

Causes and Remedies for the Decline of Islamic Medicine in the Last Five Centuries

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Abstract

The period between the 9th and the 15th century spotlights a bright era when, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the Arabs extended their field of activity right up to Spain. They played the pivotal role of guardians and caretakers of scientific thought, achieving supremacy especially in biological sciences. Indeed, biology came to be known as an "Arab science." In the 19th and 20th centuries, the world of Islam has surprisingly neglected its great men of medicine and science, philosophers, mathematicians, critics, commentators, statesmen, and men of letters. It completely overlooked the fundamental achievements of those great scholars. The pioneering work in science and technology, accomplished during the glorious period between the 9th and 15th centuries was lost sight of and not the slightest heed was paid to the three million manuscripts of that illustrious era that remain "preserved" in several libraries of the world. These three million manuscripts contain creative works, research, discoveries, and inventions of the Muslims and Arabs. The entire infrastructure of all the scientific and technological advancement of today is based upon the groundwork of those scholars.

Keywords: Islamic medicine, Muslim scholars

I have previously presented an article of mine that narrates the study of the decline from the 15th to the 18th century. "Science, Modernity, and Religion" is worth your deep thought. In this paper, I have presented the current declined state of thought, skill, and action among Muslims and have given solutions to resolve this situation.

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Persistent oversight and negligence of the germinal contributions made by Muslim scholars in various fields of knowledge resulted in new generations finding themselves in the iron grip of a depressing sense of inferiority. Consequently, when the torch of learning passed into the hands of the West and its glare came to be felt in the East, every student, scholar, author, and learned person of the East began to regard the West as his preceptor, and cowered down to its superiority.

This sense of inferiority produced dire results. The worst that could have happened was that the Muslim world became incapable of serious thinking, objective research, analytical inquiry, and inventive creativity, giving way easily to the excellence of the West and underestimating or rejecting the role of its own great ancestors. The situation today is reflected by the Muslims' disregard of these three million

manuscripts, wiping completely off the slate the very existence of those masterminds who produced this immense treasure.

So devastating is this inferiority complex that it has put blinders even on the eyes of petro-dollars against Islamic science and technology. This feeling of inadequacy in the fields of education, science, and medicine and this perpetual heedlessness have ensnared the Arab and Muslim world in social and economic despondency to the detriment of their society and culture. As the sun of Islamic civilization began to set, every conceivable malediction of the world descended upon Islamic communities and every calamity resulted in a chain of enslavement. After the ebb and tide of temporary waves of freedom, the chain of bondage has clanked once again and today the Arab and Muslim world has been partly or wholly enslaved by the West. Portents are that the next 100 years will pass in this state of dejection unless some true Muslim appears on the scene to invoke the spirit of Islam and the whole Muslim world rallies round the call of pan-Islamic union.

The present situation is that summits held under the Organization of Islamic Conference, Jeddah, have brought about discord instead of accord, and that every meeting of the Muslim Foreign Ministers has collapsed under the pressure of alien forces. Learning and erudition have never been major items on the agenda of these meetings. This grand neglect can serve only to hasten disaster.

A "Voice of Hamdard" has been heard echoing from Pakistan during the past four decades, exhorting that every broken chain of the Arab and Muslim contributions to the history of science must be rejoined. Hamdard initiated research beginning with ibn al-Haytham (the Father of Optics), and included work on al-Bīrūnī. Subsequently, Hamdard secured the cooperation of UNESCO and Iran in reviewing the history and philosophy of science in light of Arab and Muslim contributions. Credit for it goes to Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. But, in spite of all this, I faced a great setback convincing the Arab and Muslim world to start work on rendering these three million manuscripts in contemporary languages. I dispatched copies of my booklet, "In Search of Manuscripts," (See Appendix) to every Islamic organization of the world and to every Muslim minister for education and culture, but no one took notice of my appeal to collect these scattered manuscripts and to make them subjects for doctoral studies.

At the closing of the 1,400 Years of Islam and the beginning of the 15th century Hijrī, I had suggested to the World of Islam that this special event not be wasted on jubiliations and ought to be marked by bringing these three million manuscripts into the limelight for the benefit of the *Ummah* in order to pull it out of a state of stagnation and despondency. Unfortunately, even today, I must admit my failure in this effort.

