

DR. A.M.A. AZEEZ MEMORIAL ORATION

MUSLIMS AND EDUCATION: IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE

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B.Ed. (Hons), B.A. (Hons), Ph.D.

Fulbright Professor and Scholar-in-Residence,
Florida International University, Miami (2022)

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Synopsis

This oration reflects on the life and legacy of Marhoom Azeez, a visionary Islamic intellectual, educator, and reformer in Sri Lanka. Drawing personal connections with Azeez, the speaker emphasizes his contributions to modern Islamic education, particularly through his role as Principal of Zahira College and ideologue for institutions like Jamiah Naleemiah. This calls for a critique on the stagnation in Islamic educational systems, highlighting the disconnect between spiritual and secular knowledge. This essay further explores the historical decline of scientific inquiry in the Muslim world post-Golden Age, attributing it to rigid orthodoxy, suppression of rational thought, and overemphasis on rote learning. Contrasting this with the European Enlightenment, he calls for reform, echoing thinkers like Iqbal and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who championed reason and scientific advancement within Islam. There should be a balanced hermeneutical approach to religious texts and a reinvigoration of intellectual tradition among Muslims requiring urgent need for the Muslim world to prioritize critical thinking, scientific innovation, and educational excellence, aiming to reclaim its historical legacy of knowledge and enlightenment in a modern context.

Key Words: A.M.A. Azeez, Colombo Zahira College, Jamiah Naleemiah, Islamic Science, Education, The Quran and Hadith, Modern Islamic Thinkers, Christianity, and Reformation and European Renaissance,

Introduction

It is with immense gratitude and a deep sense of honour that I deliver this year's Dr. A. M. A. Azeez Memorial Oration. I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Foundation and its promoters, especially Mr. Ali Azeez, his son, for considering me over the years for this honour. Although I should have undertaken this task earlier, Alhamdulillah, I am thankful for the opportunity to fulfill this cherished desire today.

Standing before this distinguished audience, commemorating the life and legacy of Marhoom Azeez, I feel a sense of coming full circle. My familiarity with him began in childhood and evolved into a profound personal and intellectual admiration—one that shaped my journey to some extent.

What drew me so deeply to Mr. A. M. A. Azeez? Was it the brilliance of the man himself—or the legacy he built at Zahira College, a beacon of post-colonial education in Sri Lanka? Did I see him as a scion of long-standing Sri Lanka Islamic educators like Sidde Lebbe, T.B. Jayah and others?

I remember my own path diverging early on. Having passed the 5th Standard Government Scholarship Exam from Maligawatte Denham English School (now Darussalam M.V.), I was meant to join Government Central College. Ideally, I wanted to pursue science at Jaffna Central College or Nelliady Central College, but economic constraints made that impossible. My next closest option was Maradana Central College, now Sri Sangaraja M.V. once earned the epithet of the Black Board Jungle of Colombo due to nefarious activities of its pupils —, not an ideal institution to satisfy my aspiration. I longed to ape the privileged two boys of our landlord who were the only attendees from Maligawatte to Zahira College. After all Zahira was the premier institution for Muslim education. As K. Sivathamby mentioned that “in those days, in the eyes of an

average Muslim villager being a student at Zahira mattered even more than being an undergraduate. “After all the boy is studying under Azeez – what better do you need”¹

In many ways, Zahira College gave me more than an education—it gave me an inspiring neighborhood. I could get there for just five cents by taking the CTB bus from Maligawatte to Maradana. Often, I would attend public gatherings and discussions held on School Premises. I vividly recall Mr. Azeez, then the Principal, addressing the audience at prize-giving ceremonies. Sometime in the 1960s—though I can’t recall the exact year—I met him in person after winning a prize at a Meelad Oratory Competition in Ghafoor Hall. I was ushered into his office, where he sat behind a tidy desk, clad in a sharp beige suit. He had a radiant presence, handsome, composed, and deeply intellectual. As the late Mr. M. T. A. Furkhan described, he was truly a “Debonair Principal.”²

Mr. Azeez would often attend activities at the Maligawatte YMMA, located directly opposite the Jumma Masjid. He had co-founded the YMMA in 1950 with the late Haji Lafir M. Cassim, and continued to visit occasionally. During one of these visits, he took notice of me. I had earned a second bachelor’s degree in history from Peradeniya University in 1970 and made a probationary assistant lecturer. A history-minded Mr. Azeez was pleased to see someone following in his footsteps and with someone he could relate to professionally.

Though I acknowledge the vast difference in stature between Mr. Azeez and myself, I can’t help but draw certain parallels. He won the prestigious Exhibition Prize in History in 1929. Coincidentally, I was the next Muslim to win the same prize in 1964, coming right

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1. K. Sivathamby (1973), in (S.H.M Jameel and Ali Azeez Ed:) *A.M.A. Azeez: Early Life and Tributes*, A.M.A. Azeez Foundation, Ali Azeez: Colombo, p.52.
 2. M.T.A. Furkhan, *Ibid*,

after Ex-Minister G. L. Peiris on that year's University Entrants list. Both Azeez and me earned 2nd Class Upper Honours Degrees in History. Yet, the comparison respectfully ends there.

Mr. Azeez entered the esteemed Ceylon Civil Service. I too passed the Ceylon Administrative Service exam in 1971 and was ranked at the top of the list. But unlike him, I declined the offer. In retrospect, I believe Mr. Azeez would have welcomed this decision, as he often encouraged talented individuals to enter academia. He once advised the late Dr. M. A. M. Shukri, who was contemplating civil service, to choose an academic career instead. Mr. Azeez had an uncanny ability to see potential in others and guide them toward meaningful, impactful lives.

Azeez eventually relinquished his prestigious role in the civil service to become the Principal of Zahira College. Coincidentally in March 1983, I was invited by the late A.W.M. Ameer and M.T.A. Furkhan to accept the principalship of Zahira College. Regretfully, I declined due to my commitments as President of the Maligawatte YMMA National Council. Do I regret it now? Perhaps. But I have always believed that the past should remain past.

So, what was the basis of my fascination with Mr Azeez? Should I add that Mr Azeez and I grew closer due to our desire to produce a thorough Muslim history of Sri Lanka? Having initially withdrawn from the opportunity to finish a postgraduate degree on Government Arts Scholarship in St. Catherines College at Cambridge University in 1934, he later continued his quest for a doctorate from London University. He had been extending his registration to complete a Doctorate with the University of London, but this finally expired as he could not meet the deadline for submission of a thesis due to personal and other commitments. That regret he lived with for many years, I believe. Being a history buff, I'm sure that if Mr Azeez had been allowed to complete this doctoral or postgraduate work

at London University, he would have become a world-renowned historian.

Mr Azeez, while at his peak in contributing to the intellectual betterment of the community, passed away in November 1973, which was a huge loss not only to our community but also to our nation. More importantly, his passing came as a significant personal blow to me. As young as I was, I had been building a good rapport with him in his last phase of life, receiving his counselling and advice on collecting information to write a history of the local Muslims. Just a few months before he passed away, he called me to 'Meadow Sweet,' his residence in Barnes Place, to hand over a few books that would interest me, including annual education reports from the collections of his library, which I hear he had started to dismantle. A good collection of his books was sent to the Jamia Naleemiah Library. I was singularly unlucky to see him alive as I left for Monash University in Australia in early 1974 to pursue my Doctoral degree. While in Australia, my thoughts often circled his memory, and I felt how nice it would be if I had the good fortune of consulting him to test my thesis and ideas.

Marhoom Azeez was an Islamic intellectual par excellence, and I can describe him as a walking encyclopedia in common parlance. A voracious reader of English and Tamil, he authored several English and Tamil books and other publications. Sahitya Award was given in 1963 for his Tamil book "Islam in Ceylon." Though concise, his book "West Reappraised" reveals his mindset and guidance to aspiring researchers. At the same time, his contributions to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* and the *Centenary Volume of Education in Ceylon* contain in-depth information on Muslims of Sri Lanka. His concise but solid writing on the Sri Lankan Muslims published in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* remains unsurpassed in its originality and content.

I cannot but refrain from mentioning Mr Azeez's mastery of the Tamil language and literary matters. As a Jaffna-born and educated person first in Vaidyeshwara Vidyalayam in Vannarpannai and Jaffna Hindu College, he had mastered Tamil Literature, including Bhakti. In this regard, I tend to compare him with the former Indian President and Scientist Abul Kalam, who, as a Tamil Nadu product, had been deeply immersed in Tamil Literary matters. Like Abul Kalam, Azeez could quote *Thiru Kural* stanzas from the masterpiece of the poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar and the devotional *Tevaram* songs. According to several colleagues, Azeez's speeches in Tamil were masterly and easy to listen to because of his fluency in Pundit Tamil! Azeez was fond of listening to Tamil devotional Bhakti songs, or *Tevaram* relayed on Radio Ceylon in the mornings. His admiration for Tamil activated the Tamil Sangam to great heights at Zahira College.³ Unsurprisingly, he received Honours in Jaffna Hindu College in 1951 when he was invited to open the Diamond Jubilee Carnival and delivered the Golden Jubilee Address at Vaidyeshwara Vidyalayam in 1963. Azeez's exposure to multiculturalism expanded his vision, comparative religious perspective, and tolerance of ideologies. In 1980 when the first convocation of the Jaffna University, Mr Azeez was conferred the prestigious Doctor of Letters degree which earned him an Honorary Doctorate.

More than anything else, Azeez stands out as a visionary and an idealogue in promoting Islamic-based modern education. He saw the potential to produce a whole generation of Muslim professionals and specialists imbued with an English education. As a public servant, he rendered yeoman service to the embattled Muslim farmers in the east; As an author, he received encomiums in national and international writing forums; A patriot whose love for his country went beyond party politics. His name, being

3. Ali Azeez (ed.) 2015, *A. M. A. Azeez, Milestones to Remember*, p. 2

listed among the 100 Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century by the Institute of Objective Studies, India is a fitting tribute to this exceptional visionary and thinker.

