

The Islamic Renaissance Was a Dialogue of Civilizations

by Hussein Askary

The purpose of this report is not to indulge in theological discussions, nor plans for social reforms in Muslim countries, although these are necessary matters that have to be taken seriously by political and religious leaders of these nations themselves. The purpose is to encourage both Muslims and non-Muslims to investigate and find inspiration in the great Golden Age of the Islamic Renaissance to solve today's dilemmas. Although I am Muslim by faith, I believe in a secular society, living in a modern nation-state where freedom of faith is granted for all. In modern times, the use of religion for political purposes or turning politics into a shadow of religion are recipes for disaster.

Nov. 23—The Muslim nations and the world have been captured by a terrible state of chaos, bloodshed, and insanity. The terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, like those attacks which have actually become almost a daily occurrence in large parts of Southwest Asia and North Africa, carried out by people who claim to be fighting for the Islamic faith and “Muslim Ummah” (collective name for all Muslim peoples), have brought the world closer to a global religious war.

In reality, the overwhelming majority of the victims of the so-called Islamist terror groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Qaeda, and others, are themselves Muslims. “Islam has been hijacked,” is a common statement uttered by Muslims all over the world who disapprove of and condemn what these terrorist organizations are perpetrating in the name of Islam. In the West, the words Islam and Muslim are increasingly being associated with war and terrorism.

But the world today cannot afford to fall into the same trap that brought upon human civilization such calamities as the Crusades of 1099-1291, which, together with the Mongol invasions, resulted in the Global Dark Age; nor the religious wars of Europe from 1492,

which did not stop until the 1648 signing of the Treaty of Westphalia. In order to prevent that, there are certain issues that have to be resolved immediately:

1. What is source of the current crisis;
2. What is the aim of its creators; and
3. How it can be stopped, so that the world and humankind, with the participation of Muslims as citizens of their respective nations, could take a new leap in the process of evolution.

We have to figure out what kind of ideas can inspire whole generations of Muslims and non-Muslims, who are either direct victims of these religious wars, or who, under the pressure of the destruction of their nations by illegal wars, economic sanctions, and geopolitical manipulations, could potentially be the recruits for such destructive forces as IS and al-Qaeda, for example.

There are clearly subjective causes from within the Muslim societies themselves that have to be critically discussed and corrected. But we should not fool ourselves that this by itself would transform the world. The current world order, dominated by the trans-Atlantic powers, itself is the key source of this crisis, and has to be stopped and changed.

The Key to the Crisis

This “dis-order” has brought to the world the “jihadist” militancy that was created by the Anglo-American-Saudi intelligence services in the Afghan war 1980-1989, the Anglo-Saudi attacks of 9/11 on the United States, the invasion and destruction of Iraq in 2003, and of Libya in 2011, and the current horrendous war on Syria fomented and backed by such allies of the United States, Britain and the EU, as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. It is here that the key to the current crisis lies.

This tool of geopolitics has now turned into a plague that is threatening all civilization with its nihilistic and satanic view of man as a blood-thirsty beast. The “prag-

matic” use of these bestial tools, unfortunately continues today in the region. The same goes for the destabilization of Russia through Chechen rebels, and China through the Uighur militants, both of whom are now actively involved in the war in Syria against the government in Damascus and in support of ISIL and the al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda) and other terrorist groups, who have hijacked the name of Islam and turned it to something completely opposite to what it really was in the Islamic Renaissance era.

The ideology of the “Clash of Civilizations,” of such Anglo-American ideologues as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, falls into the same bestial category. Their claim that China, the Islamic world, and the West will inevitably clash, and cannot co-exist as equals and work together for economic, scientific and cultural development, is debunked by the Renaissance efforts illustrated below.

The reality of Muslim society between the Eighth and Thirteenth Centuries was not always rosy and fine. Civil wars, bloody power struggles and intrigues were a normal state of affairs. However, most of those in power and their scholars, advisers, scientists, and citizens, realized and agreed that *knowledge was power*. Today, the Islamic world has been pulled down into a bloody political and religious struggle, but knowledge and the love of wisdom have taken a back seat. Many Muslim nations today are experiencing a state of cultural and economic stagnation, if not outright degeneration.