The work of collecting and publishing manuscripts under the aegis of the King Faisal Foundation is rather limited and ineffective. King Hasan II of Morocco possesses a

large collection of manuscripts. There are some 400,000 manuscripts in Turkey. Libraries in Iran are full of manuscripts. Afghanistan's stock of manuscripts has been transferred to India. Russia and the Central Asian countries have a large quantity. Princeton's list of manuscripts has been compiled in two volumes by Philip Hitti. The stock at the Escorial is closed. The British Museum and the Library of Congress contain large numbers of them. The National Library of Medicine in America contains large stocks, as does the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. Libraries in India are full of them, especially the Khuda Baksh Oriental Library in Patna, but all of them are termed as "preserved." These are the references to which I am an eyewitness.

Indifference to History

History reveals that people's indifference to their past invites indolence and inertia. To build a better present and to be able to look ahead, one must also look back. This is what is happening in the field of medicine. I can affirm that one of the main causes of the decline of Islamic medicine is our indifference towards our history.

For instance, let me ask you a few questions:

- What are the sciences and technologies to which these three million manuscripts are devoted?
- Have you considered who are the authors of these manuscripts?
- Do you know who authored the *al-Qanūn fil-Ṭibb*, which until the 18th century remained a medical textbook in the West, and what happened to its author? This book had been translated into the Russian and Uzbek languages, and the English translation is now underway at the National Library of Medicine.
- Do you know who wrote the 25 volumes of *al-Hāwī*, the man whose work on smallpox led to the discovery of the vaccine for smallpox?
- Do you know who wrote *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (comprising 30 sections). Its most important part is the surgical, which was modern in Spain yesterday and which remains modern today. Its author was the man who invented almost every instrument of surgery.
- Do you know that *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* is the first book that describes the working of human vision? Who was its author, and who was the forerunner of the camera-obscura?
- Do you know the original Arab exponent of circulation of the blood? Was he William Harvey?
- Do you know the great man who, from the fort in Nandana (now in Pakistan), was the first to measure the dimensions of the earth? Amazingly, this measurement has been accepted as accurate.
- Can you name the medical expert who discovered a cure for bodily lacerations in the useful fungus found on trees in the rainy season -- the secret that led Alexander Fleming to the discovery of penicillin?
- Do you know the ecclesiastic writer who, from his prison deep down in a well in Bokhra, dictated 27 volumes of his book to his disciples sitting and listening on the rim

of the well above? These tomes are considered to be some of the most authentic ones in the study of "Fiqh."

- Do you know why the name of Jalinoos (Galen) was expunged from the 26th edition of the world famous *Gray's Anatomy*?

- Do you know who was the original author of the *Tract on Cardiac Drugs*, the man who gave the most appropriate concept of cardiovascular diseases?

- Do you know who established the relation between the four elements and human health and disease?

History tends to push people into the serfdom of aliens -- a situation that we are currently facing.

The field of botany

It cannot be denied that the Muslim people's quest for knowledge has been greatly influenced by the Glorious Qur'an and the "Sunnah" (the sayings and the traditions) of the Prophet [PBUH]. In the field of medicine, they also kept before themselves the guidelines provided by the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah, and preferred herbs for the treatment of disease. The stupendous amount of the ancients' observations and experiments with herbs resulted in a rich legacy of multiencyclopediaic works, but we have failed to make good use of this great bequest. We chose to follow the West instead and treated the human body as merely a mass of flesh and bones, giving little or no place to man's soul. We therefore gave no consideration to the spiritual attribute of the human body, outstepped the limits of nature, and depended on antimicrobials as our sheet-anchor.

In the world of medicine, this is the precise dividing line between Islamic and Western medicine. A Muslim cannot deny the existence of the soul, and this view is absolutely correct. Denial of the soul means denial of psychology, and the exclusion of psychology from medicine clearly endangers medicine. Putting this complicated debate aside, I wish to explain the importance and need for the treatment of disease through herbs.

In the high noon of Islamic medicine, the physicians who discovered chemical substances, designed surgical instruments, described surgical procedures, carried out pharmacognostic studies on thousands of herbs, and used this knowledge to establish pharmacological effects that have not been contradicted to this day could also have isolated active principals from compounds and extracts of a plant, but they desisted deliberately from transgressing the limits of nature, accepting the human body as it was created by nature, and treated it in nature's way. With success they fought disease for centuries together.