Many have highlighted Mr. Azeez's special contribution as the Principal of Zahira College. He held this position for 13 years, from 1948 until 1961. He possessed the best management and administrative skills to achieve excellence in the College. It is undisputed that those were the golden years in the History of the College, during which over 150 students were selected to enter the University of Ceylon. Notably, Mr Azeez was a constituent member of the University Senate University Court and University Council at the University of Ceylon. His position gave him an advantage in selecting the best from each year's list of graduates passing out from Peradeniya and offering them appointments as teachers at Zahira. Among them were A. M. Sameem, K. Sivathamby, S. Balasingham, M.M.M. Mahroof, M.T. Jiffry, Tuna Saldin, S. Mubarak, the few I could recollect, and others. They, in turn, were commendable teachers who helped many to do well in the University Entrance Examination and pursue University education.⁴

M. Azeez's rookie teachers produced the best results for Zahira in the university entrance examination each year. Aside from the academic arena, Zahira College excelled in various sports such as cadeting, boxing, wrestling, soccer, cricket, and rugby. Zahira boys topped in Rifle Shooting, beating the Ceylon Army in the national competitions, forming more than a third of the National Rifles Shooting Team, and winning the coveted Queens cup twice.⁵

Besides holding the principalship of Zahira College, Mr Azeez has served Muslim education in many other ways. Early in his

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4. Personal Information from A.C.L. Ameer Ali, email correspondence dated 8 March 2025.
 5. Cf., (Captain) A.G.A. Barrie, "Zahira, Rise, Fall and Resurrection" Azeez. Foundation.Com, posted on 30, July 2021.

career, in 1942, he established the Kalmunai Muslim Educational Society, and three years later, he successfully started the Ceylon Muslim Scholarships Fund, which has helped and is still helping underprivileged Muslim children pursue higher education. Above all, he continuously mentored many Muslim youths to succeed in business, careers, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, his vision to turn Zahira College into a radiating centre of Islamic thought fell short when he tried to establish something bigger than a mere school. Taking the cue from the setting up of Buddhist-centered Vidyalandara, Vidyodaya, and higher Privena institutions, he advocated a special Muslim Cultural Centre cum Cultural University for Muslims, expanding the prospects of Zahira College.⁶ Despite the proposal to set it up in Zahira College and include it in the Throne Speech in 1961, his idea did not take off for several reasons, as it was considered premature given the constraints of space and time.

Azeez's dream was to create a class of Muslim intellectuals and thinkers who would not only be fluent in English but also be able to access a vast amount of literature, especially about Islam and Muslim culture. Among the Muslim reformist educators and leaders, he deeply admired people like Abul Kalam Azad, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Sir Seyed Ahmad Khan, and especially Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Through Zahira College, he planted the seeds that would eventually sprout and produce a new generation of Muslim leaders in Sri Lanka who would guide the country towards modern progress. It was an uphill battle given the local Muslim community's background, which was enmeshed in business endeavours and strict religious conservatism. They were not forthcoming in easily embracing modernist ideas about Islam and its civilisation. This aspect of

6. Vide., A.M.A. Azeez, (1961), *A Memorandum on the Project of the Ceylon Muslim Cultural Center*, The Ceylon Muslim Cultural Center, Zahira College, Colombo, Ceylon,

Azeez's life needs more scrutiny in his biographies, yet a critical analysis of his speeches and writings should yield some truth.

As a follower of Iqbal's ideas, what attracted Mr Azeez most was the concept of Tawhid, progressive Islam, criticism of obscurantist and stagnant "Mullah Islam," the unique role of man as God's Calipha on earth, the importance and true nature of Islam as emphasized by the Quran and the Prophet, the proud legacy of the glorious days of Muslim civilisation centred in Medina, Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba, and Delhi, and the struggle for Pakistan. It has been said, that "being an Iqbal admirer, Azeez was not afraid to be the herald of unpopular truth as Iqbal once wrote.

"The strength of the West is due to knowledge and science.
Her lamp is light from this fire only.
Knowledge does not depend on the style of your garment.
And a turban is no obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge."
"Arts and Sciences, O Lively and eager youth,
Require keen intellect, not Western clothes,
What is needed in this quest is vision,
Nor this or that particular headdress!
If you have a subtle intellect and a discriminating mind
They would suffice to guarantee success."

(Cited from Memorial Oriation in 2011)

Like many of us, Azeez was keen to see the emergence of a higher class of intellectuals who value knowledge and science in a world assailed by petty dogmatic issues.

How many of us know about Marhoom Azeez's role—or rather, his input—in establishing Jamiah Naleemiah in Beruwela? The Islamic Renaissance Secretariat set up by philanthropist Naleem Hajjar was already rendering yeomen service to fast-track by

coaching pupils at “A” levels to facilitate their entry into universities. More importantly, Naleem Hajjar had been consulting several local experts, including Masud Alim, Alhaj Moulavi Thassim Nadwi, Dr M. A. M. Shukri, and others, to support a higher Islamic learning institute. Naleem Hajjar valued erudite counselling from Azeez on how best to produce Islamic scholars who would be well-grounded in modern sciences and traditional Islamic knowledge. Naleem Hajjar’s intention to establish Jamiah Naleemiah served two purposes: first, to produce Muslim scholars “Ulamas’ in traditional religious education, but not those who completed in the so-called conventional proliferating Madrasa institutions. He envisioned Muslim intellectuals who could simultaneously absorb modern knowledge such as science, the arts, commerce, law, etc. He found a great supporter in Azeez, who was one of the ideologues behind the founding of Jamiah Naleemiah, to say the least. If I were to refer to the History of the unification of Italy, three great men would have contributed to the unification of Italy: Mazzini, Kovoov, and Garibaldi. Azeez was the Mazini, the dreamer who gave Jamiah Naleemiah its ideological underpinnings. I understand that until the last moments of his life, Azeez had collaborated with Naleem Hajjar, having been a frequent visitor to his Alexandra Road home in Wellawatte and had participated in interviews with Hajjar to select suitable teachers for the College.

Aside from its belief in religiously oriented scholars, Naleemiah has produced professionals from many walks of life, including teachers, businesspeople, public servants, foreign service members, lawyers, and more. Some of them have found employment at international universities.

Naleemiah Institute came into existence not only to produce traditional Islamic scholars or bureaucrats but, more importantly, scholars and thinkers of high caliber who would revive the old glory of Islamic educational achievements in the glorious days

of the Islamic Empire before and after Abbasids. It was a long shot, but was that goal achievable? Did Naleemiah realize Hajiar and Azeez's vision to create outstanding and world-class scholars known for their innovative thinking and add to our knowledge? I am not casting aspersions on the Institute's accomplishments. Many successful Muslim graduates have benefitted from Naleemiah's education to hold important positions in the Sri Lankan government in business and religious establishments. However, I question whether any critical breakthroughs in Islamic knowledge come from Naleemiah-trained researchers. This question should not be confined to Naleemiah's performance. Still, it should be applied to many institutions worldwide designed to impart higher-quality Islamic education, including Egypt's famous Al Azhar University. Despite good intentions and expenditure to produce world-class Islamic Scholars, how far have the intentions of its founders been realised in practice?

This question has bugged me for many years, and I have not been able to find answers not just about the loftily established Jamiah Naleemiah in particular but also about the current state of education in Islamic countries in general. Naleemiah may be a microcosm representing a wide cosmic Islamic world Institutions. To ask a specific question, has the Muslim world produced outstanding men or women of knowledge in the contemporary era compared to those who made their names in the glorious days of Islamic learning in the past, say during the period of Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties and thereafter?

Crisis of Muslim Knowledge Stagnation

Leaving aside education, let us identify some obvious areas of stagnation in the Muslim world. The Muslims are in the throes of a political and hegemonic crisis everywhere experiencing terrifying setbacks. Why should I mince words? Consider the terrible

conditions that the Palestinian people, who are overwhelmingly Muslims, have suffered for decades, not to speak of the dreadful destruction that has been going on in Gaza and the West Bank, where scores of innocent women, children, and the elderly have been killed in droves. Elsewhere, why are Muslim Rohingyas or Chinese Islamic minorities still harassed and left defenseless as permanent refugees in a hostile country? Why do the great majority of Muslims live in extreme poverty and illiteracy in nations where they are both the majority and a minority? There is nothing that makes Muslims proud of their existence in the modern times.

On the whole contemporary Muslim societies grapple with various existential issues that span political, social, economic, cultural, and religious dimensions. These challenges are deeply intertwined with historical, geopolitical, and global factors. Muslims around the world, particularly in the West, face discrimination, stereotyping, and violent attacks due to rising Islamophobia.

The influence of Western culture and globalisation has led to a sense of alienation for some, as people grapple with questions of cultural authenticity, national identity, and the role of Islam in modern life. Many Muslim-majority countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes where political freedoms are limited. Corruption within governments, lack of accountability, and the absence of democratic systems create widespread dissatisfaction and political unrest.

The failure of many Muslim-majority countries to establish strong institutions and ensure the rule of law is a significant barrier to progress and further leads to ineffective governance, injustice, and widespread inequality. In many parts of the Muslim world, democratic institutions are weak or non-existent, leading to the erosion of civil liberties, freedom of speech, and political participation. The division between Sunni and Shia Muslims, especially in the Middle East, has led throughout History to violent conflicts, political instability, and social fragmentation. This sectarianism often fuels regional

and international conflicts as different states and actors align with different factions.

The rise of extremist ideologies, such as those espoused by groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, has led to violence, terror, and insecurity. These groups claim to represent Islam, but their interpretations are often seen as perversions of the faith by the majority of Muslims. Muslim societies are often caught in the crossfire of the so-called “War on Terror.” The rise of jihadist movements has led to both internal security issues and international repercussions, with many Muslim-majority countries facing the brunt of violent extremism. High levels of unemployment, political disenfranchisement, and ideological manipulation contribute to the radicalisation of young Muslims, who may be drawn to extremist groups promising an idealised vision of political Islam or revenge against perceived injustices.