What is common between the Western bestial ideologues and politicians such as Dick Cheney and Tony Blair, with their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, ISIL and al-Qaeda, is the process of dehumanization of individuals and groups. It is no coincidence that many of the top Iraqi military leaders of ISIL, are former Iraqi soldiers and officers of the Republican Guard and special forces, who after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, were imprisoned and tortured by U.S. and British forces in the most un-



Dept. of Defense

Two key representatives of the “disorder:” Former Vice President Dick Cheney and then-Crown Prince Sultan of Saudi Arabia, meeting in 1990.

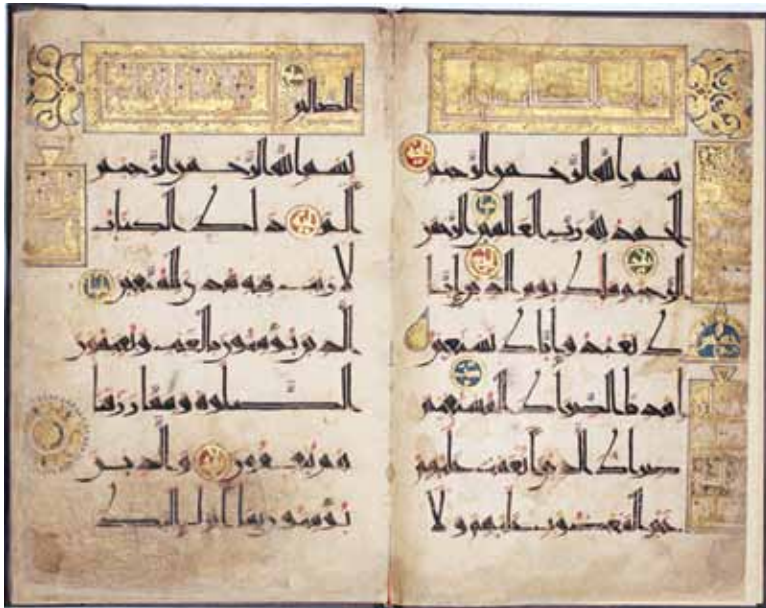
imaginable and humiliating way in such infamous locations as Abu Ghraib prison and Camp Bucca. That is where the leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself, was incarcerated by the U.S. forces in Iraq in 2004.

These prisons, like other CIA-run prisons around the globe, became the recruiting and brainwashing centers that produced a new generation of mass-killers, who, exactly like their prison-guards and torturers, regarded anyone who was not on their side as less than human, and more like an animal or an insect who could be crushed, maimed or burned in cold blood. Intolerance is the key aspect of this bestial mentality.

This mentality does have precedents in Islamic history, in such theologians as the Fourteenth-Century Ibn Taymiyyah, who is the key source of inspiration for the Saudi Wahhabi movement and its creations, al-Qaeda and ISIL (see appendix).

What Image of Man?

After a long period of development, in what can be called the Golden Age of Islamic civilization (Eighth-Thirteenth Centuries), eastern Islamic civilization went into a prolonged dark age after the first destruction of Baghdad by the Mongol hordes in 1258. The Muslim regions did not recover until after World War II. That Dark Age swept over central Asia, Iran, Iraq, and the Levant, and Turkey. Egypt and North Africa were also



courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art

Manuscript of the Quran in color and gold on paper. This fragment contains the surah al-Fatihah (the Opening) and al-Baqarah (the Calf).

deeply affected by this process. Islamic Civilization survived in Al-Andalus (Spain) a little longer, until 1492.

If the world survives the current crisis, with the combined efforts of the BRICS nations and wise people in the West, the Muslim world will have to reflect on its history and purpose of existence, and on the brightest periods and aspects of its heritage in order to muster the cultural and moral strength that it has lost for both subjective and objective reasons.

