab al-Ghina'* in several volumes. There was noting else to learn

from or revive from pre-Islamic knowledge. There was no formal philosophy or paintings or architecture as architecture in desert was not possible, Thus renaissance, as far As Arab society was concerned, was not possible.

Yes, we all know the great impact of knowledge that was borrowed from Greek sources during the early Abbasid period which had on the Muslim mind. A House of Wisdom (**Bayt al-Hikmah**) was established in Baghdad. As there was nothing to revive from pre-Islamic history, the Abbasids, when they came to know about Greek knowledge of philosophy, mathematics and other sciences, they bought the books giving the Roman rulers tons of Gold loaded on several camels and brought these books from translation into Arabic loaded on hundreds of camels.

For Romans of that time these books were of not much use as they were not interested in knowledge. Their condition was very similar to that of pre-Islamic Arabs who were interested only in either *shajarah* tree of their clans and tribes which they could recount orally or in poetry. They could neither read nor write. Now the Arabs as well as non-Arab Muslims were part of the greatest empire of the world and hence ignorance would be a shame. They must acquire as much knowledge as they could, if not from indigenous sources than from foreign sources.

Also, Qur'an had laid great emphasis on *'ilm* (knowledge) and so they discovered rich inheritance of knowledge from Greek sources and they decided to acquire it and translate it into Arabic. Thus when knowledge is needed it is acquired from whatever sources it is available, great universities came into existence with libraries spread over buildings running into several kilometers. It could be the envy of any learned people in the world.

Again it was during this period that a large number of people adopted what came to be known as **I'tizal** a word which is said to be derived from Hasan Basri's pronouncement of the words *itazil minni* (i.e. get away from me) when he persisted in asking one question. Thus thereafter they came to be known as *mu'tazilah* i.e. those asked to get away from Imam Basri.

Mu'tazilah are also known as rationalists of Islam as they believe in accepting any thing only if it satisfies intellectual criteria. They maintain that something is good not because shari'ah says it is good but because reason says it is good and something is bad not simply because shari'ah says it is bad but because reason established it to be bad. The tradionalists maintain just the opposite i.e. something is bad just because shari'ah says it is bad even if reason says it is good.

It is also important to note that Muslims did not simply adopted this knowledge from Greek and Roman sources merely superficially but enriched it through their own creative sources and produced great philosophers, mathematicians and astronomers and physicians and medical experts and so on. The traditional Ulama were not happy by revival of this knowledge as for them anything outside Qur'an was mere heresy. Thus during this period heated debates took place and one of the great theologians Imam al-

Ghzzali who wrote a remarkable book *ihya' al-Ulum* i.e. Revivification of Knowledge which till today is an important source of traditional theology.

Once Ghazzali wrote a book *Thafut al-Falashifa* (i.e. Bewilderment of Philosophers) to ridicule Ibn Rushd, a great philosopher from Spain. Ibn Rushd immediately responded by writing a book *Tahafut Tahafut al Falasipha i.e. Bewilderment of Bewilderment of Philosophers.*

Thus it will be seen that there was great debate during those days between rationalists (philosophers) and traditionalists and ''Ilm al-Kalam came into existence. 'Ilm al-Kalam stands for dialectics and the traditional ulama used rationalists own weapon i.e. reason to attack them. Even in Europe same thing had happened After Reformation Counter-Reformation movement had been launched by Church.

In the beginning of this essay I had raised the question is Renaissance possible in the Muslim world today and answered this question saying it is most difficult and most challenging task. In fact the Islamic world has already seen the era of renaissance. This is the contrast between the Islamic world and the western world. Islamic world began with renaissance and fell into an era of darkness whereas western world began with *jahiliyyah* (an era of darkness) and launched its renaissance in early 16^{th} century and once it launch ed its renaissance, continued with it and does not need another one now.