The tension between maintaining Islamic traditions and embracing globalised, modern values is persistent. While some segments of society call for embracing modernity, others advocate for a return to stricter interpretations of Islam, which sometimes leads to cultural clashes. The Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world have become battlegrounds for regional powers and international actors. Conflicts like the Syrian Civil War, the Yemeni crisis, and the ongoing tensions between Sunni and Shia powers are fueled by geopolitical rivalries.

The intervention of external powers in the internal politics of Muslim-majority countries, particularly in conflicts like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, has created instability, loss of life, and ongoing tensions in the region. Muslim communities in non-Muslim-majority countries often face marginalisation, exclusion, and hate crimes driven by misconceptions and prejudices about Islam and its followers. These complex and multifaceted issues require thoughtful, context-specific solutions and approaches. The

interplay between cultural, political, economic, and social factors continues to shape the realities of Muslim societies worldwide.

In politics, instability and weaker administration resulted from the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the disintegration of Islamic political formations. Muslim governments became even more divided as nationalism increased, frequently at the price of Islamic unity. Regular wars and internal strife, both inside and between states with a majority of Muslims, took resources and focus away from modernisation and growth.

My immediate question in the context of my talk is more about educational attainment in Muslim societies worldwide. I wish to focus specifically on intellectual stagnation in the Muslim world. How did the Islamic world lose momentum in intellectual debate, particularly in science, philosophy, education, and so forth? Why has the Islamic world been unable to match or keep up with the Western world's accomplishments, for example, in science, technology, education, and the arts? How likely are they the Muslims will awaken and develop into a contemporary, materially sophisticated country that can compete with other contemporary nations to raise the standard of living globally?

Bernard Lewis, a renowned scholar of Islam and Arabism, was forced to ask the question given the greatness attained by Islamic powers during the good old days under the Umayyads, Mamluks, and Ottomans. *What Went Wrong?* was the title of his 2002 book published by Oxford University Press in Oxford and New York. He wasn't the first writer to pose the subject, "Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response." Islam's stagnation from the pre-modern era is a complicated subject with many underlying causes. In the 18th century, assisted by the Industrial Revolution, European powers colonised and disturbed Muslim countries' local economy's political and educational systems. They suffered lingering effects of dependency and stagnation. There has been strong opposition

to modernisation and reform because of adherence to orthodox religious interpretations and traditional cultural traditions. This kind of opposition widened the divide between conventional wisdom and the demands of modern society.

During the Golden Age of Islam, which lasted from the eighth until the eleventh centuries, our scholars dominated through their seminal intellectual contributions to science and knowledge. Undoubtedly, Islam had a major impact on the European Renaissance, which cleared the path for knowledge and science in the development of numerous fields. Knowledge expansion, translation, and preservation of scientific texts by the Muslims promoted a spirit of inquiry vital to scientific advancement in the West.

Great Muslim Emperors like Al Mansur and Harun Al Rashid established institutions like the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, and scholars from diverse backgrounds translated and expanded on the works from Greece, Persia, China, and India. Thinkers like Al-Razi, Ibn Sina, and Al Haitham were not just scientists but polymaths who excelled in every branch of science they developed.

Let me list some notable scientific accomplishments made by Muslim Scholars who improved astronomical observations by establishing observatories like the Ulugh Beg Observatory in Samarkand and Baghdad. Prominent astronomers like Al-Battani accurately measured celestial bodies and enhanced star catalogues. Established hospitals (baristas) and medical schools, including those in Cairo and Baghdad, made medical knowledge easier. Influential works like *The Canon of Medicine*, authored by doctors like Avicenna (Ibn Sina), were used for centuries as a medical reference in Europe and the Muslim world.

Through experimental techniques and the development of alchemy as a forerunner to contemporary chemistry, Muslim academics, including Jabir ibn Hayyan, made significant contributions

to the study of chemistry. Farming practices in Europe and beyond were influenced by Islamic agronomy, which brought new crops and sophisticated agricultural techniques. Geographical writings and intricate globe maps produced by Islamic thinkers such as Al-Idrisi enhanced navigation and comprehension of the planet. Advanced navigational methods were made possible by using astrolabes and other equipment. Intricate geometric patterns, arches, and domes were among the novelties brought about by Islamic architecture. Amazing technical talents were displayed by the engineers who built palaces and mosques. Greek philosophical writings were preserved and expanded upon by scholars such as Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), who incorporated them into Islamic philosophy and subsequently influenced philosophers of the European Renaissance.

What interrupted its continuity today if Muslims had inherited such glorious feats in knowledge?

It is high time we found clues about the current problematic areas in higher Islamic education. "Islamic intellectualism" is the essence of a genuine, original, and adequate Islamic thought that must provide the real criterion for judging the success or failure of an Islamic educational system.

The dichotomy or-- rather, the lack of it-- between spiritual and secular education has afflicted progress in modern education in Muslim communities. Secularism as a concept scares traditional Islamicists away, whereas searching for sole (religious) knowledge occupies the primary aim of Islamic education, which like all other aspects of life, is meant to lead toward spiritual benefits for a better life hereafter.

Islam is wont to differentiate between the spiritual and the worldly knowledge. Theoretically, all knowledge emanates from Almighty Allah and his revelation Al Quran- transmitted by the

Prophet Muhammad (Sal). Added are the sayings of the Prophet and his examples of behaviors, which run into hundreds of volumes of written texts maintained by exegesis or Tafsir literature as we know them. It was up to specific educational institutions like the Madrasa to train scholars to act as interpreters of the Al Quran and the Hadith literature and turn them into codes of knowledge and behaviours by the Muslim *Umma*.

Nowadays, in a crisis-ridden Islamic world, the Madrasa system faces umpteen issues regarding survival. Due largely to backlash from the Western powers, Governments in Egypt, India, Indonesia, Singapore, and even Sri Lanka have entered an era of drastic reforms to be stimulated in traditional religious-oriented curricula in the Madrasas. An outcome is that the Muslim Umma everywhere is forced to rethink the education imparted in the Madrasa schools to come to terms with the modern developments in propaganda and open warfare.

The Quran emphasizes religious knowledge as the most important virtue for Muslims. Yet, in the Middle Ages, there seemed to be a healthy balance between spiritual and material aspects of education. At the peak of Islamic empires in the Middle Ages, Muslim dynasties strengthened the Islamic way of life while providing the scientific base to spread the religion across the continents. This situation did not last beyond the 14th century as education in Islamic countries slowly began to witness a decline. On the contrary, Western societies moved far ahead in scientific discoveries beginning with the European Renaissance. Islamic communities went into reverse gear by becoming dependent on the need to obtain 'Ilm' knowledge of all religions instead of relying upon diversified and specific secular knowledge that promoted science and technology. I find an eerie comparison between the Christendom of the Middle Ages, when knowledge became stagnant, and the present-day Muslim education, which follows suit in more or less identical paths.

Christian Education and the Renaissance

I should stray a little at this juncture to underline a regressive pattern elsewhere to focus on this point. So, let me elaborate on what happened in Christendom before the Renaissance movement took place around the 16th century C.E. and how European societies broke away from the chains of traditional Christian-based education to lay the foundations for scientific knowledge. I have chosen to elaborate on this vital fact as central to my theme today: to compare two different systems of educational attainment in two different civilisations.

During the Middle Ages, the Church became the primary custodian of education imparted in monasteries and later cathedral schools. In preserving and imparting knowledge, the focus was primarily on religious studies. It was based on Biblical teachings, and its purpose was to prepare people for Christian emancipation. Theology was the dominant academic discipline, and the theologians who were engaged in finding out the ultimate truth were known as *scholastics* or *schoolmen*. All knowledge was designed to please God's perceived will, and any variant understanding of truth was rejected as incompatible with biblical teachings. The dignity of man and his quest to fulfill human potentiality was put on the back burner in a devout spiritual tradition.

Christian education during this period was primarily restricted to the clergy, leaving laypeople largely uneducated in matters of faith. The absence of a structured educational system meant that ordinary Christians had limited opportunities to learn about their beliefs or engage in theological discussions. Clerical education was primarily focused on rote learning and memorization of religious texts, particularly the Latin Bible and catechism. This approach limited critical thinking and deeper theological understanding, especially among the clergy, and led to a superficial grasp of doctrine.

The educational system was designed, among other purposes, to produce educated clergy for church functions rather than to foster a well-rounded understanding of scripture and theology.

The Church was often seen as suppressing secular education and knowledge that contradicted its teachings. This suppression contributed to a lack of intellectual diversity and stifled potential reform movements within Christianity.⁷

The educational approach within the church was not focused on nurturing a deep understanding of scripture or fostering critical thinking among believers. Instead, there was an emphasis on rote learning and adherence to tradition without encouraging personal engagement with faith. This lack of an effective teaching ministry contributed to a culture where superstition and misinformation could thrive. The combined effects of doctrinal confusion and inadequate education created fertile ground for skepticism and criticism of the church's authority. As individuals began to question established beliefs, movements like the Reformation gained momentum. The Reformation sought to address these weaknesses and promote a more personal understanding of faith through education and scripture. The combined effects of doctrinal confusion and inadequate education created fertile ground for skepticism and criticism of the church's authority. As individuals began to question established beliefs, movements like the Reformation gained momentum. The Reformation sought not only to address these weaknesses but also to promote a more personal understanding of faith through education and scripture.

The emergence of Humanism in Europe challenged the pervasive notion and purpose of education based solely on religious lines. At the core of Humanism was the belief that man, as God's creation, was a noble and beautiful creature who gloried life and ruled the

7. <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/the-state-of-the-church-before-the-reformation>, Accessed on 3/19/2025, 1:27 PM.

world. Then came the Enlightenment part as an epoch-making movement in European History.

The development of new theological ideas and a critical examination of conventional Christianity led to the Enlightenment. The burgeoning rational intellectual community denounced the body of Christian doctrine as a collection of antiquated folktales propagated by the Catholic church, which acted as a repressive force against intellectualism, spirituality, and the social ambitions of the general populace. As a result, Christian superstition, prejudice, and ritual were ruthlessly mocked.