The image of man in the *Quran* is no different from that in Christianity or Judaism. Human beings are creatures with special characteristics that separate them from all other creatures, by the merit of being created “in the image of God” as in Judeo-Christian belief, or “having Allah blow His own Soul unto Adam” (Surat al-Hijr, 15:29 *Holy Quran*). Humankind also inherited dominion over the Earth (Surat al-Baqara 2:30 *Holy Quran*), as the Creator’s creative representative on Earth, to whom the Creator himself had taught all existing knowledge (2:31 *Holy Quran*), and mankind is commanded to develop it.

From the very outset of the message of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed and the “Revelation” of the *Quran* emphasized the importance of reading or recitation. “Iqra’ a,” [read, recite or proclaim] was, according to Islamic traditions, the first command Mohammad received through the “Revelation’s” Archangel Jibril

(Gabriel). In a truly Promethean spirit, The Prophet Mohammed reportedly received these words:

1. Read in the name of thy Lord, who created-
 2. Created man out of a leech-like clot.
 3. Read/Proclaim: And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,-
 4. He Who taught the use of the Pen.
 5. Taught man that which he knew not.
- (Surat al-’Alaq or verse No. 96, the *Holy Quran*).

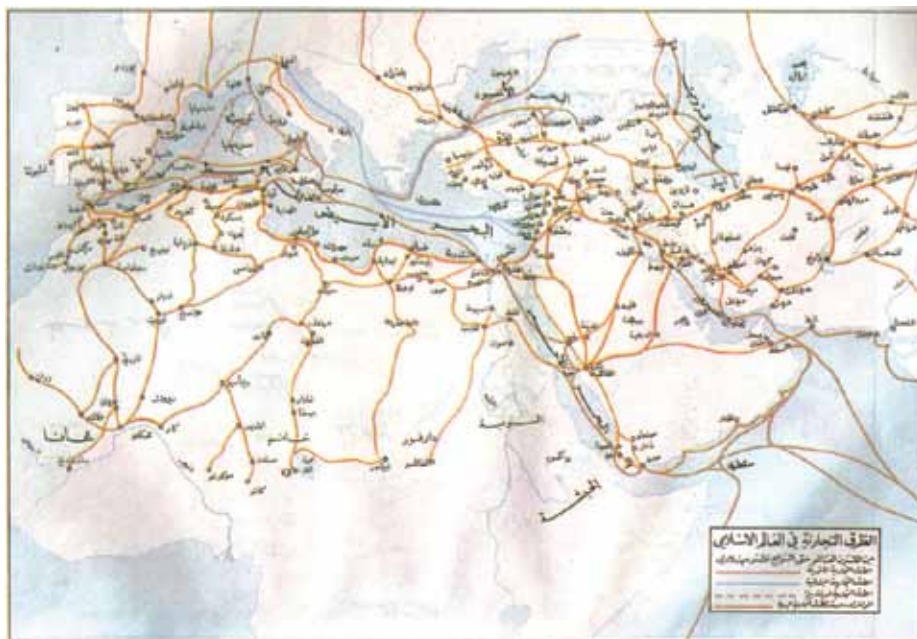
There is also a saying/tradition (Hadith) attributed to the Prophet Mohammad—whose authenticity some dispute, but which is widely spread even in early Islamic books—which says: “Seek knowledge even if it were in China! Seeking knowledge is a duty upon each Muslim.” This is a significant sign of the early Islamic society’s emphasis on seeking knowledge and wisdom, which is the root

cause of the massive cultural, scientific, and economic evolution that took place in the Islamic “empire” in those centuries.

It is well-known that the Prophet Mohammad was a merchant who travelled for 25 years of his early life to Yemen from Mecca in the Winter to meet merchants from Asia and East Africa, and to Syria in the Summer to meet with merchants from the Levant, Persia, and Rome,—and even those from India and China who had come through the Silk Road. His knowledge of the traditions and cultures of these peoples is reflected in the *Quran* and Hadith (tradition). The emphasis on a knowledge-based society was one key cause of the Islamic Renaissance. Another was the recognition of the universality of knowledge, which enabled the Muslims to assimilate enormous bodies of knowledge from every possible culture they came in contact with, without any prejudice. Therefore, they could bring together the sciences, philosophy, technology, etc., from China, India, Persia, Greece, and Africa, into one melting pot and institution.