Unfortunately Islamic world began with it, Europe inherited it and now is in need of knowledge from Europe. A lender needs to borrow now. During Abbasid rule the rulers fully patronized renaissance. They spent great fortune to transfer knowledge into Arabic, the then *lingua franca* and people had to learn Arabic to acquire advanced knowledge in social and physical sciences.

So most important question was why the Muslim world lost its initiative while the Western world seized it? There are number of reasons. While the traditional Ulama were taking control of the Islamic world the rationalists were rebelling against the Church and trying to seize control. In the Muslim world the Mullas seized control as Civil wars among Muslim rulers seriously weakened the Abbasid rulers and Fatimid rulers – a Shi'ah dynasty ruling over Egypt was weakened by the machinations of the Abbasids.

The Abbasids were finally destroyed by the Mongols of Central Asia in 1258 when lakhs of Muslims were killed in most barbaric manner. Now for the Muslim world, not only its glory destroyed but security became main problem and in such uncertain conditions conservative forces took over and many maintain that doors of ijtihad were closed. Ibn Taymiyyah issued his famous fatwa on jihad in those days. Thus ijtihad was replaced by jihad and sword destroyed pen.

After Abbasids many regional powers came into existence with great glory but none could match resources of the Abbasid regime. The noted historian Toynbee describes Abbasid state as universal state of Islam and most of the regional states paid their tribute to Abbasids (except the Fatimids). The Abbasids had given not only sense of security but

also sense of pride to all Muslims and such conditions are required to achieve great heights of knowledge. Today we see same thing in the western world: political stability and abundant resources to put a part of it in research enrichment of knowledge.

Do we see such possibility in Islamic world today? Muslim world is supposedly poor and backward. If we want renaissance we need great resources. First of all we have to achieve hundred percent literacy in Islamic world. However, figures are very disappointing. In the entire Arab world put together less books are read than Greece, a small country in Europe, This shows the extent of illiteracy in the Arab world. In such conditions it is not easy to usher in renaissance in Islamic world.

Also, in other African and Asian countries where Muslims constitute either majority or substantial population like in India, illiteracy is still higher. India has Muslim population of 150 million and but illiteracy and poverty is quite high, higher than one can imagine as convincingly shown by Justice Sacchar Committee constitute by Government of India. Justice Sacchar has shown that Muslims are falling behind Dalits, the lowest and poorest caste of India.

Yet another criteria could be the number of Noble Prizes awarded to Muslim intellectuals especially in social and physical sciences. Muslim laureates in subjects like physics, chemistry, economics and biology is far less than among the Jews who are just few millions in number. In physics there is just one Noble Laureate i.e. Dr. Abdus Salam and just because he happens to be An Ahmadi Muslim, Muslims remained indifferent to his receiving this honour.

Let us remember we need very different approach for ushering in renaissance – a non-doctrine approach a doctrinaire approach is the very antidote to high achievements in the field of science. Above I have referred to the conflict between theologian Ghazzali and philosopher Ibn Rushd fortunately in this case the philosopher stood his grounds firmly. In many cases they just wilt. The Islamic world today is dominated by theologians who are totally illiterate as far as science is concerned.

If any scientist does some leading research our theologians can issue a fatwa against it and force the scientist to recant. Here I am reminded of a beautiful story written in early seventies by a Pakistani writer **Ghulam Abbas**. Storyline is as follows: Pakistan has decided to send a mission to moon and all preparations are made, date and time for landing moon is fixed, great celebrations are going on and the moment the mission lands the whole nation buts into joy.

However, when these celebrations are going on a theologian issues a fatwa next day that it is a kufr to send mission on moon as it amounts to interfering in Divine matters and this fatwa is followed by more fatwas and many Muslims come out on the street to challenge the moon mission. Some even argue moon is sacred as with it the month of Ramadan and the month of hajj begin and how a human mission can land on it? The progressive Muslims challenge orthodox and soon a civil war breaks out and within a few months whole country is destroyed and only a desert is left. The story ends by some tourists

passing through it on camel and the guide explains to them here was Pakistan which had sent a mission on moon and it was destroyed in civil war between the orthodox and the progressives. Now only this desert is left. Here is the ruins of mosque from where fatwa against the moon mission was issued.

