

ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION: FACTORS BEHIND ITS GLORY AND DECLINE

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ABSTRACT

Civilization is widespread of quality civic idea, supported by full development of arts, maintained with enthusiasm to pursuit the knowledge in which many ethnicities and religions may participate. It begins from the time of the settlement of the first man on this earth. Almost every nation has contributed to the history of civilization, although the contribution may vary from one nation to another. What may distinguish one civilization from one another is the strength of the foundation on which these civilizations have been founded and the impact these civilizations have made to humanity as a whole. Based on this fact, Islamic Civilization which may be synonymous to tawhidic civilization is based on a unity of God which stands completely against any racial or ethnic discrimination. Such major racial and ethnic groups as the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Africans, Indians, Chinese and Malays in addition to numerous smaller units embraced Islam and contributed to the building of Islamic civilization. Moreover, Islam was not opposed to learning from the earlier civilizations and incorporating their science, learning, and culture into its own world view, as long as they did not oppose the principles of Islam. Indeed, historically speaking, during the period when Western civilization was experiencing the dark ages, between 700-1200 A.D, Islamic empire stretched from Central Asia to southern Europe. Scholarly learning was highly prized by Arab Muslims and the people, and they contributed greatly to science and mathematics. Many classical Greek and Roman works were translated into Arabic, and scientists expanded on the ideas. Yet, in this modern era, many seem to jubilate our past glory, without paying enough attention to the cause and impetus that contributed to that glory of Islamic civilization, and others tend to marginalize (if not ignore) the factors behind its collapse and decline. Therefore, this article by applying historical approach will explore the factors and raison d'être of rise and fall of Islamic Civilization. And lastly, the article will provide some solutions and lessons that can be learned from rise and fall of Islamic civilization.

Keywords: Islamic Civilization, Decline, Rise, Qur'an, Muslims, Arabs, Knowledge.

Introduction

Islamic civilization is strongly linked with Islamic world that can be divided in three sections geographically. If we focus our gaze on the Islamic part of the globe, it would look like an eagle that is flying with its two wings completely outstretched. The first geographical section is in the center, the heart of Muslim territory. The two others form wings on either side. The Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor can be regarded as the main body of the Islamic world, analogous to the body of the eagle. Asia Minor is its head and beak. The southern part of the peninsula is its tail with wings stretched out. Its right wing starts from Iran and Turkey, includes Afghanistan and Indo-Pak sub-continent, and extends up to Malaysia and Indonesia. Its left wing encompasses the whole of Northern Africa and had reached into Spain and France.

According to many historians, the Islamic civilization starts from the seventh century of the Christian era as the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was born in 571 A.D. He started his mission in 610 A.D. and the most correct estimates state that, after having brought about a complete Islamic revolution throughout the Arabian peninsula, he returned to his Creator in the year 632 A.D. (May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) Meanwhile, after the demise of prophet Muhammad (S.W) Islamic civilization has continued to flourish in the time of his successors, and during the dynasties of *Umayyads* and *Abbasids* upheld the banner of the Islamic world. Their civilization and culture, their religion, their arts and sciences and their supremacy continued to exercise its hold on the greater portion of the civilized world. There is no doubt that such civilization was so unique and great on earth. Indeed, nowadays, many Muslims tend to talk about the golden age of Islamic civilization and its greatness without paying enough attention to the factors behind its glory in one hand, and the factors behind its decline in the later century in another. Hence this humble article aims to explore the vis-a-vis root causes of glory and the main reasons behind the decline of this unique civilization. As such, historical approach will be applied in order to achieve the aims and the objectives of the article. And lastly, the article will suggest some solutions and remedies that may solve the above problem.

Definition

What is civilization?

Civilization according to Fernand(1995) is derived from the Latin word *civilis*, which means civil. Other related Latin words are *civis*, meaning citizen, and *civitas*, meaning city. Over the years it has been used to indicate various meanings. In the 18th century, the word was used to distinguish behavior. Behaving as a civil person was the opposite as behaving as a barbarian. Later on, during the time of the French Revolution (late 1700s to early 1800s), the word referred to humanity argued Samuel(1996) in

its entirety, rather than just a specific group of people. As more modern times approached, the word was sometimes used interchangeably with the word 'culture.'