The reference to China was not a mere metaphor. Diplomatic relations with China were established less than twenty years after the Prophet Mohammad’s death. His companion Saad ibn Abi-Waqqas visited the Chinese Tang Dynasty Emperor in 650. The Chinese Emperor Yung-Wei, according to writer Yusuf Abdul Rahman, “respected the teachings of Islam and

FIGURE 1



Munjid, Dar El-Machreq Publishers 1986, Beirut, Lebanon

Map of trade routes in the Islamic World between the Tenth and Fourteenth Centuries. The density of large cities along the trade routes are a confirmation that trade is a byproduct of development.

considered it to be compatible with the teachings of Confucius.” To show his admiration of Islam, the Emperor approved the establishment of China’s first mosque, reportedly Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou. That mosque still stands there today. Although the story of the visit by Waqqas is not firmly documented, the evidence is that the mosque was built in the Seventh Century.

The Silk Road: An Ancient Image of the Future

There is an intimate, intertwined relationship between the Ancient Silk Road and Islamic Civilization and its dialogue with East and West. Fortunately, once again, today the emergence of the New Silk Road strategy, which is spearheaded by China and also its allies in the BRICS constellation, Russia and India, gives hope for reversing this spiral of violence and destruction. Rather than the Clash of Civilizations, a “Dialogue of Civilizations” can be pursued, as former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami phrased it, or a harmony of interests among nations, and what President Xi Jinping has called a “Win-Win” strategy.

The Ancient Silk Road, and indeed the New Silk Road, have to be regarded as vehicles of civilization-building. As Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the Chairwoman

of the Schiller Institute (and the “Silk Road Lady” as she is now known in China), has repeatedly emphasized, and as my colleagues at *Executive Intelligence Review* and I have illustrated the concept of the “Development Corridor,”—the New Silk Road is not about the transfer of merchandise from point A in the East to point B in the West or *vice versa*. The same goes for the ancient Silk Road.

Rather, the Silk Road is a vehicle for scientific, technological and cultural exchange, and a means to bring new tools to the peoples along the route between A and B to improve their productivity, their creativity, and thus their standards of living. That, in turn, enables them to use their specific local or national culture and creativity to

invent and create new tools to give back to the other societies along the same route.

Incorporating New Technologies

What Muslim society did from the Eighth to the Thirteenth Centuries, with certain ups and downs, with the Chinese technology to produce paper from wood pulp and other cellulose fibers, is one of the brightest examples of this cultural transformation process.

In real economics, i.e. physical economics as Lyndon LaRouche has taught, one of the key metrics of economy is to figure out how the introduction of a new technology or scientific principle into one part of the economic process, increases the productivity of the system as a whole. Paper-making is one such technology, whose dissemination (through Islamic societies) across three continents, created such massive effects on human society, that it will take many years and many experts to measure its impact on the productivity of the human society throughout the past eleven centuries.

Arabic was also the *lingua franca* from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries, from Central Asia all the way through Southwest Asia and North Africa to Spain. The introduction of paper from China to this vast trans-continental culture, made the further assimilation and

spreading of knowledge easier, cheaper and faster by orders of magnitude.

The history of the invention and dissemination of paper is a wonderful story of how Chinese, Indian, Persian, Arab, and European cultures collaborated directly or indirectly to elevate the human base of knowledge, culture and economy.¹

The advantages of paper are that it is flexible, absorbs ink more efficiently, is light in weight and costs less. Government bureaucrats in the Islamic empire realized that texts and seals written or impressed on paper were very difficult to remove or forge. Merchants on the Silk Road preferred paper letters of credit and checks to gold and silver coins which were a security risk.

