The Negative Image of Muslims

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Never before the Muslim Ummah, who once were at the forefront of science, technology, and innovation, had a lower esteem than the present time. The commonly held perspective contends that 9/11 destroyed the Muslim image. While that tragic incident was a major contributing factor to painting all Muslims with a broad brush as terrorists, there were forces in action to defame Muslims and the Muslim world long before that.

Orientalists like Bernard Lewis, and many before him, had openly attacked Muslims, referring them as terrorists and violent people. Unfortunately, Muslims did not get the platform to refute these blatant lies and allegations. The late Professor Edward Said, a Christian, wrote the only remarkable repudiation of these false contentions.

**Several factors have contributed to this negative image**. Among them are a lack of true democracies in Muslim countries, colonialism, converting the great Muslim universities that were teaching secular and religious sciences to Madrassas that focus only on religious studies. Some allege that these Madrassas are the root cause of extremist ideologies. However, **some Muslims have inherent self-destructive tendencies that have compounded to building negative images.**

Lack of democracy in the Muslim world is the trend which started much earlier in Islamic history. Democracy did not last beyond the fourth Caliph, and the Caliphate became a dynasty. **Luxury and boundless wealth corrupted those with absolute power and gradually weakened the Muslim empire**. Another primary reason for downfall was the authoritarian and dictatorial rule in many Muslim countries, including theocratic Iran, resulting in the regression from the basic Islamic principles of greater freedom for the individuals, including women.

Muslim-majority countries have under performed in economic and human development indicators such as gross national income per capita, literacy rate, and life expectancy. Western colonization of Muslim countries and on-going Western exploitation of their resources was one of  the root causes of this deterioration. **In 1700 A.D., India, under its Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb, constituted 27% of the world economy. Following India's colonization, the situation reversed entirely due to the British looting, plundering, and transferring of its riches and resources to England**. All Western empires did the same to their colonies, most of which were Muslim countries. Under the guise of civilizing these barbarians, colonial powers, mainly the British, demonized, enslaved, imprisoned, heavily taxed, and slaughtered their colonies' inhabitants.

Undoubtedly, some ignorant Muslim factions have committed extremist acts of killing innocent people, whose majority of the victims happened to be Muslims, in God's name. These terrorists do not realize that their inhumane crimes not only deny them entry into heaven, but lead them to hell, according to Quran ([5:32](https://www.islamicity.org/quransearch/?q=5:32)), which states that taking of innocent lives is a sin that God does not forgive.

The factors discussed so far contributing to Muslims' negative image are present in the existing literature's vast body. However, **what is lacking is an account of Muslims' self-introspection, an examination of their self-inflicted failures, causing an undesirable image of 1.8 billion followers of Islam's faith.**

**This article focuses on the Golden Age of Muslims, followed by the causes of its decline, and prospects.**

During the early years of Islam, for nearly eight centuries, when Europe lived in 'dark ages,' Muslims reigned over a vast empire extending from the Near East (Samarkand, Uzbekistan) to Western Europe (Cordoba, Spain). The rulers (Caliphs) took great interest in promoting education in science and technology. **Primary think tanks (Houses of Wisdom) flourished in the empire in Baghdad, Iraq, and Cordoba, Spain, which attracted scholars from all over the world who spoke all languages and practicing all religions**.

The force behind these initiatives was Islam's emphasis on knowledge and tolerance of other religions. Before these developments, Greece and Rome were the center of scientific knowledge and activity. With the advent of Islam, Baghdad and other Islamic cities replaced them.

Between the 8th and 11th centuries, creative Muslim scholars enlightened the world with their achievements and contributions in diverse fields such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, cartography, agriculture etc. **Scholars and thinkers enjoyed freedom of thought because of their independence from political authority**. The Muslims became scientific innovators with originality and productivity. Muslim scientists considered their work in the service of humanity to be a sacred act of worship. At the apex of its glory, around the 10th century, Cordoba, the capital of Muslim Spain, had pavements, street lighting, three hundred public baths, parks, palaces, one hundred thousand houses, and 70 libraries. One library had half a million books, more than all the books in many countries of the 10th century Europe. **Muslim physicians performed complicated surgeries 600 years earlier than in Europe**. In the late 10th century, Muslim scientists invented spherical trigonometry (indispensable for space sciences) and differential and integral mathematics. They also discovered the force of gravitation, blood circulation, laws of motion, and made progress in the field of astronomy. **There was hardly a field of knowledge where Muslims did not research, think, investigate, explore, or invent something exemplary**.

