

THE BOOK IN ARAB/ MUSLIM CIVILIZATION

By

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Remarks delivered at the

Second International Summit of the Book

On the Theme of “the Book by any Name”

At the opening session

“The Meaning of the Book in Human Civilization”.

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, under the theme of “the Book by any Name” we are exploring the role of the Book in Human Civilization. Whatever the topic, whatever the platform, the Book is central to any civilization. Today, I will address two inter-twined aspects: the Book in the Arab/Muslim Civilization and the extension of that in the last 500 years into western Civilization.

The Mediterranean has always been a crucible for the formation and evolution of civilizations through the additive contributions of the various people on its shores. Initially it was the role of the eastern and southern Mediterranean with the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia and then Iran. Then the pendulum swings to Greece and the golden age of Greek philosophy and science, and then it swings back to Alexandria for the great period of Hellenistic culture, until Rome and the Roman Empire takes over. Then the dark ages in Europe correspond to the emergence of the Muslim civilizations from Andalusia in Spain to India. And then the pendulum swings back to Europe after the renaissance. So let me focus a bit about the period from

the 7th to the 17th centuries when the civilizations of the Muslim peoples were the dominant societies of books and learning.

They say that the book helps **preserve** culture and identity. I would argue that the Arab/Muslim culture was **shaped** by the Book. Let me explain:

First was **The** Book, The Quran, which starts the whole Islamic civilization that today counts some 1.4 billion adherents around the world. The revelation of the Quran, in the Arabic language of Quraish in Arabia in the seventh century, starts with the single word: “**Read!**” The Quran, The holy book of Islam, is absolutely central to all Muslims. Following and complementary to the Book, is the Sunna or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, through which tradition goes beyond that very first Quranic order to read, and whereby Muslims are enjoined to learn, and to seek knowledge.

The search for Knowledge (‘Ilm) and Truth (Haq) are an integral and undeniable part of the Muslim tradition. The pursuit of knowledge is the single most striking feature in a system of great revelation such as Islam. The word ‘Ilm (knowledge) and its derivatives occur 880 times in the Quran. But knowledge is not perceived as neutral. It is the basis for better appreciating truth

(Haq), which is revealed but which can be “seen” by the knowledgeable in the world around them. Indeed, believers are enjoined to look around, and to analyze what they see, to use their minds to learn the truth. And turning to the Sunna (or tradition) of the Prophet, we find that the Prophet exhorted his followers to seek knowledge as far as China, then considered to be the end of the earth. Scientists are held in high esteem: the Prophet said that the ink of scientists is equal to the blood of martyrs. In battles, prisoners from the ranks of the non-believers could earn their freedom by teaching a Muslim to read. The Muslims recognized the Jewish and Christian religions, and called their adherents “people of the book”.

The early Muslims, did not reject the advanced civilizations of Greece, Egypt and Persia. They translated their books into Arabic and wrote careful exegetes about them. They preserved the legacy of Hellenic Greece and Hellenistic Alexandria with its fabulous ancient library, whose destruction in successive fires, starting with Julius Caesar in 48 BCE and ending with the destruction of the Serapeum in 391 CE, and the murder of Hypathia in 415 CE resulted in a major loss to humanity as the 700,000 scrolls it contained were lost. BUT as distinguished scholars pointed out, the story of the invading Muslim Arabs in 641 CE burning

the Library by order of Caliph Omar is nonsense since the Library was completely destroyed over two centuries before.

The early Muslims, when confronting the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, did not call for banning or burning their books. Indeed, they translated them into Arabic, they wrote excellent studies about them, referred to them as “Al-Hakeemain” (the two wise men), and selected those parts of Greek philosophy that suited their needs and interests and rejected the other parts .

Indeed, so great was the respect that they had for ancient books and learning that they undertook one of the most remarkable adventures of the human intellect; they recreated as close an institution to the Ancient Library of Alexandria as the world has seen. It was called the *Bait al-Hikma* or the “House of Wisdom”.

We are at the beginning of the ninth century and the Abbasid Empire stretches from Morocco to India, and from central Asia to Sudan. The capital is Baghdad. The new Caliph Al-Maamoun, son of the legendary Caliph Haroun Al-Rasheed of Arabian Nights fame, would give a big push to this project. He actually offered that anyone who would translate an ancient manuscript into Arabic would receive its weight in gold. Soon, from all over the vast empire manuscripts were being collected and

translated. Soon the Vizier, Al-Maamoun's minister of Finance, said that: "The scholars are cheating: they are using big letters and thick paper in order to increase the gold they will receive". To which Al-Maamoun replied: "let them be, for what they give us is infinitely more valuable than the gold we give them"... All librarians must aspire to have rulers with such priorities!

As a result of that enormous program of translation Arabic became the language of knowledge and science within less than a century. But the program also helped gather the remnants of all the copies of manuscripts from the Great Ancient Library of Alexandria that remained anywhere in the vast Abbasid empire. These were gathered back into the house of Wisdom in Baghdad as their owners rushed to have them translated and get their weight in gold. The Arabic translations were copied many times over and they traveled far and wide in the Empire as well as finding their way to Europe through Spain and Sicily and other points.

In the vast Muslim empires of the middle ages, science and philosophy flourished along with freedom of expression and public debate. Rationality and the experimental method were adopted at the end of the tenth century.

Centuries before Bacon, Descartes and Galileo, Ibn Al-Haytham (10th C) laid down the rules of the empirical approach, describing how the scientific method should operate through observation, measurement, experiment and conclusion:

“We start by observing reality ... We then proceed by increasing our research and measurement, subjecting premises to criticism, and being cautious in drawing conclusions... In all we do, our purpose should be ... the search for truth, not support of opinions” .