Another important characteristic is that paper can be produced anywhere in the world, no matter the climate or geography. What is needed is cellulose, which is the most abundant of all naturally occurring organic compounds, and fresh water both for the production process and also for water wheels to power papermills. In Central Asia, Iraq, eastern Syria and Egypt, all these elements were available, and helped establish the largest paper mills in the world between the Eighth and Thirteenth Centuries.

Islam and the Tang Dynasty: A Clash Produces a New Culture

The Tang Dynasty in China reached its pinnacle of prosperity, but also of political and military expansion in the late Seventh Century AD up to the middle of the Eighth Century, which was considered the Golden Age of the empire. Its capital Chang'an (currently Xi'an) was the most populous city in the world, with around 800,000 to 1 million inhabitants in the 760s. The total population of China was estimated to be about 50 million.

This factor enabled the dynasty to build a massive army, which managed to expand the influence of the empire westward into the Turkic steppe in Central Asia, dominating and benefitting from the trade on the Silk Road. Many minor kingdoms and cities paid tribute to the Tang Emperor, and provided wealth from the fertile Ferghana Valley, watered by the Syr Darya River which is today shared by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

1. 1. Bloom, Jonathan M., *Paper before Print, The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*, Yale University Press, 2001.

FIGURE 2



The Chinese Tang Dynasty expansion, AD 750.

Simultaneously, the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate (660-750 AD) had likewise expanded both westward throughout North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula and eastward all the way to Transoxania (i.e. beyond the Oxus River). With the emergence of the Abbasid Dynasty, which overthrew the Umayyads in 750 AD, the Islamic and Chinese empires collided face-to-face in that region. A major battle, the Battle of Talas in the valley of the Talas River (in today's north-eastern Kyrgyzstan) took place in July 751, in which the huge Chinese army was defeated with great losses. It is reported, although not confirmed, that thousands of Chinese prisoners were taken into custody by the Muslims, including many craftsmen, including "papermaking artisans."

The Battle of Talas put an end to the westward expansion of the Tang Dynasty. But, interestingly, both empires were interested in continuing the commercial process along the Silk Road, and also in security cooperation, as both sides viewed the local Turkic tribes as a threat, in the border region between the two empires. According to the Chinese-Muslim historian Bai Shouyi, diplomatic missions and gift exchanges continued, with thirteen missions between 752 and 798.

An Lushan Rebellion, a Turning Point

However, the most dramatic development that brought China and the Islamic world closer, was the as-

sistance delivered by the Muslim Caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansour (founder and builder of Baghdad in 767) to the Tang Emperor to face the devastating An Lushan Rebellion. An Lushan was a Chinese General of Sogdian (Central Asian) origin. The rebellion that began in 755, ended in favor of the Tang Dynasty in 763.

A decisive moment came when An Lushan's rebels captured the capital Chang'an in 756, forcing many of its inhabitants and Emperor Suzong to flee eastward. At that moment, the Emperor Suzong approached al-Mansour for help, and the latter sent 5,000 Arab troops (some reports say 25,000), to aid the Chinese Emperor. They helped recapture the capital and push back the rebels. Many of these Muslim soldiers stayed in China, and are said to be the origin of the current Hui Muslims of China. Muslim merchants also continued to travel to China, and the spreading of teachings was tolerated at that time by the Confucian-influenced Tang Emperors.

This collaboration led to closer cultural exchanges, which spurred the scientific and cultural revolution that became the Islamic Renaissance.

The Baghdad Renaissance

During the reign of Haroun al-Rashid's son, Caliph al-Ma'mun (reigned 813-833), Baghdad was transformed into the global scientific and philosophical "research center." Any important scientific or philosophical manuscript from any part of the world and in any language, would have found its way to the House of Wisdom established in Baghdad by al-Ma'mun. There, it would be translated, studied, copied, replicated (if it was a discovery or experiment) and disseminated without restrictions. This is a wholly major history in itself, which I dealt with in my report "Baghdad 767-1258 A.D.: Melting Pot for a Universal Renaissance," ([EIR, October 18, 2013.](#))

The trans-cultural dialog and enrichment achieved in sciences, music, and philosophy, in addition to economic activities such as architecture, hydraulics, and navigation through new modes of cartography, reached completely breathtaking levels in this era, facilitated by the introduction of papermaking from China and the expansion of the Silk Road.