The modern man who has conquered the moon seems rather helpless before the power of microorganisms. He has therefore started finding refuge again in herbs. The modern man who claims to be the master of science and technology has openly admitted that he is unable to completely understand the workings of the human mind and body. Certainly, he cannot predict for sure the effects of a medical preparation introduced into the human body. He

was convinced of the superlative performance of his laboratories, but thousands of the so-called "perfect" medicines perfected in the so-called "perfect" laboratories had to be withdrawn for having subjected human health to a worse condition. Today's man is therefore again seeking security in treatment with herbs. Modern man tried to fight psychosomatic disorders, including tension and depression, with tranquilizers, sedatives, and hypnotics, giving no thought to psychological factors and to the soul of man. As a result, a thousand-bed hospital in Boston was found inadequate to meet the demands of mental patients, and another hospital of the same size is under construction. This is only an example of one city in one state.

Love for luxury at the expense of self-respect is certainly one reason for the decline of the world of Islam. Self-dignity has been put under the hammer in the Arab and Muslim world, striking a dead blow to the honor and respect of the Muslim community. Aversions to simplicity and contentment have polluted politics and made national security a commodity for sale. The heart of the Muslim has become void of faith. This is a curse that has let loose so many evils in the Arab and Muslim world -- evils that have put health and education on the downgrade. The need for excellence in knowledge and education is no longer essential. In 1990, thousands of scientific conferences were held throughout the world where some 2.5 million learned papers were presented. The papers presented by Muslims numbered only one thousand. In the past two centuries, significant research contributions were almost nil from the Arab and Muslim world. No new breakthrough has been recorded in the fields of medicine and science.

Some suggestions

What must be done to pull ourselves out of this heart-breaking and distressing state of affairs? My suggestions follow:

- We Muslims must sincerely return to the teachings of the Glorious Qur'an and make Qur'anic tenets our guide.
- Let us find the light of wisdom in the life of the Holy Prophet [PBUH]. Let us learn the lesson of how poverty could not hold him back from becoming the greatest of men and how his life and thought made such a deep and indelible impression on world civilizations and cultures.
- Insights ought to be gained from our history and we should consider what charismatic qualities made Muslims the world leaders for centuries.
- Let us accept that Islamic teachings are firmly based on realities. Mobilize the hidden forces of faith to regain our lost glory.
- Let us agree once and for all that greatness cannot be achieved without giving prime importance to knowledge, its attainment and dissemination, and holding erudition in high esteem.
- Let us protect our dignity and self-respect and not sell them at any cost.
- Let individuals in the society learn to respect humanity

following the Qur'ānic injunction of unity among themselves, holding fast to the rope of Allāh.

- Let the whole world of Islam bring educational curricula in line with the Islamic way of life and introduce an overriding unity in the curricula to foster pan-Islamic unity.
- Let our educational system be based entirely upon our own resources, eschewing dependence on others as a matter of our prestige.
- Let liberty rule supreme in every country big or small.

Indeed, freedom was tasted by many of us, but why was it so short-lived? The 21st century seems to push us back in serfdom once again. The situation must be assessed realistically in the light of what freedom really demands and how the spirit of independence can thrive. Perhaps, only then can the followers of Islam hope to regain the torch of learning to lead the way.

This cannot be done without firmly believing that slavery is a curse deadly opposed to the spirit of Islam.

APPENDIX

In Search of Manuscripts

According to conservative estimates, 3 million manuscripts have been written or compiled by the Muslims during the period of the ascendancy. However, the manuscripts lie scattered in different parts of the world. They are displayed with pride by public and government libraries from time to time; they are kept as objects of pride (even if they are not used) by owners of libraries and collectors of rare manuscripts; and, what is perhaps more tragic, they have been left to mold in subterranean vaults. As a result, they have been lost to the scholars, palaeographers, and historians who could derive benefit from them and present a pictorial representation of the early Middle Ages. Muslims decided to keep dissemination of knowledge elite when they refused to accept printing by the cast iron movable type even though their Greek and Armenian subjects employed letter press printing. They passed up God's bounty, and He transferred the function the dissemination of knowledge to other (non-Muslim) hands. These same nations are today on the way to piercing the secrets of nature, charting paths in space never before known, and are doing so in the form of technological breakthroughs.