The Age of Reason signaled a dramatic departure from the past. The intelligent individuals vehemently condemned the intolerance of the Christian institution, yet they were neither atheists nor irreligious. They posed a challenge to them by presenting an understanding of nature, History, and humanity based on the findings of the natural sciences. Enlightened thinkers aspired to and articulated the optimism that accompanied the advancement of material and scientific knowledge. The well-known authors Voltaire, Diderot, Alembert, Condorcet, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, David Hume, Christian Wolff, Immanuel Kant, and Marchese di Baccaria advanced the idea that happiness, freedom, and liberty will triumph over all other considerations. Because of Copernicus's, Kepler's, Newton's, and Galileo's scientific discoveries, they thought humans might fully comprehend how the universe worked and acquire hitherto unheard-of power over their physical and natural surroundings. The changes occurring in the conventional life organization further bolster this sentiment. As they witnessed the transition from the gloomy Middle Ages to the modern era, the Enlightenment theorists were persuaded by the accomplishments and superiority of their time.

The focus of biblical traditions shifted from God to man, his finest creation. Theology was supported by science during the Middle Ages. Its goal was to show off the wonders of creation and

offer logical evidence for what the Christian religion already knew. As a result, speculation about the universe focused on “Why do things happen?” while the new humanistic researchers posed “How do things happen?” Medieval thinkers developed finely reasoned deductive approaches to link natural events to prime causes. As a result, it impeded the growth of experimentation, which is the foundation of contemporary science.

Biblical information was thoroughly examined to produce human-beneficial truths. Consequently, new areas of knowledge started to emerge. One of its outcomes was linguistics, which produced fresh insights into History, ethics, rhetoric, and grammar. The quest to comprehend the universe apart from God prompted advancements in physics, medicine, astrology, other scientific fields, and language studies. Experimentation, observation, and logical reasoning dominated new concurrent knowledge formation. The biological sciences lag behind physics and chemistry because of metaphysical presumptions about the creation of the universe, as taught in the Bible. Away from the strict doctrine outlined in the scriptures, the new thinker discovered methods to explain the human body and instincts.

The term “renaissance,” which translates to “rebirth” in French, is used by historians to describe the fresh advancements throughout the medieval period from the 14th to the 16th century. The city-states of Northern Italy, which housed the most significant commercial hubs, including Florence and Venice, were the first and most obvious supporters of the Renaissance. An environment of independence and self-reliance that flourished in these mercantilist republics provided the initial impetus for the Renaissance and the Reformation, rather than dynastic and monarchical nations like France, Austria, and England. I have no intention of delving further into European medieval History. However, I think it's time to try to find some similarities between the current state of education in Muslim nations

and what is happening in the modern world if History is to teach us anything. So, let me discuss a similar, if not worse, trend arising from our society's misguided reliance on a spirituality-dominant perspective, especially in imparting new knowledge and education.

The experience of Islamic education, compared to the above development in the Christian world, was quite the reverse. The Christian world was sunken into darkness due to the dominance of the Papal Church in knowledge creation, and it recovered from it in the post-reformation period, leading to a kind of scientific revolution in knowledge creation. In Islamic History, Muslim scholars pioneered rational and scientific knowledge, which peaked between the 8 and 11th centuries and then descended into a regression like the dark ages in the European continent. I shall deal with this phenomenon in detail later. Still, I would like to underscore a few factors that contributed to the decline or stagnation of Islamic sciences after the 11th century.

First was the birth of Asharite ideology in the 9th century, which disdained the rationalist approach and rejected the relationship between cause and effect in any natural order. I shall revert to this later when I mention Imam Ghazzali's contribution to knowledge gathering. Asharite divide worsened ideological battles when Shias and Ismailis gained power at the beginning of the 9th century from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya to Egypt. To counter the Shia emergence on the ideological front, the Seljuk Grand Vizier Nizam -ul-Mulk founded Madrasas to give importance to Sunni religious studies, bifurcating the twin sides of scientific and religious knowledge into two. In Nizamiyyah, Islamic religious studies became regulated. Studies of the Quran, Hadith, Fuqaa, and Jurisprudence gained the upper hand, giving dominance to religious scholars who sidelined natural sciences like Physics. While rationalists and great scholars such as Ibn-Sina and Ibn-Rushd were sidelined in Muslim institutions, their scientific contributions were highly extolled in European Universities.

Religious studies became a lucrative business at the expense of independent inquiry while the Ulama class gained key government positions, especially in Jurisprudence and other administrative positions. At one time, the Ottoman Sultans allegedly banned the printing press for printing Arabic texts. When Napoleon's Army invaded Egypt in 1798, the Muslim world was centuries behind in science and technology. Still, it is given lukewarm support for modern education vis-à-vis spiritual-based Islamic education.

Part 2

A persistent theme throughout History has been the resistance of traditional societies to modernization and transformation as in Islam and other world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity etc., Religious beliefs, cultural identity, governmental authority, and social hierarchy are among the factors contributing to unhealthy conflicts. Traditionalists fear that modernisation will lead to a decline in morals and spirituality. Apprehension rules societal transformations and scientific progress for fear of diminishing the influence of religious institutions.

My primary inquiry is: What role could religion play in undermining scientific reasoning? Religious beliefs and scientific concepts intersect in a multitude of ways. It is widely acknowledged that when scientific doctrines conflict with religious convictions, communities encounter cognitive dissonance, which can impede learning and result in apathy toward research.

For Muslims, the Al Quran — as revealed by the Almighty God — is considered sacred, eternal, infallible, and justifiably so. Any novel scientific or social doctrines cannot contradict divinity. As custodians, our Ulamas, or religious authorities, ensure that religious doctrines remain stable or are updated only incrementally. If so, what is the current state of science among the Muslim community, given their strong ideological beliefs? What about

the other contributory variables, such as poverty and inadequate governance, after colonialism?

Frequently, Muslims tend to nostalgically celebrate the achievements of Islamic mathematicians and scientists in the tenth century and how Muslim intellectuals excelled beyond their contemporaries in several disciplines. Indeed, the scientific viewpoint of Islam stimulated early curiosity and investigation. During that period, the Muslim world spanned regions, including North India, Persia, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Spain, and Morocco.

I do believe that my audience does not view me as agnostic, anti-religious, or dismissive before my presentation. I wish to stand apart from group-mindedness and follow blind faith. I reserve the right to think independently and ask questions, which may sometimes incense traditionalists. Whatever the case may be the progression of knowledge is essential for the future of Islam, materially and spiritually.

My second query is: Why has the modern Islamic world been unable to match or maintain the progress of the Western world in science, education, the arts, and innovation? What advancements have been achieved in Islamic science over the past millennium? Why have the likes of seminal scholars of Islam from earlier epochs not surfaced in modern discourse? Why do Muslims not pursue alternatives to the progress and wealth that Eastern nations like China and Japan have provided to the world? How likely will the Islamic world develop into a contemporary, materially advanced nation capable of competing with other industrialized countries to improve global living standards? Additionally, what factors contribute to the widespread poverty among the majority of Muslims worldwide, especially in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and specific conflict-affected Middle Eastern countries such as Yemen, where a significant segment of the population lives in poverty?

I am beginning to question these pressing issues on multiple levels and am seeking reliable interpretations from my extensive examination of various Islamic literature. Unfortunately, some interpret the tone of my inquiry as a sign of my waning confidence in the benevolence of the Almighty or as my failure to understand that every hardship encountered by Muslims is a reflection of divine purpose.

Should we validate that Islamic education is generally declining in utility, efficacy, and quality in many countries? To what extent can it be acknowledged that the conventional madrasa curriculum among other factors undermines the role of Islamic scholars, relegating them from active societal contributors—both formally and informally—to passive participants by focusing solely on religious education? This approach devalues students who engage extensively in secular education. As defined by pedagogical and philosophical criteria, an effective educational curriculum emphasizes life skills, exposure to diverse opportunities, self-employment, self-sufficiency, job satisfaction, technological progress, and lifelong learning. The approach to Islamic education must adapt to modernity and globalization.

The Qur'an's admonitions regarding the pursuit of knowledge are clear. Traditional Muslim scholars assert that Islam provides a robust foundation for pursuing scientific knowledge, as the Qur'an encourages a desire for truth that promotes scientific inquiry. The Qur'an and Sunnah emphasize the pursuit of knowledge as a virtuous endeavor in devotion to Allah, praising those who seek an understanding of the physical world. This is illustrated in the verse: *"Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, there are signs for men possessed of minds who remember God, standing and sitting and on their side, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth."* (Al-Qur'an, Surah Al-Imran 3:190-191). Undoubtedly, the holy Qur'an catalyzed the advancement of sciences in the early History

of Islamic civilization. The Qur'an illustrated the interrelation of God, nature, and humanity as a fundamental perspective, which motivated the exploration of natural phenomena. The early Muslim scholars, inspired by divine revelation, examined nature within the framework of the Qur'anic perspective.

The initial verse of the Qur'an asserts that a primary means of comprehending the Creator is through the examination and study of nature and the entire established universe. This novel Islamic interpretation of nature, grounded in the unblemished Tawhid (the "unity of God"), empowered adherents with the ability for innovative thought and inventive insights to explore the natural world. The Tawhidic worldview also stimulated scientific exploration and socioeconomic progress, infusing Muslim academia with renewed energy. The Qur'anic emphasis on the pursuit of truth has substantially facilitated the growth of scientific inquiry among Muslims. Moreover, many indications from the Qur'an and Sunnah suggest that education is a commendable pursuit that enhances one's standing in the afterlife and demonstrates one's allegiance to Allah. The Qur'an unequivocally praises those who seek to understand the material world, urging them to attain wisdom and devotion to Allah.

The Prophet Muhammad (Sal) preached that a servant of God would remain standing on the Day of Judgment until questioned about his time on earth—how he used and utilized his knowledge (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith #148). Furthermore, *"Knowledge from which no benefit is derived is like a treasure out of which nothing is spent in the cause of God."* (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith #108). *"Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people."* (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith #107).

Such counsels proved effective at both extremes of the spectrum. How do the exhortations to seek knowledge boost the current status of contemporary educational achievements, particularly in the field of science within Islam? I must examine and discuss these topics, as they form the essence of my presentation today.