Greek geometry and mathematics were fused with the Indian numbering system (so-called Arab numer-



Maqamat al-Hariri Library, illustration by Yahya al-Wasiti, Baghdad 1237

Scholars in an Abbasid library.

als) in the House of Wisdom by Mohammad ibn Musa al-Khawarizmi (Latinized as Algoritmi), the father of algebra, whose name is immortalized today in the term *algorithms*. Greek and Persian books of medicine were translated and developed into a whole new system of medical education by such scientists as Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) whose book *Al-Qanun fil Tib* (The Canon of Medicine completed in 1025) was the main medical textbook throughout the Islamic world and even in Medieval Europe for centuries. The art of composing terrestrial and celestial spherical cartography, incorporating Greek and Chinese methods, was refined and spread from Baghdad into many parts of the world.

The most important aspect of this massive development is that it was done as joint projects of many cultures, religions, and nations without any prejudice. Ibn Sina was Persian, Al-Khawarizmi was Turkish, and Qusta ibn Luqa, the most important translator of Greek and Latin manuscripts in the House of Wisdom, was a Melkite Christian of Greek extraction. But they all worked in Baghdad and spoke Arabic. One of the most amusing ironies in this regard is that the man who first codified and compiled all Arabic grammar in one book *Al-Kitab*, was Sibawayh (665-696), who was a Persian.

Sibawayh (whose name mean “the smell of apple” in Farsi) was born in Persia, but when he was still a child, his family moved to Basrah, in Iraq. He later moved to Baghdad to join the flourishing scientific society there. His teacher in Basrah was Al-Khalil al-Farahidi, a musician and linguist who was the first to codify and write down the entire metrical system of Arabic poetry, and who also wrote books on phonetics and articulation.

The largest Abbasid library was built in Baghdad in 991 by a Persian minister under Caliph Baha-ul-Dawla, named Sabur ibn Ardashir. It contained over 10,000 volumes on a range of scientific subjects. However, it was in Spain that the greatest of all libraries was built, in Cordoba, during the reign of Caliph al-Hakam II (reigned 961-76), a descendant of the Umayyads. Al-Hakam’s main interest was books, and he started collecting books in his teens and was tutored by the best scholars of the time. Al-Hakam’s library contained 400,000 books. The catalogue of titles alone is said to have filled 44 volumes. Scholar Jonathan Bloom says that even if these numbers are exaggerated, “still, at even one-tenth the size, [it] would have been larger, by a factor of fifty or more, than any library in Christendom.” Furthermore, this library in Cordoba, and those in Toledo, were available for outsiders too. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars, astronomers, physicians, and theologians, would meet in special reading and meeting rooms in the library to discuss and debate. Later, in Fatimid Egypt (Tenth-Eleventh Centuries), a similar library was built, modelled on the one in Baghdad, and almost as large as the one in Cordoba.

Economic Impact

Many of the scientific discoveries that were made in the scientific institutions were also incorporated in the economic development of society. Providing water to the cities and agricultural lands required massive infrastructure projects, such as canals, water wheels, hydraulic systems for lifting and transporting water to the cities, etc. Scientists like the Banu Musa brothers, who lived and worked in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, designed many machines for water pumping and transportation. Their works were transcribed and published in books. Facilitated by the availability of paper in the Islamic lands was the spread of other arts,—metalworking, ceramics, and particularly textiles,—“for art-



EIRNS/Michael Weissbach

Interior of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, built A.D. 786-787 by ‘Abd al-Rahman I.

ists could create designs on paper that artisans could apply to their work.” This was most efficiently used in architecture, because the repetition of patterns, which is characteristic of Islamic architecture, could be transmitted through pattern books.