During 7th to 15th centuries thousands of Muslim scientists, philosophers and scholars illuminated the world (during the dark ages of Europe) with their contribution in every field of knowledge, and the world rightly called them the foundation for Renaissance in 15th century Europe

Some of the most well-known medieval scholars were**Al-Khwarizmi** (780-840) from Uzbekistan, who was the father of algebra, **Al-Zhahravi** (936–1013) from Cordoba Spain, who introduced surgery as a separate specialty, **Ibn Haitham** (965-1040 ) from Basra, Iraq, was one of the most eminent physicists whose contributions to optics and scientific methods are outstanding, **Al-Razi** (864**-**932) fromIran was a physician whose books were taught in European medical schools for 500 years**, Jabir Bin Hayyan**(725-803) from Khurasan who introduced several analytical methods in chemistry, **Ibn Sina** (980-1037) from Bukhara, Uzbekistan, who compiled at a very young age the entire medical knowledge available from ancient times in his encyclopedic work on medicine called Qanoon fil Tib (The Canon of Medicine), **Ibn Rushd**  (1128 - 1198) from Cordoba, Spain, who made remarkable contributions in philosophy, logic, medicine, and jurisprudence, **Al Biruni** (973- 1048) from Uzbekistan, who was an expert in Astronomy and translated many books from Sanskrit. **Al Battani**(858-929) from Harran, Turkey, was another great astronomer and mathematician. **Al Farabi** (870-950) from Turkey was an expert in philosophy.

**Al Ghazali** (1058-1122) from Iran was a great Theologian and a philosopher;  **Al Idrisi** (1099-1166) was from Ceuta, Spain, worked in Sicily with King Rogers and wrote books on geography;  **Al Mawardi** (972-1058 ) from Basra, Iraq was a political scientist. **Ibn Al Baitar**(1197-1248) from Malaga, Spain, was one of the greatest botanists. **Al-Kindi** (800-873) from Kufa Iraq was a great philosopher. **Ibn Zuhr** (1091-1161) from Seville-Spain was a great Surgeon; **Omar Khayyam** (1044-1123) from Iran was a mathematician, astronomer, and a famous poet. **Nasir Al-Din Al Tusi**  (1201-1274) from Iran was an astronomer.**Ibn- Nafees** (1231-1288) from Damascus discovered blood circulation long before William Harvey. **Ibn-Batuta** (1304-1369) from Morocco is one of the earlier world travelers who traveled 75,000 miles by sea and land, **Jalaluddin Rumi** (1207-1273) from Afghanistan was one of the great Sufi philosophers. **Ibn Khaldoon** (1332-1395) from Tunisia wrote world history, a brilliant scholar who introduced the science of sociology; he has no equal for any age or country (Encyclopedia Britannica).

From the early days of Islam, until the 10th century A.D., the educational and political systems were dominated by the rationalist **Mutazilites**, who sought to combine faith and reason in contrast to the dogmatic**Asharites**. Some Muslim scholars of the 10th century highly criticized Ibn Sina and other scholars. They argued that analytical studies, secular sciences, and philosophy would create doubts and confusion about religion, and therefore, there was no need for teaching them. Ashari intellectuals like Ghazali, who in his 'Incoherence of the Philosophers' had labeled such knowledge as 'Kufr.' The seemingly rational philosophy of Ibn Sina got denounced as it was felt it deprived God of His supreme power, who is responsible for all natural phenomena. Today, some university graduates believe that earthquakes are God's punishment for sinful behavior, not a natural phenomenon.

Ibn Rushd challenged Al Ghazali by saying that if causal relation is secondary and everything comes from divine will, there is nothing in the world left to learn and know. He refutes Ghazali's argument by stating that there is no conflict between science and religion, and proved his point by quoting the Quranic verse, "Will they not ponder upon the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and all that God created." ([7:185](https://www.islamicity.org/quransearch/?q=7:185)) However, his ideas got rejected, and the great Madrassas (universities) teaching the scientific and technological knowledge abandoned them.

By the 11th century, the Asharite's dominance brought in a powerful ulema-state alliance that marginalized the Mutazilite intellectuals. **By supporting Asharites, the Caliphs ensured their self-interest in preserving dictatorial rule**. In the 18th century, the Wahabi/Saudi alliance revived it.

Gradually all Muslim universities of the pre-11th century adopted the curriculum of Nizamia University, established by Nizam-ul-Mulk. Patronized by the Seljuk dynasty, the ruler appointed Imam Ghazali as the head of the institute. **Little by little, the Quran's religious teachings, Hadeeth, and Sharia, replaced the natural sciences and philosophy curriculum**. Eventually, the Seljuk model of the ulema-state alliance became prevalent in all Muslim countries of the world.