The curiosity engendered by the Qur`anic revelation likely prompted early Muslim intellectuals to engage in creative thinking, evident in their original works and their contributions to the translation and preservation of the scientific heritage of ancient civilizations, including Greek, Indian, and Persian sciences. Through profound insights and rigorous methodologies, they examined the works of ancient ancestors and presented them to contemporary generations. Innovative insights and rigorous verification of facts, statistics, and data marked the endeavors of Muslim intellectuals. Their methodologies yielded novel data of exceptional quality while preserving the scientific heritage, which was dispersed throughout the languages of ancient civilizations.

Currently, the circumstances have changed. Modern Muslim intellectuals possess significantly less authority to validate scientific qualifications independent of their spiritual status. In contemporary times, how can Muslim intellectuals reconcile traditional views of social cohesiveness with the pursuit of scientific progress? After examining numerous texts on Islamic education, I have inevitably concluded that the significant divide between conservatism and modernity constitutes the greatest disruptive issue in the Islamic world.

Conservatism and Islam

What is the nature of clash between conservatism and modernism? Conservatism, when considered independently, is not intrinsically harmful. Conservatives arise from the existence of components that necessitate preservation. Islamic conservatism plays a vital role in preserving religious and cultural identity against the effects of globalisation and Western influence. A plethora of conservative intellectuals promote a modern interpretation of Islamic teachings, asserting that Islam can coexist with current values such as human rights, democracy, and economic progress without compromising

fundamental religious principles. Thus, conservatism in Islam is not homogeneous, and the faith comprises diverse schools of thought.

Many orthodox Muslims think that compliance with Islamic customs, including prayer, fasting, and dress requirements, is vital to their identity and sense of community. Resilience and strength may arise from the desire to maintain a religious heritage. Cultural stagnation can result from an overly inflexible adherence to tradition, limiting prospects for reform or reassessment. In such contexts, societies may become increasingly insular, impeding their capacity to adjust to the changing requirements of the contemporary world. Innovation in philosophy, literature, art, and social conventions may also be suppressed. The influence on the advancement of Islamic nations in the modern world is intricate and dependent on multiple elements, including location, culture, political climate, and the interpretation of Islamic doctrines.

Religious academics contend that the core principles of Islam should be upheld across all age groups, while reformists emphasise the necessity of freedom of speech, thought, and religion. They typically reject theocracy and Islamic extremism. Liberal Muslims claim that Islamic texts, outside their doctrinal elements, necessitate reinterpretation to remain pertinent in the twenty-first century.

Muslim scholars have endeavoured to identify the problem and suggest remedies to advance the faith from a “Period of Stagnation” after 13 C.E. The perspectives on Islamic Science have grown contentious due to the contemporary, science-focused civilisation of the Western world. This issue was mostly rooted in the perception that Islam has been experiencing a decline in civilisational advancement since the Turkish Caliphate began to diminish its authority over the Islamic realm. Since the 15th century, a time characterized by decreased knowledge production for many causes, new groups of reformists emerged, fostering ideas of liberalism and progressivism within Islam.

While the West began a journey towards scientific progress around Circa 1100, Arab civilisation reverted into introspection. Among other reasons, some scholars highlight the role of certain medieval Islamic thinkers, especially the renowned Shaikh Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, a philosopher celebrated for his influential treatise, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. As the title suggests, he became frustrated with the contradictory theories of philosophers. He determined that the only dependable source of knowledge was revelation, as opposed to notions formed from causality-driven innovations. He emphasized that divine involvement is constant, so individual well-being requires ongoing appeals to the powers “above.” This religious system ascribes earthquakes, droughts, and floods to divine punishment, and it is futile to probe events based on the principles of Causality. For others, Imam Al-Ghazali was hardly an anti-intellectual. A multitude of Western intellectuals praised his writings. Rather than disregarding philosophical differences, Westerners sought to integrate or reconcile them. Fundamentalist interpretations of all religions, including Islam, contradict the notion of material forces dominating the world.

Modern Islamic Reformists

The 19th century posed serious existentialist threats to Muslim societies, which had suffered from colonial blitzes, making them subservient to the Western powers politically, economically, socially, and, above all, intellectually. To counter Western intellectual hegemony, the 19th century witnessed the emergence of a new class of intellectuals and reformists who started thinking out of the box, not necessarily yielding to pressures from a retarded ‘Ulama’ class. These reformists spread themselves into various schools of thought, such as positivism, secularism, Islamism, and Salafism.

Islamic modernism was the earliest Muslim ideological reaction to the challenge of Western culture. In the latter half of the 19th

century, like-minded Muslim intellectuals from Egypt and India developed a fresh approach to Islamic theology and Quranic interpretation, critically reexamining jurisprudence's traditional ideas and practices. This new strategy showed remarkable consistency with the European-inspired Enlightenment concepts I mentioned earlier in my talk. The reformists were nothing less than a direct rebellion against Islamic orthodoxy. There are many names belong to this phenomenon of Islamic reform, but let me list some typical and well-known pioneers, namely Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–1898), Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and others.

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905)

Muhammad Abduh briefly served as a Sheikh of Al-Azhar University until he died in 1905. Disregarding the strictures of Muslim ritual, doctrine, and familial relations, he urged Muslims to employ reason to stay up to date with the times. He should not rely only on the readings of scriptures offered by medieval clergy. According to him, Islam holds that intellect was bestowed upon man so that he may be guided by knowledge rather than being led by a harness. Abduh believed a teacher's job was to encourage men to pursue their studies. According to him, Islam condemned the mindless copying of tradition and urged people to distance themselves from the world of their forebears. To him, independence of will, thinking, and opinion were the two greatest religious gifts bestowed upon man. The development of Western civilization in Europe was largely attributable to these qualities. He believed that when many Europeans could use their right to free will and utilize their intellect to seek out facts, they were inspired to take action. He asserts that Islam is the only religion whose doctrines can be supported by logic.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898)

He was a Muslim reformer, philosopher, and educator in nineteenth-century British India. In the Indian sub-continent, he had to fight and rebel against the ‘Islamic’ system of education prevalent and was completely controlled by the Madrasahs. He established the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which became the present AMU in the Indian subcontinent.

While travelling around England, he visited its colleges and was influenced by the post-renaissance educational system. On returning to India, he resolved to establish a school that would provide Indians with a modern education, patterned after Cambridge and Oxford. The *Khwastgaran-i-Taraqqi-i-Talim-i-Musalman* (Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among Muhammadans) was founded on December 26, 1870, after he returned. It changed its name to a Fund Committee for founding a school by 1872. Syed Ahmad is a great Muslim visionary and social reformer in South Asia. In 1886, he established the All India Muhammadan Educational Conference to encourage Muslims in India to pursue Western education, particularly in science and literature. The meeting inspired Muslim leaders to suggest expanding educational advancement overseas, a move known as the Aligarh Movement, and raising money for Ahmad Khan’s Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College. His University, now regarded as one of India’s most prestigious establishments, was Muslim India’s armoury.

Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938),

He was a poet, philosopher, and, most importantly, mystic who inspired A.M.A. Azeez in his ideas for educational reform. Iqbal’s ideas are extremely important for the global academic system and Pakistan’s educational system. He embarked on an intellectual quest grounded in the lessons found in the Quran.

Iqbal talks of a dynamic and creative education, directed to the nurturing and the release of the creative spirit in man, to equip him with the desire and capacity to conquer new realms of art and science, knowledge and power, an education inspired by the optimistic faith in the destiny of man. This education is motivated by an optimistic belief in man's future. According to him, science must play a major role in it, granting man authority over nature and the scientific process, allowing him to investigate and deliberately rebuild his reality. It must provide for continuity of purpose since science is essential to the modern world in terms of its intellectual and practical value and, as a result, education. Any synthesis of all the information about human experience must be vital alongside religion. According to Iqbal, Science is the most potent source of idealism and an innate love for humanity since it guarantees that man would use his immense talents to benefit both people and the planet. As such, we must not be against it and be given a prominent place in education.

All the intellectuals mentioned above had one thing in common: they rejected Islamic conservatism and resistance to reformist thoughts while acknowledging the fact that the lackadaisical attitude of the Muslims towards the pursuit of knowledge and scientific inquiry was the main cause of the decline of hard Science in Islamic civilization. This mindset was made up of the deterministic worldview that defined the majority of Muslims. The advancement of science and the growth of the human race depends on freedom of thought and investigation. However, over a while, the door of *Ijtihad* was locked, and freedom of thought and effective use of reason were restricted because of divergent opinions among different Islamic sectarian groups. Consequently, the deterministic perspective emerged as the primary attribute of Islamic thought.

Crises of the scientific mind in the Muslim world, according to many scholars, are deeply rooted in the Muslim sociology of

religion.⁸ According to this view, one of the major factors behind the decay of hard science in Islamic civilization was the attitude of Muslim societies towards the scientific quest and cultivation of knowledge per se. This attitude was constituted by a deterministic outlook that characterized the mainstream Muslim community. Free thinking and freedom of research are essential for scientific progress and the development of the human community. However, due to controversial views among various groups of Islamic sectarians, freedom of thought and efficient exercise of reason were controlled, closing the door of Ijtihad. Therefore, the deterministic outlook became the main character of Islamic intellect. Many works have been written by modern Muslim intellectuals, with titles such as “*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*,” “*Stagnation of Muslim Mind*,” and “*Reconstruction of Muslim Mind*,”⁹ to address this basic problem. The major implications of restriction of freedom were blind imitation, stagnation of mind, and lack of tendency for scientific quests.

How does the Islamic attitude towards “science” differ from its Western counterpart? As the Oxford Dictionary defines “The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment,” science makes it necessary to accept the key premises underlying science – causality and a belief in the existence of physical law. Without the scientific method, you cannot have Science because Science is all about objective and rational thinking. Science demands a mindset that incessantly questions and challenges assumptions, not one that relies upon received wisdom. It implies that the natural study of the physical

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8. Masud, M. Khalid (1995), *Reasons for the Decline of Scientific Activity and Creativity in the Muslim World*. International Conference on Science in Islamic Polity in 21st Century, (Islamabad- Pakistan).
 9. Mohammad Iqbal, (2013) *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (Encountering Traditions)* Paperback , Harvard.

world through various fields, including biology, ecology, medicine, physics, etc., is included in the field of science.