Commerce, which had developed massively due to agricultural and industrial development during the early centuries of Islam, thrived. The Islamic world from the Indus and Central Asia to the Pyrenees in Europe, was one “common market.” Merchants traveling long distances with their commodities, preferred not to carry gold or silver coins as they travelled. Paper credit, such as letters of credit (*Suftaja*) and checks (originating from the Persian *Sakka* or Arabic *Sakk*), were widely used in the trading centers of the Silk Road, and in Africa and the Mediterranean. Copies of

these were found among the Geniza Papers, referring to the late Nineteenth Century discovery made in the Genizah (Hebrew for storage room) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt, of a collection of almost 300,000 manuscripts.

Transmission to Europe

In addition to Greek philosophy and science, translated back from Arabic books, it was mostly from Islamic Spain that Europeans learned about the advances of the Islamic Renaissance.

Unlike the Byzantine Christians, the Spanish and French Christians had a different view of Islam and Arabic altogether. More important, Christian theologians began an effort to translate Arabic books. Peter the Venerable, abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Cluny, France, travelled to Spain for several years and returned in 1141. Peter commissioned the translation of at least five major books, including the *Quran*, from Arabic to Latin.

Another very important character in the Islamic-Christian dialog was Ramon Llull (Latin: Raymundus Lullus). He was born in 1231 in Palma, Majorca, which was under the control of the Christian Kingdom of Aragon. He travelled in Muslim Spain and North Africa, and learned Arabic to study and translate the works of Arab theologians and philosophers. Although Peter's mission was intended to refute Islam's "heresies," and Llull's was to convert Muslims to Christianity, they both shifted the European critique of Islam from looking at it from outside, into studying it from inside through translating and reading the original works.

Inspired by Francis of Assisi, Llull came to the conclusion that Muslims, Jews, and Christians believe in the same "attributes" of God the Creator, and that Muslims should be approached by reasoning and dialog, and not by the force of weapons. Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa later made the same arguments in his 1453 groundbreaking book *De Pace Fidei* (On the Peace of Faith), shortly after the Ottomans invaded Constantinople. Llull had argued for the importance of linguistic education at the major universities in Europe. It was partly due to his influence that the Council of Vienne ordered the creation of chairs of Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean (Aramaic) at the universities of Bologna, Oxford, Paris, and Salamanca, as well as at the Papal Court.

The story of the Islamic Renaissance should be a source of inspiration for all those who, while fighting against the bestiality of such satanic forces as ISIL and their masters, and fighting to establish peace, are at the same time thinking about the future of their societies and nations. How would a world of obviously different cultures, religions, and traditions come together to create something common, beautiful and great?

As Lyndon LaRouche described the matter with associates recently, an educated society is one where, even though the great majority may not be geniuses themselves, the society has certain qualifying intellectual and moral capabilities, and they do know that they must look up to the geniuses of history and of our own day, and walk on their path. The greatest Muslims of the Renaissance period, looked to the great geniuses of other cultures, like the Greeks, and learned from them,—but in that process produced their own geniuses. We should all look up to them and walk upon their path.

Wahhabism and Ash'arism

The highest Wahhabi religious personality in Saudi Arabia, the Mufti and Chairman of the Supreme Council of Ulama (clergy), Abdul-Aziz bin Abdullah al-Asheikh, on March 12, 2012 described the acts of fundraising and supporting the rebel Free Syrian Army as *jihad* under Islamic law, because, according to him, the Syrian regime is *kafir* (blasphemous or apostate). However, when it came to peaceful protests in Saudi Arabia by those demanding economic and political justice, these he declared to be evil.

This is a typical example of the selectiveness of the Wahhabi clergy, which always takes the side of the House of Saud. A former Mufti, Abdul Aziz bin Baz, was asked about Muslims wearing crosses and other ornaments; he declared it a sin. However, when he was asked about King Fahd wearing the Iron Cross of the British Empire, awarded to him by Queen Elizabeth II, making him an honorary British Knight in 1987, bin Baz replied that "if the Wali al-Amr (the ruler of Muslims) considers that wearing the cross has a benefit to the Muslim nation, then that cannot be considered an offense"!