Something of it did happen and the story came out literary true. Zia-ul-Haque captured power, issued the Hudud Ordinance followed by the Ordinance punishing a person with death for insulting the Prophet and now Pakistan is virtually is controlled by Taliban who cannot tolerate any dissent or difference of opinion.

For bringing in renaissance deep knowledge, existence of differences of opinion and conflicting views is highly necessary. Knowledge advances through contestations and not through conformity. And our theologians want perfect conformity with their views and any dissent is strongly condemned and lands one in hell. Our mullahs and maulanas cannot tolerate any other interpretation of Qur'anic verses.

Each sect of Islam claims monopoly of paradise and condemns all others to hell. How can Muslims become harbinger of renaissance in such despicable conditions? In India Syed Ahmad Khan who founded MAO College (Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College) in Aligarh was great supporter of modern science and he described science as work of God and the Qur'an as word of God and he maintained, and rightly so, how word of God can contradict work of God i.e. Qur'an and science cannot contradict each other.

Even then the mullahs condemned Syed Ahmed Khan as a *nacheri* i.e. one who worships nature and considers *nacher* (nature) as superior to religion. Today our Ulama may not oppose science openly and blatantly as in the 19th century but they have not been able to reconcile with it either. They still feel religion as superior to science and fundamentally contradictory to each other.

For them the mixture of religion, culture and primitive ideas about nature represents final truth and anyone who challenges this truth challenges Allah's authority. The problem is these ulama think their fallible human opinion is divine opinion and any deviation from it is deviation from Divine opinion. Any rebellion against them is rebellion against Allah. They do not allow any change any the laws formulated by human beings in their own circumstances and on the basis of their own understanding of the Qur'an.

Today the Shari'ah laws are causing lot of problems, particularly to women. These shari'ah laws are biased against women particularly because of medieval cultural biases. There are very few Ulama who admit this and consider these laws as immutable. Any attempt to remove gender bias is also considered deviation from 'divine '. Becau7se of their medieval cultural bias and only bookish knowledge of shari'ah they think what was written hundreds of years ago was final and admits no change.

If changes have occurred in these laws in may Islamic countries it is due to efforts of secular rulers and in the midst of resistance from theologians. There were hardly anyone who supported the change. In many cases after the change in regime the orthodox laws

were brought back into operations. The progressive theologians like Muhammad Abduh were marginalized.

In order to launch renaissance movement not only a future vision is required but also theologians need to be equipped with contemporary developments in the field of knowledge. Our Ulama are not, even by exception a physicist or a chemist or a mathematician. They do not allow us even to prepare a lunar calendar and insist on sighting a moon with naked eye.

All fatwas are issued on the basis of text of the medieval books and no one bothers to reflect on new problems in new context. Even today in our madrasa courses no change is thought to be necessary and let alone in matters of *manqulat* no change has been made in case of ma'qulaat also , Under ma'qulaat too we still teach theories of Plato and Aristotle which are of historical importance only for students of rational sciences.

Our ulama in India (and same is the case in other Muslim countries) still strongly resist any attempt for modernization of madrasa education even if they are assured that as far as religious education is concerned it will not be touched. Hundreds of millions of rupees are lying untouched and going waste allocated for the purpose. Also madrasas are run on sectarian lines and each sect has its own empire of madrasas and mosques.

It is also common that if triple divorce is pronounced in one sitting, they would rather advise the couple to go to Ahl-e-Hadis to solve their problem rather than change their own stand. How can two sects have two opposite stands in the matter? Our efforts to codify Islamic Personal Law so as to minimize gender discrimination and bring into practice the Islamic spirit of gender justice, is being met with strong resistance and as some kind of conspiracy.

Is it the way of bringing in renaissance in Islam?

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