According to Cambridge dictionary of English (1998) civilization is human society with its well-developed social organizations, or the culture and way of life of a society or country at a particular period in time. Yet Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1992) defines civilization as the opposite of barbarism and chaos. Civilization is an advanced stage of human society, where people live with a reasonable degree of organization and comfort and can think about things like art and education.

Characteristics of Civilization

Civilization has been given many characteristics by many different people. A social scientist named V. Gordon Childe (1936) believed civilizations could be distinguished from other forms of society by their types of livelihood, settlement patterns, and forms of government, economic systems, and literacy. However, many consider civilization to indicate a group of people living in a city. Urbanization helps many historians distinguish between many groups that have existed, especially in ancient times. Civilizations generally have complex systems of ownership of land and marketable goods. Yet, Charles Redman (2004) reviewed the above characteristics given by Gordon, as such he classified the characteristics into two, namely; primary characteristics and secondary characteristics. Primary characteristics, such as ,Urban settlements , Full-time specialists not involved in agricultural activities , Concentration of surplus production, Class structure and lastly state-level organization (government).

However, the secondary characteristics can be categorized as followed; Monumental public building, extensive trading networks, standardized monumental artwork, writing and development of exact sciences. All in all, we can conclude that civilization is an advance level of development characterized by advance social development, economic progress, good political organization, scientific and technological development etc.. in any society.

Having defined civilization generally, what is Islamic civilization?

According to Huntington and the "Clash of Civilizations" (1996) religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations. As such, there is no surprise that civilizations have frequently been identified by religions. For example "Islamic civilization" or a "Christian civilization" implying that each religion has its civilization. Based on above fact, the term 'Islamic Civilization' is rooted from two concepts; namely 'Islam' and 'Civilization'. Therefore it means a civilization based on Islam which is also a religion of comprehensive way of life argued Qardawi(1985). It is also a civilization that comprises a group of people or a nation whose way of life or culture are based on Islam. It is founded by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h).

What are the Characteristics of Islamic Civilization?

Characteristics of Islamic Civilization

1- Based on the Tawhid -

Al- Faruqi(1992) argued that Muslim civilization was the first universal civilization that was based on a pure and strict Unitarianism (unity of God) .The only One Who deserves submission, the only One Who deserves worship and the only One Who deserves absolute obedience.

2- Universality

It is undeniable fact, that one of the characteristics of Islam stated al-Qardawi (1985) is universality. Automatically, it means Islamic civilization was universal civilization, and the first civilization which embraces the entire humanity. It declared equality of all human beings of all descents, races, colors. It is attributed to all Muslims on an equal basis. Therefore, this kind of civilization is open to the contribution of all members of the Muslim *Ummah* regardless of their race, ethnicity, or color, and even non-Muslim citizens. Because it is based on principle of Quranic verse "Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you" (49: 13).

3- Moderate Rationalism

Another unique characteristic of the Islamic Civilization is moderate rationalism. One of the beauty of Islam argued Kamal Hasan (2011) is religion of moderation. It means Islam opposes any sort of extremism in all dimensions of human life. It instead invites its people to exercise moderation, as such it gives human reason a high position; because its faith is based on reasoning and conviction, it rejects superstitious and unfounded beliefs. However, it does not go extreme to deny the truths which are not directly related to empirical knowledge but which can be proved empirical knowledge and rational thinking.

4- Tolerance

Indeed, it is undeniable fact that, tolerance towards people of different religions (especially Christians and Jews) is the most important characteristics of Islamic Civilization argues al Faruqi(1998), this fact is proven through the constitution of Al-Madinah that was built by wisdom of the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) , where Muslims and non-Muslims were dwelling together in harmonious manner, and where the true tolerance, pluralism and peaceful co-existence had prevailed. And minorities

enjoyed a high level of tolerance and freedom of religion and economic pursuit. Undoubtedly, this characteristic is peculiar for a civilization based on religious foundations.