**The madrasa system damaged the rational thinking, creativity, and resulted in the demise of independent thinkers**. While all medieval Muslim scientists had expertise in secular and religious sciences, the new Muslim graduates from the 14th century onward only mastered spiritual knowledge.

By the 13th century, Europe began emerging from the dark ages by separating church from state and establishing world-class universities that attracted independent scholars. In the following 500 years, Western Europe experienced the Renaissance, which contributed to intellectual and economic strength and military power. The Muslim world did not experience any similar revolutions and became militarily and politically weaker. **By the 19th century, Muslims declined from the most progressive to the world's most backward nations**.

The Ottoman Empire, which was the most powerful empire of the world, lost its status as Muslims became backward in science and technology. The Europeans badly beat them with their advanced arms and technology.

**The first printing press emerged in Gutenberg, Germany, in 1436. Based on some Fatwas, the Ottoman Caliph, in 1485, declared the printing press Haram**. Consequently, Muslims did not use this great medium of communication. **The Muslim world was thus stranded for more than 300 years in scientific development just by one Fatwa**. Another instance of theology's priority was the **destruction of the astronomical observatory in Samarkand in 1449, and Istanbul in 1580**. Just like the Ottoman empire, the great Mughal and Safavid empires completely neglected the teaching of science and technology. By the 17th century, all Muslim countries were under the Western empires. The entire Muslim world faced the same calamities.

Three hundred years ago, Europe invented the clock. **Ulama declared the calculation of prayer times by watches was Haram**. Eighty years ago, they announced the use of loudspeakers for Adhan, and Salat Haram in the Indian subcontinent. **Even in the 21st century, many Muslim clerics do not accept astronomical calculations for moon sighting and celebrate the Eid frequently on two different days in the same town**. So, it is evident that we are slow to accept change even when it is for the better.

Most graduates from Madrasas in Muslim countries find poorly paid jobs in mosques, shrines of saints, and a few others, in teaching institutions. Some of them become radical due to misinterpretation of Quranic verses and dogmatic thinking. The religious leaders are "set against the modern education, and Madrasas contribute to an economic downfall and poverty. **The most significant problem with Madrasas is that they emphasize rote learning and suppression of critical thinking**. Religious organizations like Salafis, Deobandis, Barelvis, and others are concerned only with how the Muslim community should practice Islam.

Notable Islamic scholars like Jamaluddin Afghani, Shaikh Abdu, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Syed Ahmad Khan, Fazlur Rahman, and others pleaded for a meaningful reform in the Islamic thought. Unfortunately, Ulama did not listen to their voices and called them even apostates.

Muslim religious scholars have a firm belief that the purpose of life in this world is to spend time in prayers to attain a high place in Jannah. They do not believe that inventing the rapid transport system, advances in farming, technological advances like the iPhone, and medical advances will help get a place in Jannah. **The early Muslim scholars understood and regarded scientific advances as a service to humanity and a form of worship to please God**, who bestowed humans with intelligence to make progress.

Due to a lack of knowledge about their heritage, many highly educated Muslims regard the Western scholars as their preceptors. Because of this sense of inferiority, the Muslim world has become incapable of serious thinking, critical inquiry, and innovation.

The Muslims educated in the Western world know about the Western scholars and their achievements. It is a great shame that they know little or nothing about the Muslim scholars' intellectual achievements and their contributions to the world civilization between the 7th and 15th centuries.

The status of the Muslim Ummah is of great concern to all the Muslim intellectuals. **No one can deny that the Muslim Ummah occupies a position at the lowest rungs of the world's ladder**. There are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims with just 500 scientists per million, while developed countries have 5,000 scientists per million. Muslims only have 3 Noble prize winners in sciences, while the Jews with 14 million have 200 Noble Laureates.

**Muslims in the present world are poor and backward in education, especially in science and technology**. Hundreds of thousands of children are getting only religious education in school. Simultaneously, tiny non-Muslim countries are so advanced that they export technology, medicine, and other needed goods to all Muslim countries. The Muslims' low levels of literacy are responsible for the poverty, the backwardness, and the deplorable conditions under which most of the Muslims live in the Muslim countries.

**It is time for the Muslim Ummah to wake up from their more than five centuries of deep sleep, resulting in the loss of their leadership status in the world and preparing our youth to excel in science and technology**. After all, our religious teachings dictate education as indicated by the Quranic commands and our Prophet's Dua to Allah SWT (Rabbi Zidni Ilmi), asking Him to increase our knowledge. **We need to study our Muslim scholars of the yesteryears and follow their paths to regain greatness once again**. The world of the twenty-first century is the world of Cloud, Artificial Intelligence, Autonomous Driving, and unlimited, unimaginable future advances. Unless we catch up by updating our knowledge, we will farther fall behind, which will ultimately result in further dependence on neo-colonists.