On the other hand, the traditional Islamic view of science holds that it is a far more comprehensive endeavour encompassing fields of study outside of technology and the natural world. The Arabic term '*ulūm* (sciences),' used in the Islamic tradition, signifies modern scholarship in its fullest meaning as an academic or scientific field. Because of their expertise in many areas of Islamic knowledge, such as theology (aqidah), jurisprudence (Fiqh), mysticism (tasawwuf), etc., Islamic scholars are therefore referred to as ulama scientists. As a "body of knowledge (in the sense of discipline)," science is defined more broadly... In the West, this more expansive meaning is sometimes used loosely to designate other disciplines like History, sociology, etc.

Western-based science, as compared to Islamic-theocracy-based science, differs in many significant ways. Even in the Middle Ages, great scientists like ibn Al Haytham, Al Beruni, etc, were greatly disadvantaged as the clergy opposed them and went as far ahead as calling them heretics.

Some even argue that the holistic approach to the Quran as the source of all knowledge leads to an impasse in creating new knowledge. For instance, when real scientists seek umpteen books to substantiate knowledge, our theocratic scholars invariably urge us to seek knowledge based on one book, the Al Quran, which they vouch contains every knowledge required for humankind. What needs to be understood is that the Al Quran is not a book of science; it deals with science and other knowledge. Though this unity was forced upon the Quran (and Islam in general) from without rather than originating from an analysis of the Quran itself, intellectuals and frequently Sufis did perceive the Quran as a single entity. However, this thin veneer could not conceal that their fundamental structure of ideas was not drawn from within the

Quran itself. Some thought systems and thought orientations were adopted from outside sources (not necessarily antagonistic to the Quran, but certainly alien to and not infrequently incompatible with it), somewhat adapted to the Islamic mental milieu, and expressed primarily in Islamic terminology.

This fragmented, haphazard, and sometimes very extrinsic approach to the Quran has gotten worse gradually with the onset of spirituality per se. In trying to accommodate the pressures of up-to-date ideas and social change that have been created by the colonial interregnum in Muslim lands a situation, some Muslims are ready to reconcile the Qur'anic dictations with certain important modern Western institutions and ideas. Others advocate the complete rejection of modernity, and an almost limitless amount of "apologetic" literature replaces reform with self-glorification.

I shall argue that a suitable hermeneutical approach is essential. In religious or philosophical texts, a hermeneutical approach might involve interpreting sacred scriptures or works of philosophy by considering historical, cultural, linguistic, and personal perspectives. For example, interpreting the Qur'an through a hermeneutical lens would involve understanding the context in which it was revealed, its language, the author's intentions (in this case, the divine will), and how it has been understood over time by different scholars and communities. I think such an approach incorporates certain elements while excluding others: it only addresses the cognitive component of revelation, not its power-appreciative or aesthetic-appreciative features. Every revelation is an artistic creation that evokes feelings of immense grandeur and beauty (known as *Jami'l* and *Jali'l* in the Sufi language). Above all, it stimulates that inextricable mental attitude known as faith, which is alluring and challenging, as proved in the Quran. However, the approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics, in my view, focuses on comprehending its message that will allow individuals who believe in it and wish to follow its teachings—in

their personal and collective lives—to do so in a meaningful and cogent manner. Both Muslims and, in certain cases, non-Muslims can participate in this purely intellectual endeavour as long as the latter have the requisite empathy and sincerity.

How far should pure knowledge and emotional faith be realistically separated? I do not disagree that faith may arise from this cognitive effort itself or that, more clearly, faith may and should lead to such a mental effort. More importantly, a blind theological approach hindered the formation of Islamic legal thinking. The tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries saw the development of this theology (*Kalim*), which eventually claimed the lofty role of being the “defender of the bases of Islamic law.” As such, it exhorted that the Quran’s divine commandments were to be obeyed because they were divine commandments; it rejected Causality and the effectiveness of the human will in the service of divine omnipotence (man was thus only a metaphorical actor, the real actor being God alone). It declared that good and evil could only be known through revelation (and not through natural reason). Al-Baqillani, who developed Ash’arite philosophy in the eleventh century C.E., even suggested that Muslims should be “officially” obligated to deny Causality and believe in the atomism of time and space! All of this took place a long time before the caliphate was destroyed. Indeed, Ash’arism was only able to develop gradually! There is no question that a certain kind of affinity or restriction of freedom was a blind imitation, stagnation of mind, and lack of tendency for scientific quest.¹⁰ In this regard, the above-mentioned great Islamic Scholar Al Ghazali’s place in History has been undervalued since he disregarded Causality to undermine the philosopher’s heretical theological beliefs of an eternal universe. This eventually led others to abandon the scientific enterprise altogether, thinking that because God controls all things

10. Cf. Shogar I.A. (2011), “The Scientific Thinking in Islam: Factor of Flourishing and Decline”, *Revelation and Science Vol 1*, No.2, Pp 1-13

in their causes and effects – known as ‘occasionalism’ – there is no need to pursue scientific knowledge.

Dominance of Hadith Literature

Now let us turn to the Hadith Literature, the proliferation of which adds to a dilemma of an orderly development of religious thinking in general and legal thought. Without “orderly growth,” no human civilization can operate well and remain completely static; changes are inevitable. However, these developments were not regulated nor purpose-driven throughout the Muslim world. The essence of Islam had been steadily losing its vigor due to problems arising in lopsided legalistic thinking.

The proliferation of both Qur’an and Hadith literature over many years leads to a contentious opinion partly responsible for taxing the energy of Islamic scholars over time. It is further compounded by the fact that many exegeses came into existence that arose from the necessity to give human interpretations to divine-originated dictum. Both the Quran and Hadith gave birth to umpteen commentaries. However, substituting commentaries and super commentaries for the texts of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and other subjects as resources for higher education was a significant development that harmed the standard of education beginning from the latter medieval centuries of Islam. The process of reading commentary led to an obsession with minutiae, to the detriment of the subject’s fundamental issues. Disputation (*jadāl*) evolved into the most popular method of “winning a point” and is now almost a stand-in for a sincere attempt to raise and address actual problems in a subject.

In the past, a commentary on a piece of work was the outcome of a teacher’s instruction of that piece in a class; pupils would write down the instructor’s remarks, which the teacher would then assemble into a commentary. Later, some distinguished scholars would write a work in verse (like Ibn Malik’s *Aljiya* on Arabic

grammar, which consists of 1,000 verses) or a condensed tract in a particular field (like Nair al-Din al-Tusi's *Kitab al-Tajrid* on theology) to make it easier for students to study or memorize. This led to a multiplication of comments and super commentaries, compounded refutations and counter-refutations, and, on the one hand, the regrettable practice of memorizing information without any deeper comprehension. This futile inventiveness and waste of precious intellectual energy resulted in works like the Quranic commentary of Faizi, a distinguished writer from the sixteenth century, and a courtier of Akbar, the Mogul ruler. In this work, the author eliminated the Arabic letters with diacritical marks, lowering the total number of letters he could use from twenty-eight to only thirteen. Some Turkish intellectuals have authored works in which they read words horizontally, vertically, diagonally, consecutively, or by reading lines and not. A sort of scholar who was encyclopedic in the extent of his study but had little new to say about anything that emerged in the Muslim world due to the practice of producing commentaries for their own sake and the inexorable decline of original thought.

The modern type of specialist whose knowledge has very narrow confines must be distinguished from this category of scholar-cum-commentator. On the one hand, this group must be distinguished from a very different type of comprehensive thinker like Aristotle or even a lesser figure like Ibn Sina, who welded various fields of inquiry into a unified system and coherent worldview. The modern Muslim scholar I am referring to is constrained to "study" every area of knowledge that is accessible. Still, his accomplishment in using these comments stops at being a compiler and commentator. Naturally, this kind of scholar is not unique to the Muslim culture; it is also typical of numerous savants in medieval Europe. One significant but unspoken presumption of this kind is that study is seen as the more or less passive collection of already established information rather than an active endeavour, a creative "reaching

out” of the intellect to the unknown, as is the case today. Since it presumes that all that can be understood about reality is already known, possibly except for a few “gaps” that need to be filled with interpretation and extension or certain angularities that need to be smoothed, this mindset is not favourable to creative inquiry and thought.

Objective research methods usually challenge orthodoxy, and Muslim countries are still too shy to engage in such confrontations that might even remotely be perceived as an affront to the literal interpretation of scripture. Islamic tradition provides relativistic approaches to reinterpreting scripture with changing times through the notion of *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning). But mainstream commentators often quash this prospect to maintain an austere absolutism. It seems likely that the pressures the Muslim world was feeling from colonial or quasi-colonial experiences were a contributing factor in the ulema’s growing resistance to change. The ulema adopted a defensive stance and sought solace in their legacy from the later Middle Ages and its barren commentaries literature the more the danger posed by the Western powers and their “advisers” led to the establishment of institutions of exclusively secular learning.

My second point is about comfort and satiation in pursuit of religious knowledge. Ibn Khaldun’s famous doctrine of *Taraf* (Extracted from his classics *Muqaddimah*) needs to be cited here, which translates to “enjoy a luxurious life without real productivity,” Muslim communities adopted the pleasures and wealth their ancestors had brought about following their early advancement and successful triumph. They developed a culture of easy money and luxury, making them resistant to mental or physical learning endeavours. Ibn Khaldun asserts that all scientific endeavours need a sustained focus on inquiry and arduous labour, with no guarantee of quick benefit. Therefore, in a culture where *Tara*, or the attitude of quick wealth, predominates, scientific inquiry could not endure.