5. Integrated and balanced civilization

The last characteristics of this marvelous civilization is integrated and balanced civilization. It is what al-Qardawi (1985) calls *al-tawazun*, (balance) which is also one of the characteristics of Islam. As a matter of fact, Islamic civilization, integrates the faith with the state, and integrate empirical science with revelation, i.e. there is no conflict between religion and science. As such, there is no room for secularism; because the civilization integrates the body with the spirit (material vs. spiritual) and integrates the worldly life with the last life. It is a civilization that based on the Quranic verse that urges Muslims to link their worldly routine activities to the hereafter. "But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief." (28: 77). In fact, there is no doubt that the above characteristics have contributed to the glory of Islamic civilization and its excellence above other creations. As such the early Muslims scholars in the early centuries have contributed immensely to various aspects of knowledge, ranging from medicine, optometry, chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, religion, theology, geography and others, along with other important factors that also contributed to the glory of Muslim civilization in the early centuries, as such Islamic civilization has reached the pinnacle of development and progress in many dimensions in the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries respectively. However, what are the factors behind the rise of Islamic Civilization?

Factors behind the rise of Islamic civilization

1. Spiritual power:

A tremendous impulse was given to the Muslim community to explore life and the world around them (life and world created for a purpose) to spread the word of Allah, as such, the early Muslim argued Muhammad Iqbal (1985) realized the importance of Ijtihad or exercising human intellect that is allowed by Islam, they started to swim in the various field of Knowledge that later contributed to the rise of the Islamic civilization, bearing in mind that the first revelation to prophet Muhammad (S.A) is strongly urging Muslims to seek knowledge.

2. Ability to transform the ideals of the Qur'an to daily conduct:

According to Imam al-Ghazali (1993) character or ethics is an established state (of the soul) from which actions proceed easily without any need for reflection or deliberation. One of the Uniqueness of the holy Quran is that, it is a book of ethics and moral values. In fact, it is a source of ethical values and moralities, as such, early Muslims used to follow the teaching of al-Quran closely, they used to transform the theoretical message of Qur'an into practical one, hence, they took into account the importance of were hard-work, perseverance, sincerity, honesty, patience and love of knowledge for the sake of Allah.

3. Intellectual freedom:

Freeing human intellect from superstitions, as argued by Iqbal (2010) and existence of ijtihad and productive creativity were some of the factors behind the rise of Islamic civilization. There was a sense of teaching people to think critically and creatively (prohibition of imitation without sound evidence). i.e research environment was so conducive and motivative, especially searching the claim of revelation in the natural phenomenon and return to the revelation in case of any obstacle or any hindrance in their study of physical world. The opening of Bait al- *Hikmah* by Harun al- Rashid (al- abbasi) for research and innovative purpose was a such example that prove intellectual freedom in the early stage of Islamic civilization.

4. Political freedom:

According to Ibn Khaldun (1986) Injustice, despotism and tyranny are the clear sign of the downfall of any state. Perhaps, the early Muslims realize the above fact that any sort of oppression especially, between the ruled and the rulers will affect their unique civilization, whose civilization is rooted from tawhid and Qur'an. Therefore, the early Muslims maintain the sense of justice, and equality between the ruler and the ruled, Mutual consultation was also taken into account as well as freedom of speech and expression which is highlighted by the *shariah* (Islamic law) was highly respected, along with the sense of reciprocity between the ruled and the rulers for the sake mutual beneficial relationship. This attitude of Muslims has contributed immensely to the development and rise of Islamic civilization.

5. Openness:

Openness here means ability to learn from human experience, regardless to people of different races and ethnicities. Initially, Muslim civilization was a joint endeavor of Muslims from different peoples and races. It was not the military power which enabled early Muslims to dominate half of the world. It was their righteousness and their humanity. Moreover, the Muslims intermarried freely with local people and became part of them.