This idea that the “ruler of the Muslim nation” cannot be faulted was an artificial creation of theologians who were used by Umayyad kings at the beginning of the Eighth Century to get immunity for oppressing the people and killing Muslim opponents, to acquire and preserve power. They manipulated the following verses from the *Quran* as a blank check for their rule: “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you” (Surah Al-Nisaa, verse 59).

Al-Ash’ari

One of the most vocal such theologians was **Abu al-Hasan al-Ash’ari** (875-935), the spearhead against the Islamic Renaissance. His concept was that Allah is the Creator of everything in existence, and so both evil and good acts of human beings are predestined by God’s will. Therefore, the evil committed by the ruler is not his own creation, but that of God, and if people tried to change that evil, they would be committing a sin against God’s will!

This view was the opposite of the school of Mu’tazila, which called for a rational method of interpretation of the *Quran*, and argued that the divine injunctions of the Creator are accessible to human reason, and that reason must be the ultimate criterion for judging good and evil.

Al-Ash’ari, who started as a student of the Mu’tazilites, turned against them in 912, and published his book *Clarification of the Bases of Religion*, in which he argued for absolutely literal interpretation of the *Quran*, in a clear attack on the Mu’tazilites. The Mu’tazilites had become a strong philosophical and scientific school in the early Renaissance age in Basrah and Baghdad in the Eighth Century.

Al-Ash’ari attacked, for example, their view that God’s references to his “seeing, hearing, having hands, ‘sitting on the throne,’ etc.” were metaphors. He claimed that God does indeed have such physical attributes, because that is what is stated in the *Quran*.

As part of the Seljuk power grab in Baghdad, **Nizam-ul Mulk al-Tusi** (1018-92), the Seljuk vizir (minister) under Sultan Alp Arslan, raised the Ash’arites to prominence in Baghdad to take over the Shafi’i Sunni sect, while undermining the other Sunni sects, creating sectarian strife in Baghdad. He established the Nizamiya school of theology, the institution from which a later theologian emerged, **Abu Hamid**

al-Ghazali (1111-58), who launched the final and most fatal attack on the science and philosophy of the Islamic Renaissance.

His book, *The Destruction of Philosophers*, is entirely oriented to destroying the philosophical thoughts of Ibn Sina (980-1037), the greatest of Muslim scientists and philosophers of the Islamic Renaissance, and his predecessor al-Farabi. Al-Ghazali’s inquisition became a tool of destruction of rational thinking, pushing society into mystical fundamentalism. The socially and economically weakened and divided Islamic state became an easy prey for the Venetian-run Crusades, and later, the Mongol invasion.

Ibn Taymiyyah

Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, who was born under the Mongol occupation in 1263 in Harran (now southern Turkey), has today become the key theological source of the Wahhabi, Salafi, and jihadist takfiri groups. Ibn Taymiyyah was the source of inspiration of Abdul-Wahhab, such Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founders as Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna, and later the Afghan Mujahideen main preacher Abdullah Azzam, and Osama bin Laden. Not only did he preach the extreme literal interpretation of the *Quran*, but also became a Fatwa factory for armed groups and political leaders of his time who were willing to use him in their power struggle.

He preached complete non-toleration of Christians and Jews, and using public executions and maiming for the smallest criticism of the religion or suspicion of heresy. He declared many Muslim sects as worse than the infidels, such as the Alawites and Shia, saying they should be completely eliminated from the face of Earth. Many leaders of ISIL, al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and such “moderate” Syrian rebel groups as Army of Islam, use his fatwas against Alawites and Shias to capture and behead all those they can get their hands on. ISIL used a fatwa of Ibn Taymiyyah’s to justify the public burning alive of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, for example.

Ibn Taymiyyah, who is called in Saudi and other Salafist schools Sheikh al-Islam, (the grand Sheikh of Islam), is one of the key sources on theological education in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi sponsored religious schools around the world.

—*Hussein Askary*