Those educated Muslims who proceed to develop successful professional careers are often sanguine with a comfortable job but would rather not invest in cutting-edge creativity. An interesting example is the medical profession in which many Muslims, and indeed Pakistani Muslims, have excelled considerably. However, most of these brilliant doctors are focused on making money in clinical practice rather than in creative research, which would lead to laurels such as the Nobel Prize. Cultural complacency leads to a mindset where success is marked by simply making a good living for the family, contributing some earnings to charity, and then living a lavish life.¹¹

During the apex of Islamic civilisation, scientists received financial support from the monarchs of the Islamic empire and the public sector via the *Waqaf* system, as demonstrated in the establishment of superior educational institutions, including Baitul Hikmah (House of Wisdom), the al-Nizzamiyyah Schools of Baghdad, and other centres of higher learning. This financial support diminished over time. The leaders were increasingly focused on music and palace construction, neglecting to allocate finances for scientific endeavours. In contrast, other nations, particularly in Europe, witnessed governments and rulers offering substantial assistance to promote science and scientific initiatives, motivating scientists to exert greater effort. In Europe and America, some affluent donors have contributed their entire fortunes to create educational institutions in the form of universities. For example, the renowned Harvard University was established via the generosity of a wealthy benefactor.

Conversely, Historians of Science have documented a significant drop in the esteem of science and scientists throughout the final decades of the Islamic empire. Currently, the situation remains

11. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saleemali/2023/10/01/nobel-prizes-science-and-islam/> accessed on 7 Feb 2025, 9.30 a.m.

mostly unchanged. Financial considerations have compelled Muslim scholars to emigrate from Islamic territories. In several states, oil affluence has facilitated the development of opulent cities, grand mosques, and lavish shopping centres. However, minimal scientific infrastructure has developed. The Arab states allocate merely 0.15 percent of their gross domestic product to research & development, well below the global average of 1.4 percent. Muslims constitute 20 percent of the global population, representing fewer than one percent of its scientific community. The “knowledge deficit” in Arab society was characterised as “grave” and “deeply rooted” in the 2003 Arab Human Development Report; a similar conclusion may be inferred regarding other Muslim nations. Comparable findings have lately been disseminated in several study journals and other media.

Nobel Prize and Muslims

May I also draw your attention to another important issue: assessing the performance of contemporary Muslim scientists? How does one measure the success of a great scientist, for instance? Let me use a yardstick: a quest for the Nobel prize. As the pantheon of laureates grows larger and more diverse, the Islamic contribution to this prize remains embarrassingly small. Nobel Foundation alone can bear the blame for this: Nearly 2 billion Muslims and only 15 Nobel Prizes. In the 122-year History of the award, only three laureates in the sciences have been of Muslim lineage: (2) in chemistry, (1) in physics, and none in medicine or economics. Muslims make up 23% of the world population but get 1.5% of Nobel prizes, while the Jews account for 0.2% of the world population but get 20% of Nobel prizes. If confronted with this question, many Muslim apologists would easily come up with a reply that scientific research facilities are hard to come by as compared to a developed and well-endowed Western University system. (Not to forget that even the 3 Muslim Nobel Prize-winning Scientists pursued their research in Non-Muslim countries) Yet, it remains a fact that, over time, embedded

religious and cultural beliefs have contributed to a weakening of Muslim intellectual capabilities.

Ahmed Zewail, a Nobel prize-winning Egyptian American chemist based at the California Institute of Technology, was asked why Muslim scientists could not aspire to become Nobel laureates, and his response was largely due to the relative intellectual inertia in the educational institutions in many Muslim countries.¹² The Nobel Prize is coveted because it recognizes deep, critical, revolutionary research. Such research usually challenges orthodoxy, and Muslim countries are still too shy to engage in such confrontations that might even remotely be perceived as an affront to the literal interpretation of scripture. When asked a similar question, a Turkish biologist, Aziz Sancar, who shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2015, opined that continuing civilizational tension could lead many Muslims to shy from reconciling their epistemic identities between science and religion.

I wish rich Muslim countries would inculcate a yearning for science at multiple levels. Existing institutions such as the Islamic World Scientific Educational and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) need a more ambitious plan of action to promote research and critical thinking. Muslim countries will need to show courage in confronting forces of anti-intellectualism if Science and Faith are meaningfully reconciled toward the kind of high-quality research required for a Nobel prize in the sciences.

University Rankings in Islamic Countries

No doubt, in recent years, supported by increased national budgets swelled by income from petrodollars, there has been a push to expand higher education in Arab-Muslim countries,

12. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saleemali/2023/10/01/nobel-prizes-science-and-islam/> accessed on 7 Feb 2025, 9.30 a.m.

which have significantly increased their investments in higher education domestically and internationally. The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have undertaken initiatives to enhance educational cooperation among member states, sharing best practices and resources. For example, according to recent reports, countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have committed around 20% of their national educational budgets and have invested heavily in establishing and upgrading local universities. These countries have built state-of-the-art institutions, recruited international faculty, and developed research facilities to position themselves as educational hubs. For instance, Qatar's Education City hosts branches of prestigious universities such as Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar and Carnegie Mellon University Qatar, reflecting the country's commitment to educational excellence. Countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan have expanded universities and technical colleges, with significant increases in enrollment. They have initiated comprehensive educational reforms to improve curriculum, teacher training, and student outcomes, often backed by technology integration. They are strongly committed to improving educational quality, fostering research, and extending cultural influence globally. These efforts reflect a strategic vision to position the Arab world as a key player in global education and innovation.

Despite significant investments, challenges persist, including concerns about academic freedom, the influence of donors on university policies, and debates over the effectiveness of such large-scale funding. Additionally, while some countries have made strides in educational reform, others face funding adequacy and infrastructure development issues.

While acknowledging that mere funding alone won't be sufficient to ensure higher academic excellence, rich universities have other impediments to producing super-quality innovators and researchers.

Dallal¹³ discusses “the dismal state of scientific and technological production in the Muslim world” and notes that in one region of the Muslim world, “the average output [of scientific publications...] per million inhabitants is roughly 2 percent of the output of an industrialized country.”

At any rate, recently, the oil-rich Arab Islamic States are investing abundantly to improve the quality of facilities, support services, and overall institutional infrastructure with enlarged libraries, state-of-the-art laboratories, and learning environments. Nonetheless, educational infrastructural developments do not guarantee a comparative edge in research and innovation. It will take years and commitment to excel to compete with Western American and Chinese Universities that have moved higher on the ladder of scientific research.

Modern-day university prestige is measured and ranked by a certain matrix or academic index based on a variety of factors that assess academic performance, reputation, resources, and impact. While different ranking organizations may prioritize certain aspects more than others, here, the main criteria used in university rankings share some common features. Leaving other criteria aside, the amount, impact, and quality of research the institution produces are crucial. It will be measured from the number of published research papers, citations, and influential contributions to specific fields. Metrics like the H-index or the number of highly cited researchers are used to evaluate research productivity and influence. QS World University Rankings are based on academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, international faculty and students, research citations, and more. Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings focus on teaching, research, citations (research influence), international diversity, and industry income.

13. Ahmed Dallal, (2010), *Islam, Science, & Challenge of History*, Yale University Press, pp. 158-159.

Likewise, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) – Shanghai Rankings places heavy emphasis on research outputs and quality, including that of faculty Nobel Prize winners and highly cited researchers.

Returning to recent developments in educational attainments displayed by Arab-Muslim Universities, there are many questions about their genuine commitment to high academic standards. Recent discoveries concerning Saudi universities point to an abuse of this system, which, unlike the well-established and endowed Western universities, is comparatively new and evolving. Yet, to raise their profile, there seemed to be an attempt to artificially create a performance index ignoring the norms adopted for ranking purposes, as detailed above. Universities manipulating publication metrics have made headlines recently. More than a dozen universities have used “questionable authorship practices” to inflate their publication metrics, authors of a new study say. One University even saw an increase in published articles of nearly 1,500% in the last four years.¹⁴

Saudi Arabian Universities, after an investigation, revealed that institutions were offering cash in exchange for affiliation — all to boost rankings. In 2023, it came to light that a case in which a prominent researcher was offered money by a university senior administrator to add his name to publications, outing the scam after not getting paid. Researchers also looked at hyper-prolific authorship, defining it as publishing 40 or more articles annually. Combined, the 14 universities 4 four from India, one each from Iraq, Egypt and Beirut, but the rest are from K.S.A. showed an increase in hyper prolific authors from 23 in 2019 to 177 in 2023, an increase of 670% and a growth rate 10 times the average. However, this rate wasn't consistent over all universities; King Saud University, for example, went from four hyper-prolific authors in 2019 to 63 in 2023, a 1,500% increase.

14. <https://retractionwatch.com/2025/01/10/bibliometrics-universities-publication-metrics-authorship/>, Accessed on 3/19/2025, 1:27 PM

University	Articles Published, 2019	Articles Published, 2023	% change
Future University in Egypt, New Cairo	127	1,368	977
Chandigarh University, Punjab, India	362	2,281	530
GLA University, Bharthia, India	259	1,521	487
Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, India	847	2,219	162
Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences, Chennai, India	1,984	3,959	100
University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Uttarakhand, India	307	1,557	407
Al-Mustaqbal University College, Hilla, Iraq	91	1,417	1,457
Lebanese American University, Beirut	316	2,600	723
Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*	370	1,591	330
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia	1,329	5,145	287
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	4,493	11,906	165
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia	750	4,388	485
Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	486	4,465	819
Taif University, Ta'if, Saudi Arabia	516	2,381	361

*also referred to as "Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University".

I wish to leverage my experiences related to universities in Muslim-majority nations that are determined to enhance their rankings. Following my paper presentation at an Islamic conference entitled “Future of Education: Challenges of Traditional Versus Modern Approaches,” conducted in Kuala Lumpur from October 11 to 14, 2019, I was unexpectedly admonished by the Keynote Speaker, a prominent Muslim intellectual and regular organizer of Muslim conferences, for enquiring about the criteria for evaluating the quality of publications in Islamic journals. He grew very agitated when I broached the topic of inadequate research carried out by Muslim researchers, especially in the absence of peer review in several localised publications. Islamic education conferences are reportedly held periodically in various Islamic capitals, featuring the same self-promoting gurus who offer misguided advice to the audience. In the meeting, I was designated a renegade and an outsider for being invited to provide a presentation that was significantly critical of the research methodologies employed by Muslim scholars.