How can we accept as a sop for our egos the fact that the number of books written in Europe between the millennium that supervened from the early Middle Ages to the modern comprised only 200 manuscripts at the most? Should not, in all fairness, we admit that the scholars of the West have salvaged many of the most precious works of Islamic heritage, edited them, and in many cases have been the first to so make them accessible to the world at large by translating them?

We have noted earlier that there are about 3 million manuscripts whose writers represented different fields and disciplines. There are myriad writers who need to be studied. Their greatness lies enshrouded by darkness. They poured their hearts and souls into writings that are crying to be studied and examined. The world of Islam is in a state of trance, of stupefaction, with its ears plugged to these wails and echoes.

During the last four decades, the contributions of Muslim scholars are no less important than those of the Orientals.

Many manuscripts have been edited and fresh work has been done on Muslim masters. The Orientals also have undergone a change in viewpoint. Their focus has become more objective. Another happy corollary of this is that religious prejudices have been defeated, and the present state is moving toward the state when the Muslims held the reins of power and patronage and dissemination of knowledge. This was the age of Gerard of Cremona, Vitellus, and others who, despite being Christians, were broad-minded enough to faithfully translate tracts by Muslim writers of the Medieval Age. We need a repetition of the same type of approach today. Three million manuscripts attest amply to the greatness of the Muslim past.

With the knowledge possessed by man today, it is not difficult for him to undertake studies of these manuscripts. With the facilities and funds available to the Islamic world, we should strike while the iron is hot.

The rise of Islam and the phenomenal progress that is achieved shows that *Sūrah* (Chapter) "Iqra" (Read or Proclaim) was the linchpin around which the axle of thought revolved. The pen and the book were the basic tools that governed the Islamic attitude, life, and the rise of Islam was a manifestation of this outlook. This historical call should not be forgotten and we ought to adopt an approach that would correspond to that adopted in the pristine age of Islam. This alone would lead to sovereign power and true greatness.

The present position with regard to manuscripts is that certain institutions in the West, e.g., libraries, museums, etc., have compiled their holdings and have adopted modern systems to indicate the disciplines. Many catalogs have been published; many more are under publication. This is a remarkable advance that demands thanks and praise.

But, in general, in the West -- and more so in the East -- still much more remains to be done. Since union catalogs of manuscript holdings have yet to be published, we can neither find the manuscripts nor know what we have to study.

The lines of approach that need to be adopted are:

- 1) Critically edited editions of manuscripts that have been cataloged should be brought out. They should be printed in

the languages in which they have been edited and, wherever possible, translated alongside the original. The translation should be in languages that have gained international use, e.g., English, Spanish, German, French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and Persian. Naturally, such editions need the fullest documentation and this effort, Herculean and laborious though it would be, will bring the past and the present together.

Another desideratum of the age is the assignment of the subject doctoral theses to young scholars.

2) Arrangements should be made to mount investigations into manuscripts that have been identified but not yet edited or studied. The following steps could be taken to bring this about:

a) Scholars, librarians, palaeographers, and catalogers should be engaged by the Ministries of Education and Culture of the countries where the manuscripts are housed. Such countries should prepare union catalogs of manuscripts that should be distributed to the world.

b) Libraries owned by individuals and foundations having such holdings also should also publish such catalogs.

c) UNESCO should, in particular, set up a division to

look to this aspect and the Muslim countries should extend their full support.

d) Muslim countries should motivate their scholars and draw the attention to such holdings and donate to the cost of printing and honorarium to scholars on full pay if engaged full-time.

e) An international Islamic organization should be established for this purpose and include a representative from each Muslim country and regional offices in every country.

f) A union catalog, which would be the consolidated catalog of different Muslim countries having manuscript holdings, should be prepared, and the responsibility for the publication of such a catalog should be taken up by a country of the Arab world.

g) If necessary, national or international seminars and symposia should be held with regard to manuscripts, having manuscripts as the themes; i.e., the papers presented should be concerned with a newly discovered manuscript. Such symposia should be able to promote the program. It should be the inter-Islamic organization that is to be charged with the holding of such conventions.

May Allāh bless our efforts.