6. The spirit of seeking knowledge:

According to the teaching of Quran: "Say: are those equal. Those who know and those who do not know?" (Qur'an, 39:9). Obviously, the above ayah was asking question without providing an answer, with the belief that human being is given faculty intellect by Allah, that can help him to reach logical conclusion. Indeed, rationally speaking, the answer of the above question is negative, because there is no way to balance between the knowledgeable people and ignorant individuals. Perhaps, most of the rulers of Banu *Umayyah* and the first two centuries of al- *'Abbasiyyin* dynasties realized the above Quranic question, as such, they were educated and scholars. They encouraged learning and scientific enquiry and they used to spend on it generously (the House of Wisdom) that was found by Harun Rashid was such an example that prove the existence of the spirit of seeking

knowledge in various dimensions, writes Abdul Rauf (n.d) as such great Muslim scholars emerged in these centuries, such as Jabir Hayyan in the field of chemistry, Khawarizmi, in the field of mathematics, Ibn Sina in the field of medicine, Ibn Haytham in the field of optometry, Bairuni in the field of science and religion and Ibn Khaldun in the field of Sociology, civilization and history. These scholars said Hamidullah (1989) have also contributed to the western civilization. Notably, Islamic civilization had strongly contributed to the world civilization that is because it was not hegemonous civilization but, it was homogenous that considered not only the well-being of Muslim *ummah* alone, but, it also considered the progress of humanity at large.

Factors behind the Decline of Islamic Civilization

However, while the Islamic civilization had enjoyed this glory in its early centuries, out of blue, the sudden decline has emerged in the early 11 century! This gives rise to a number of questions. One of these concerns is what is the factors that have led the Muslim world and their civilization to this weak position? In order to answer this question correctly, we need to recall the factors that enable Muslims to perform extremely in various fields in the earlier centuries of Islam. Did Islam play a positive role in the development and glory of such civilization? If our answer is positive, why decline happens in the early twelve century? Can it be said that, while Islam contributed to their glory in the past has become ineffective or unable to contribute to their glory in modern era? The answer of these questions demand cursory glance on the some of the tangible factors behind the fall and decline of Islamic civilization.

According to Umar Chapra(2008) and other prominent Muslim scholars agreed that Islam was not the cause of Muslim decline and malaise. But, the factors that led to fall argued Chapra(2008) are moral decadence,(Dishonesty, indifference, cheating, laziness, neglecting obligation, involvement in haram, interest in pleasure and enjoyment rather than more serious things...etc), deep rooted inequalities of income and wealth, conflict and disunity among the *ummah*. Whereas, Ibn Khaldun(1986) argued in his *Muqaddimah* that the central factor of rise and fall of any civilization is closely dependent on the well-being or misery of the people, this is in turn argued Ibn Khaldun(1986) dependent not just on economic variables but also on the closely interrelation role of moral, institutional, psychological, political, social and demographic factors through a process of circular causation extending over a long period of history. Perhaps Arnold Toynbee(1935) may have read the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun when he also argued that civilizations die from suicide, and not by murder.

It means human being is the central factor of killing or promoting his civilization. So, while the early Muslim *Ummah* were enjoying good characters, moral values and the teaching of Qur'an, that contributed to the rise of Islamic civilization, those good manners and excellent attitudes were suddenly vanished, Hence, the civilization collapsed. In fact, the important of human factor in shaping the civilization has also stated in the holy Qur'an when Allah said "God does not change the condition of a people until they change their own inner selves" (13:11) in another chapter of the Qur'an, Allah said: "Corruption has appeared everywhere because of what people have done" (30:41). Lastly, concerning the factors behind the decline of Islamic civilization Iqbal (1999) argued that one of the factors behind the decline of *Ummah* is the closure of Ijtihad which also contributed to academic decline. As such, sciences reached the stage of stagnation (staying at the same level without any farther development); because Ijtihad was virtually stopped; In fact, the role of Ijtihad argued Iqbal(1999) which highly contributed to the development of early Muslim *Ummah* had come to end, fanaticism to juridical as well as theological schools of thought became widespread