It is high time that I comment on the disproportionate rise in the appointment of academics to Professorial Ranks in our local universities, particularly at the Muslim-majority Southeastern University in Oluvil (SEUSL). The appointment of Professors has mostly been influenced by the manipulation of U.G.C. Regulations and contrived publication standards, disregarding any significant pioneering research in reputable international journals, to put it mildly. I have not observed any significant contributions from this University to research culture conceived by its founder, the late Mr. M. H. M. Ashraff, a passionate supporter of Mr. A. M. A. Azeez’s goal to nurture leading Muslim intellectuals.

I aim to share my experiences as a long-serving university educator, having devoted over thirty years to my career and seen substantial research production in Islamic nations. For valid reasons, I choose not to provide the names of the universities I served in

Southeast Asia; nonetheless, I am not withholding any information to create deceptive conclusions. Having been employed in Islamic tertiary institutions, I had specific expectations concerning the performance quality of the primarily Muslim intellectuals. My observations mainly concern the actions of specialist Islamic universities that provide an exclusively Islam-centered curriculum. Since the 1970s, several international Islamic universities have been founded, notably those in Islamabad and Malaysia, to attract Muslim scholars from various Asian regions and promote new pathways of knowledge and study. One can identify very few distinguished publications or contributions by Islamic scholars that can stand up to the Western dedication to knowledge advancement and innovation.

With rare exceptions, the works of Islamic academics seem to be somewhat superficial in their thematic depth and research quality. I found a publication on Islamic marriages written by a highly rated and distinguished Islamic scholar from Brunei. His work consisted mainly of extensive Holy Quran and Hadith excerpts, accompanied exclusively by translations of the original texts. The book lacked significant analysis, elaboration, or explanations concerning the nature of Islamic marriages. Upon inquiry, I was informed that conversation is restricted, as it must precisely conform to the Quran and Hadith; any departure may lead to colleagues exposing individuals as advocates of Bida' (innovation), which is scoffed in Islam. There is a proliferation of Islamic magazines from prestigious international Islamic universities that publish works by Muslim academics, which, with certain exceptions, lack content and rigorous research. They are too sensitive to give opinions on the well-entrenched knowledge that hitherto exists on topics such as Hadith genealogy, Fiqh, Jurisprudence, and everything else they care to approach cautiously to prevent inciting conflicts among knowledgeable Mullahs.

A recent decree from the University administration at specific Islamic universities mandated the Islamization of the general curriculum under the guise of the Islamization of knowledge. For example, there arose so many anomalies when teaching social science subjects like Geography, Sociology, and History purely from Islamic viewpoints, leading to considerable turmoil at one of the universities where I taught. The University had engaged a substantial number of non-Muslim Ph.D. holders to teach these courses, and occasionally, they were mandated to submit their curriculum for evaluation by an authorised council of Islamic experts who themselves were not admirable researchers. Securing curriculum clearance from Muslim authorities would be difficult if the subject matter diverges from 'approved' Islamic knowledge. A particular sociology course was directed to remove all mentions of Darwinian evolutionary theory. At times, there were impediments to expounding upon comparative religious ideologies, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, in History classes. A senior Muslim scholar/administrator was terminated for diminishing the Arabic language content in the Islamic Law program, which was considered incompatible with the foundational values of an Islamic University.

Research progress in Muslim countries is incumbent upon more personal and intellectual freedom. Without this, cognition, concepts, innovations, revelations, and progress are unachievable. For progress in science, Muslims necessitate emancipation from dogmatic convictions and a society that promotes inquiry over conformity.

I assert that several obstacles within Muslim-based colleges impede the advancement of research and innovation essential for competing in technology and science with Western countries. Today's world is undergoing a fourth Industrial Revolution, marked by a technological upheaval in which emerging and quickly advancing

fields such as Artificial Intelligence, genomics, and robotics need pivotal studies. To my understanding, other progressively educated cultures do not feel obligated to draw inspiration from their sacred books. I question if Jewish scientists consistently see the Torah as a fundamental source for their research. I find it amusing that our professors frequently assert that contemporary scientific theories were foreshadowed in the Quran, which was delivered 1400 years ago. It would be significantly more beneficial for our scholars to produce original, groundbreaking scientific discoveries through their comprehensive study of the Quran rather than seeking validation from the Quran for already established scientific findings made by individuals outside the Islamic faith.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as I reflect on the life and legacy of Dr. A. M. A. Azeez, it becomes evident that his vision for education and intellectual advancement remains profoundly relevant today. His commitment to fostering a generation of Muslim intellectuals who could navigate both traditional Islamic knowledge and modern scientific inquiry serves as a guiding light for contemporary Muslim societies. More importantly, the need for reform in Muslim education is undeniable, particularly in its approach to integrating modern scientific and intellectual inquiry with traditional religious values. While historical Muslim scholarship contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge, the stagnation in modern Muslim educational systems is concerning. Factors such as rigid adherence to outdated traditions, resistance to scientific reasoning, and a lack of intellectual freedom hinder progress. It is essential for Muslim educational institutions to foster environments that encourage critical thinking, innovation, and a balanced integration of faith and reason. Only through such reforms can the Muslim world regain its intellectual momentum, contributing to both academic

excellence and meaningful societal progress in the contemporary era. The challenge lies in overcoming the entrenched barriers of dogma and embracing a forward-thinking approach that values inquiry, scientific discovery, and a more dynamic interpretation of Islamic teachings.

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A Biographical Note

B. A. Hussainmiya, Ph.D.

Dr. Bachamiya Abdul Hussainmiya, B.Ed. (Hons), B.A. (Hons), Ph.D., is a noted South Asian historian with an academic focus on Indian Ocean Studies, Sri Lanka Muslims, Brunei history and Sri Lankan Malay cultural heritage. His service in academia spanned over 50 years. Having retired as a Professor in History at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (1988-2016) and in post-retirement, he served as a Visiting Professor in History at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) for four years. He is recognized widely for his unique interdisciplinary approach to historiography, combining meticulous archival research with rich cultural narratives.

He is married to Manel Zahra Hussainmiya, an attorney-at-law, and they have two children currently residing in New Zealand.

Born on 11 December 1946 in Maligawatte, Colombo, Dr. Hussainmiya began his education at Denham English School (now Darussalam Maha Vidyalaya) and continued at Maradana Central College (now Sri Sangharaja Maha Vidyalaya) as a 5th Standard Government Scholar. After passing the University Entrance Examination in December 1963, he briefly attended Zahira College before enrolling at the University of Peradeniya in October 1964.

Excelling academically, he became first island-wide in the Tamil medium stream and won an exhibition prize for History. He achieved a first-division pass in the Higher School Certificate Examination (1963) and completed in 1968 a B.Ed. with a Second Class Upper Division—the only such distinction awarded across all three mediums that year at Peradeniya. He was appointed a temporary Tutor in History on the condition that he completed a B.A. (Hons) in History, which he did successfully in 1970, becoming a Probationary Assistant Lecturer.

In 1974, he was awarded a Monash University Graduate Scholarship (Australia), where he pursued Indonesian/Malay Studies for his M.A. under renowned Professor Cyril Skinner. Returning to Peradeniya in 1978, he completed his Ph.D. in History in 1984.

Dr. Hussainmiya is widely recognized for his pioneering research on the Sri Lankan Malay diaspora. He has a greater following among the Malay academics because of trail blazing theories on the rise and fall of classical Malay Literature. In 1974, he became the first person to unearth over 150 original Malay and Islamic manuscripts in Sri Lanka during a field study sponsored by the Monash Southeast Asian Studies Centre. These findings—epics, poetry, and religious texts—in Jawi/Malay and Arabic and Arabu Tamil in addition to lithographed texts significantly expanded the hitherto defined boundaries of the Malay world (*Dunia Melayu*) to include Sri Lanka. Notably, he revealed that Sri Lanka published the first Jawi Malay newspaper, *Alamat Langkapuri*, in 1869—predating Singapore's *Jawi Peranakan* (1876). He also introduced to the Malay World the lasting contributions of a great local Malay literary savant *Baba Ounus Saldin* (1832-1906), and others who belonged to the 19th century Malay World Literati.

In 1985, he joined Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) as a Research Fellow at the Institute of Malay Language and Literature (IBKKM). There, he authored two seminal books: *Lost Cousins: The Malays of Sri Lanka* (1986) and *Orang Rejimen: The Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment* (1990). He collaborated closely with the late Professor Tan Sri Datuk Ismail Hussein, head of *Gapena*, and contributed extensively to seminars and literary research on Sri Lankan Malays.

Invited to participate at the first World Malay Symposium held in Melaka (1982), he gifted a rare Sri Lankan manuscript to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohammed which augmented the growing interest of the Malay World literati towards the neglected

and microscopic- minority community of Sri Lanka Malays In 1985, in turn he co-organized the second symposium in Colombo with Gapena (The Malaysian Writers' Federation), attended by over 100 delegates and inaugurated by President J. R. Jayewardene.

In Brunei Darussalam he was commissioned to write his magnum opus: Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam, published by Oxford University Press (1995). He went on to author several respected works on Brunei history, becoming a highly cited historian and public intellectual. At UBD, Dr. Hussainmiya thus made a lasting contribution to the understanding of Brunei's political evolution, socio-cultural transformation, and colonial interactions. In recognition, the Sultan of Brunei awarded him a Gold Medal and the honorary state title PSB (Fourth Class) during the Sultan's birthday honours in 2007.

Throughout his career, Dr. Hussainmiya was affiliated research scholar with world research Universities such as UKM, UM, Hull University (UK), Northern Illinois University, and the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka) etc. In 2022, the Fulbright Foundation honored him by inviting him as a Scholar-in-Residence position at Florida International University, Miami, USA.

Beyond academia, he has been an active community leader. At 15, he became the first President of the Maligawatte Junior YMMA. Later, he served as National President of the YMMA Council (1981–1984) and founder of the Federation of Muslim Youth of Sri Lanka (FAMYS). He remains committed to youth empowerment and poverty alleviation. He still provides counselling and guidance to aspiring researchers from locally and abroad.

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