Likewise, listen to the voice of Ibn Al-Nafis (13th C) on accepting the contrarian view, subject only to the test of evidence and rational analysis.

“When hearing something unusual, do not preemptively reject it, for that would be folly. Indeed, horrible things may be true, and familiar and praised things may prove to be lies.”

This is the Muslim tradition that must be revived if the Arab World, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, and the Muslim world, Arab and non-Arab alike, will indeed join the ranks of the advanced societies of our time. Rejecting politicized religiosity, and reviving

these traditions would promote the values of learning and science in our societies, the values of the Book. Books, whether printed or electronic, and the learning they symbolize, would once again be at the center of our social fabric. We would once again become learning societies that participate in the production of knowledge, not just in the consumption of technology.

Returning to the case of 9th century Baghdad, we note that when a great philosophical debate occurred around the divine origin of the Quran, where the Mu'tazilite school held that it was physically created even if the inspiration was divine, while the mainstream orthodox view held that every word was divine, there was hardly any violence, and the most that was done in the case of Ibn Hanbal, a great jurist who opposed the Caliph Al-Maamoun's open support for the Mu'tazilite school was that he was jailed for a while. A very mild rebuke given the medieval practices well-known elsewhere in the Mediterranean of the time.

But not all societies in the middle ages were so sympathetic to learning and books. Baghdad, with its fabulous house of Wisdom, was destroyed by Hulagu and his Mongol armies in 1258 CE.

There are very few examples of Arabs or Muslims burning books or destroying libraries. One such

example was in the 12th century, when the writings of Ibn Rushd were burnt, but he was allowed to depart from Andalusia and copies of his books had been safeguarded elsewhere.

By and large these were rare incidents in a world defined by its openness to all cultures, where they would bring Indian numerals with the marvelous invention of the zero, and use it extensively, and also pass it on to Europe who would refer to the ten digits as “Arabic numerals”. This is the world where the eminent Jewish Scholar Maimonides and the eminent Nestorian Ibn Ishaq could flourish alongside their Muslim brethren. This is the world of enormous openness that was created in Baghdad, Andalusia and the domain of the Moghul Empire of Akbar. What a difference from the European tradition where scholarship was limited to a few monasteries and under strict doctrinal supervision of the church hierarchy. Europe was a different world, where up to 500 years later the inquisition did not allow discussion and Giordano Bruno was burnt alive in 1600 and Galileo barely escaped with his life in 1633.

But that impressive legacy is to be appreciated for its **relative** respect for books and scholars, relative to the northern shores of the Mediterranean that is, but the Muslim east also had their martyrs. Most famous

among them was the mystic Al-Hallaj who was atrociously put to death in 922 CE in Baghdad. But these cases were quite rare as there was no comparable centralized authority similar to the medieval church in Europe and no doctrinal enforcement body similar to its inquisition.

It is important to recognize that this openness to culture and to science of all kinds and from all corners of the earth was to remain a marking characteristic of the Arab/Muslim cultures of the east for over a thousand years, well after the advent of the Ottoman Empire. Then decline set in, and the torch passed to Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Printing was invented, and mass production of books became possible. With an expansion of readership, the evolution of the ideas of the enlightenment and the momentum of the post-renaissance scientific revolution, Europe was to acquire its new burst of creativity, innovation, science and technology and would go on to dominate the world, frame contemporary thinking and reinvent the global institutions of today. Europe and the American societies built by European immigrants to the Americas, would become the new custodians of books, freedom of expression and open debate.

This rise of Europe coincided with the decline of the Islamic societies, almost all of whom would be

colonized by Europe and would gradually regain their independence in the 20th century. We still have a lot of catching up to do.

Today even as the world explores the marvels of the genes and breaks down the secrets of the atom and reaches to the stars and calculates the age of the oldest rocks ... some in the Muslim world debate the importance of growing beards or whether a woman's nail polish prevents her from having full ablutions. Others want to recreate their own vision of a mythical past in the 21st century by imposing their own narrow perspective of society as they look with suspicion on the new and try to erect barriers to limit where our minds may range... But they shall fail.

It is only by returning to our legacy of respect for learning and our love of books, books be they electronic or printed, books in any form, books by any name... Only by that will we, the contemporary Arab/Muslim societies of today, be able to relink with our past legacy of greatness, rationality and pluralism and become, once more, major contributors to the formation and production of knowledge, real artisans of the exciting journey of discovery that the future is all about.

Thank you.

NOTES

- 1 Al-Farabi, brilliant contributor to the foundations of Muslim philosophy, never denied his reading of Plato and Aristotle, nor is his personal contribution diminished by that, any more than Einstein's contributions would be diminished because he read and studied Newton and Maxwell.
- 2 One important example was in 650 CE when Uthman ibn 'Affan, the third Caliph, ordered the destruction of all unauthorized versions of the Quran in order to ensure that only the seven copies he issued of the authentic Quran in Madina would be used henceforth. But the purpose and logic of that action was clear to all.

In my research on this question of book burning, I have come across very few cases of burning of books by Arabs/Muslims, although I feel that any single book destroyed is a great loss to humanity as a whole. Among the few cases of such disasters are the important case of the library of Nalanda, known as Dharma Gunj (Mountain of Truth) or Dharmagañja (Treasury of Truth), a world renowned repository of Buddhist and Hindu knowledge; the Maldives library of budhists texts in the 12th century; and possibly also the Royal Library of the Samanid Dynasty in the 11th century. But the two most famous accusations, burning the libraries of Alexandria in Egypt and of Ctesiphon in Persia have both been debunked by scholars old and new.