Conclusion

In conclusion, there was a time in the history of Islamic civilization that is affectionately called the Islamic Golden Age by Muslims and historians of all persuasions alike. Scholars would argue about the exact dates that constitute the Islamic golden age, but the general consensus is that it started shortly after the rise of the Islamic empire – early 7th century – or after the birth of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and lasted until sometime between the 13th and the 15th century. Indeed, there is no doubt that, Islamic civilization had immensely contributed to the world civilization, it was homogenous civilization which open its door to all mankind regardless their ethnic and racial diversities, its characteristics are based on Unitarianism(*Al-tawhid*) and universality(*Al-'Alamiyyah*). It is because of its solid foundation that such civilization enjoyed the glorious era in the early century of Islam. Based on our research, we found that the golden age of Islamic civilization can be attributed to various factors, such as high spirit to spread the word of Allah, transformation of the idealistic of the Qur'an into the daily conduct, intellectual freedom from superstitions to think critically and creatively and unity of the *ummah* in the golden era of Islamic civilization. However, one may ask the rational question that, what did lead the Muslim world to the weak position after having enjoyed a glorious past stretching over several centuries? The, research find out that Islamic civilization dies from suicide and not by murder. That means the weakness of such unique civilization which started to appear in the early 13th to 15 centuries was caused by Muslim themselves, that decline can be attributed to many factors such as, disunity among the *Ummah*, moral decadence, decline in intellectual and scientific activity, loss of dynamism in Islam after the rise of dogmatism and rigidity, tribalism, ethnocentrism and many more. With the collapse of this gigantic civilization in human history, the *ummah* is yet to recover from social and economic malaises.

Solutions, suggestions and lessons:

Firstly, the Muslim *Ummah* need to refer to the right and correct teaching of the holy Qur'an and *Sunnah al- Nabawiyah al- Sharifah*, Which are the two legacies that left by *Rasullullah*. According to authentic *Hadith* stated by the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) "I left for you two legacies, when you hold them firmly you will never go astray, book of Allah and my *Sunnah*".

Based on above *Hadith* of the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), Muslims *Ummah* ought to return to the guidance of Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, with particular reference to the view of Qur'an about the factors behind the rise and fall of any civilization. As a matter

of fact, Qur'an has already stressed on the role of human being himself as a root cause of his own downfall, and that fact is clear in chapter 13:11 of holy Qur'an when Allah said "God (Allah) does not change the condition of a people until their change their own inner selves", similarly in another chapter of the Qur'an, Allah stated that: "corruption has appeared everywhere because of what people have done" (Quran, 30:41) the above Ayyah simply indicates that people are the main architect of their fate and destiny, moreover, they are not only the end but the means of their actions. Human being as means to destroy his end has also stated by the Holy Qur'an when Allah said: "And that man can have nothing but what he does (good or bad), And that his deeds will be seen. Then he will be recompensed with a full and the best recompense" (Qur'an, 53: 39-41). Thus, Qur'an and *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) are the main solution and primary remedy of malady of the *Ummah*

Secondly, the Muslim *Ummah* need to remember the importance of knowledge and the purpose of seeking knowledge in Islamic worldview. They should seek knowledge in all dimensions, because knowledge is power, and, it is via knowledge we can be raised to the highest status by Allah. According to the holy Quran: "Allah will exalt in degree those of you who believe, and those who have been granted knowledge. And Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do". (Quran, 58:11). And again, through knowledge, we can discover many truths on *Sunnatullah* (God's customary way of acting).

Thirdly, there is a need for *ijtihad* among the Muslim *Ummah*, what i mean by *ijtihad* is creativity, critical thinking and innovation. So, the Muslims *Ummah* should refer to Qur'an as a source of their research in all dimensions of knowledge, they should contemplate and ponder about the meaning of verses of the Quran for the sake of creativity and innovation.

Fourthly, mutual beneficial reciprocal relationship between the rulers and the scholars is urgent. I mean the friendly relation between the people in power and scholars is essentially needed. As such, the rulers should sponsor the research of academic scholars and intellectuals. Likewise, the intellectuals should academically contribute to the betterment of the nation, and they should propose the establishment of join research venture among the Muslim *Ummah*.

Lastly, it is time for Muslim *Ummah* to learn from the past, so as to reshape the present and pave the way for an excellent future. The lesson we can learn from the glory and decline of Islamic civilization is that, any civilization on earth can logically be understood by evaluating and analyzing their vision and motivation, and any civilization should not forget the importance of justice, i mean we need to bear in mind that, the Almighty God (Allah) is always just, and His omnipotence love justice. Therefore, any civilization that is not based on justice will surely collapse.

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