

## I

# *What the West has Learned from Islamic Civilization*

ABDULHAMID ABUSULAYMAN

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**G**IVEN THE CONTEMPORARY social and political climate in the world, it is more significant now than ever before to discuss the contributions of Muslims to civilization, with a view to building bridges of appreciation and understanding among peoples of various cultures and ideologies. A computer search for the need for cross-cultural understanding yields 306,000 web pages.<sup>1</sup>

Having spread all over the world as faith communities, the inheritors of the Abrahamic tradition of monotheism have had the greatest influence on human history.<sup>2</sup> At this juncture of history, when the whole world is like a village, it is of immense importance to work together toward mutual understanding of the common grounds, common goals, and common dedication to the spiritual as well as the moral aspects of life to restore humankind to its senses. The aim is to bring about lasting peace with justice, by resolving problems created by the distortion of history. If there is any way to make real peace in this world, people of the Abrahamic faith trio have a special role to play.<sup>3</sup>

While Christianity and Islam have been behind most of human accomplishments, it is also owing to the distortion of these two faiths that we have faced and are still facing the stupendous problems of global proportions. Christianity with its message of peace and tolerance was distorted so much so that it justified ruthless imperialism and its injustices throughout its colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Indeed, it was a distortion of that great religion and its spirit. It also gave birth to nationalism, where human beings emphasized only differences that

conveniently served the opportunists as a basis for hatred and wars. Its propaganda also contributed to the distortion of Islam and Muslims. Islam came to elevate the human civilization out of the Dark Ages to new heights, and created a new civilization by advanced empirical and experimental sciences as well as by enhancing an awareness of the need for human unity based on the concept of monogenesis.<sup>4</sup>

The lasting spiritual light of Islam immensely impressed people of other faiths so as to change not only their religious beliefs but also their customs and even their languages. It was unprecedented in human history. Northern Arabia, North Africa, and East Africa were not Arabic speaking, which they later became. It was the imprint of these pioneers at a time of darkness, which built the strong foundations of the new civilization, leading to Europe's Protestant revolution (the Reformation), the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. Deliberate distortions of history have covered up contributions of Islam and Muslims to human civilization.<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, Muslims themselves have little or no idea about their own spiritual light, which has now lost its luster. Consequently, the Muslim people are making little or no significant contribution to the field of modern science today.

To bring genuine peace to this global village, we need to revive the pristine purity and spirit of monotheistic equality and justice for all. We have to ensure that these spiritual values are back in power to bring human beings to their senses. Although the United Nations declared that war was illegal, there were more wars in the world between 1950 and 2000 than ever before. So it is not mere words but also the spirit that brings people together to appreciate one another. The whole idea of Islam, and before that of Christianity, is to bring human beings to this universal spiritual message, to make them identify with one another as creations of the One and Only God (SWT),<sup>6</sup> to serve the good cause in this world, and to achieve eternal happiness in the Hereafter.<sup>7</sup>

In reviving the real values of Christianity, Islam made it clear that human beings are created from a single source (soul). The differences among peoples and the creation of peoples and tribes should not be allowed to lead to conflicts or to seek superiority. Humankind should interact (the Qur'anic word *yata'arraf*) because, if we are all the same or identical, there is no meaning to or method of interaction. When we differ in a positive sense, however, we will interact to contribute to social, eco-

conomic, and political justice. It is a law of nature for the positive–negative and the male–female to interact to mutual benefit.

Islam does not deny that there are different colors or different languages, yet this is not a cause for determining superiority or inferiority of individual and groups. It is to bring to humankind the wonders of God in creation. So it is a positive phenomenon. According to both Islam and Christianity, justice and personal responsibility are central.<sup>8</sup> We must always do justice to everybody, even to our enemies. What Islam brought forth was religious freedom. Whenever there was a war for the sake of Islam, it was only to bring people their freedom. Whoever agrees to that, shares the goal of peace. Whoever denies human beings the freedom of their own convictions and religion should not be allowed to do so.

In this global village, we need to have the philosophy of peace and freedom to identify and appreciate one another in practice. Real freedom means to be able to do the right thing, and not to do the wrong thing. Freedom without ethics, without values, without a worthy cause, is a curse upon humankind, it is the destruction of civilization. That is where the role of all genuine faith communities comes in: to serve the Divine cause to facilitate life and lend real meaning to it with love, conviction and mutual acceptance.

The Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) represents the cream of the Muslim communities in the United States. It is the first time, I believe, that there has been an immigration of Muslim intellectuals to this free, influential, and open society. It is the duty of the Muslims in this country, with their intellectual and financial resources, to reform their culture by removing from it all the wrong things which have developed within the Muslim communities. They need to bring back the real values of Islam, and to bring back this kind of moral sense of justice and responsibility.<sup>9</sup> To contribute to this country of theirs and to its people, they ought to unite to serve the good cause of balancing the spiritual and material benefits to humankind.

It is a mission for this Muslim community to seize this opportunity of freedom and resourcefulness to cut the shackles of oppression by dictatorships, to rethink their religion and their culture, and to restore the true light and spirit of the common cause of justice. They also need to work together with their fellow human beings for the benefit of the United States and the world. This country can serve as a vital force for the peace

and the prosperity of the whole of humankind, or, with the misuse of its resources, it can become a source of destruction. The power is great, yet it urgently needs strong self-control and proper spiritual guidance. It is up to these faith communities and their cooperation that they can fulfill the mission of peace with justice. It is their duty and an opportunity which they cannot afford to lose. They need to work together for the benefit of humankind, *insbā'Allah*.

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