An increasing number of online universities are popping up worldwide, teaching young Muslims Fiqh and Shariah laws. Even though there is nothing wrong with that, however, it will add very little to the Muslim Ummah's advancement in this world. **Opening online schools where the Muslim youth could learn STEM subjects are equally important**. Ultimately, we need to take very bold and courageous steps in the acquisition of modern knowledge. As Allama Iqbal says: "Pray, fast and perform the pilgrimage and feel that we have discharged our obligation to Islam. That is the easy part. Doing all those things is only a starting point for a much larger obligation: to keep advancing in knowledge of things' ultimate nature. We should never ignore this larger goal."

**But There Is Hope for The Future**

From an objective perspective, we should be thankful to Europeans who reintroduced science and technologies in Muslim countries, which they had colonized. Because of their influence, Muslims in Indonesia, Turkey, the Indian subcontinent, Iran, Egypt, and several Arab nations became acquainted with modern science's knowledge. Some of these countries are now beginning to produce engineers, doctors, and scientists. Some Muslim countries like Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia are competing with Western countries. Pakistan has made significant progress in the realms of nuclear energy. Turkey has opened 125 new universities, 35 thousand laboratories, and is planning to produce 300,000 research scholars in science and technology. Qatar and UAE have also started new universities with the help of American and European institutions. **It is encouraging to see that in July 2020, UAE launched an experimental satellite to Mars from a launching pad in Japan**. They spent billions of dollars on this mission during the past six years, and I hope, it serves as an inspiration to the Muslim youth and encourage them to earn college degrees in science and technology. UAE collaborated with the University of Arizona, University of Colorado, and the University of California at Berkeley, for this project.

**It is high time that all Muslim nations invest in modern rationalistic education**. They can utilize other countries such as South Korea, China, Singapore, and Taiwan as models. After all, these countries obtained their freedom about the same time as Muslim colonies did. Needless to point out their advances, while most former Muslim colonies have been stagnant. **Indeed, God does not want Muslims to be dependable, miserable, weak, and dependent on Western countries**.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we must emphasize that religion and science are integral parts of human life. Science makes life easy and comfortable, while faith nourishes the human soul. Over the centuries, science and technology have provided humans with numerous comforts of life, while religion has taught us strong moral values such as honesty, integrity, empathy, compassion, and love, and respect for our fellow human beings.

The Islamic civilization did not decline due to the West's rise, but the decline has resulted in an **unchallenged** growth in the West. Many young Muslims think that Islam is against the scientiﬁc advancement. **Our downfall is due to our sheer neglect of Islamic teaching which promotes scientific advancement.**

Ulemas insist that Islam is a faith. Logic and reason play no part in it. But many young Muslims find them confused what should they believe when each sect or subsect of Islam thinks that the other one is wrong?

The fundamental deficiency of modem scientiﬁc education is its inability to integrate education with ethical values. Scientists have developed the capability to eradicate the globe with their stockpile of thousands of nuclear warheads. Still, they seldom use their knowledge of science and technology to alleviate the hunger or improve the health care of disadvantaged people of the world. Accumulation of wealth has become a primary goal of education.

The Secularists Philosophers do not have a concept of promoting universal morality. They primarily protect or safeguard the material interest of groups or corporations and disregard humanity's common interest. The Capitalist Corporate Culture uses adultery and Seduction, which deeply affected society's moral fabrics and dehumanize women. Muslim morality is against the Corporate concept of treating sex and women's body as a marketable commodity.

From the scientific point of view, there is nothing called universal morality. Since, at any chronological age, science deals with relative truth, it cannot give any final opinion on the mode and purpose of creation. God has bestowed us with free will. But this freedom is not absolute. In this limited span of human life, we strive to practice righteousness. The purpose is to balance human nature and the divine purpose of creation. The innate Conscience of humankind is called in the Quran "Self –reproaching Soul", which provides constant moral guidance to humanity in his worldly life. Unfortunately, the exclusive scientific education does not promote this vital aspect of human nature.

The integrated educational system of scientific education and Islamic education will accomplish academic excellence with strong moral values and apply science and technology for the beneﬁt of the entire humanity. We need to protect moral Degeneration, which has now become an integral part of Our civilization.

Muslim countries that have the political and economic resources should work on developing an integrated system. With free-thinking and acting logically and rationally, Muslim nations can produce the scholars and scientists. **"Peoples condition will not be changed until they change what is in themselves" (Quran 13:11).**

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