

The Sick Nations of the Modern Age

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Preface

This article first appeared in the *Tarjuman al-Quran*, Lahore, October 1935, a monthly organ edited by Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi. It was later on incorporated in one of his books *Tanqihat* – a collection of essays and discourses specifically dealing with the problems arising out of the conflict between Islam and the Western civilization.

This penetrating thesis is a bold attempt to understand the malady from which the entire humanity suffers today, and of which, apparently, there appears to be no remedy. After analyzing the cause of this downward trend the author points out in clear cut terms the ways and means through which clouds of darkness and ignorance can be shed away and mankind can get real happiness and bliss.

As regards the Muslims, the author has mercilessly taken stock of their shortcomings and failings. The author laments that those who were supposed to lead mankind to glory and excellence are themselves groping in darkness through no fault of others but of their own, and they themselves are responsible for downgrading the fair name of Islam.

Although the article was penned years back yet its contents are as fresh as tomorrow morn and its message as vital as it was yesterday.

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The Sick Nations of The Modern Age

The whole of mankind – Muslims as well as non-Muslims, and the peoples of the East as well as the West – are today beset with a grave evil: their lives are governed by a culture that was born in crass materialism and as now totally steeped in it. The practical policies as well as the theory of this culture are based on perverse and unstable foundations. Its philosophy and science, its ethical values and social system, its law and politics, in short every feature of this culture, made a wrong beginning and has since progressed in the wrong direction. And it has now reached a critical stage of decline which is not very far from collapse and total ruin.

This culture had its origin among a people who were not blessed with any clear and pure source of divine wisdom. They had their leaders of religion no doubt, but these leaders were not endowed with wisdom or knowledge or armed with any law of divine origin. They had no assets or equipment except a fallacious religious concept which was inherently incapable of guiding them along the right lines. On the other hand it could not but act as an obstacle to the progress of science and philosophy. This is precisely what it did, with the result that those who were eager to progress threw religion overboard and adopted a different course where they had no guide except observation, experience, speculation and deduction. And they came to depend entirely upon these undependable guides, which are themselves incapable of functioning rightly without light and wisdom from a higher source of guidance. With the help of these guides, they no doubt made appreciable endeavours in the spheres of thought, research and organization; but in every one of the

fields in which they worked, they made a wrong start and set out in the wrong direction. They started from atheism and materialism, and consequently looked upon the universe as an object without a Creator or Master. Similarly, they studied the phenomena of nature and the living creatures with the presumption that there was no reality beyond what could be directly perceived or experienced. With the help of experience and speculation, they studied and comprehended the law of nature, but they could not perceive its maker. They found the world of matter at their feet and began to press the forces into their service. But they had no idea that they were not the masters or rulers of this world in their own right but only the vicegerents of the real sovereign. This ignorance of, and indifference to, the divine Creator and Master of the universe made the concept responsibility alien to their minds. And consequently they raised the whole edifice of their civilization and culture on unsound and insecure foundations. They abandoned God and began to worship the self, which, raised to the level of divinity, put them in grave difficulty. And it is the worship of this false and dangerous god that now leading them, in all fields of thought and action to deceptive and dangerous courses. The intermediary stages of these courses are no doubt very attractive, but the last and ultimate stage is total ruin and destruction. It is indeed this false god that has made science a weapon for the destruction of mankind, vitiated morality with self-indulgence, hypocrisy and unfettered freedom, and subjected the economic life of men to crass selfishness and fratricidal conflict. Again, it is this god that had injected the poison of selfishness and self-indulgence and luxurious living into every aspect of social life, and made politics for mankind by corrupting it with nationalism, racial discrimination and the worship of power. In short, this was the pernicious seed that was sown during the European Renaissance and which was grown over the centuries into a massive and deadly tree. Its fruits are sweet but poisonous,

its flowers are attractive but full of thorns; its twigs and branches are green and verdant but are exhaling a deadly breeze which is imperceptibly poisoning the blood of all mankind.

The peoples of the West who themselves planted this pernicious tree, are now disgusted with it. It has created such serious problems in all aspects of their life that every attempt to solve them raises countless new difficulties and complications. Any branch that is lopped off is replaced by several thorny branches that run out to be equally, or even more, dangerous. For instance, the attack on capitalism has resulted in the birth and rise of communism. Attempts to cure democracy of its ills have led to the rise of dictatorship. Endeavours to solve social problems have led to feminism and birth control. Efforts to eradicate social evils by law have resulted in large scale law-breaking and crime. In short, an-endless crop of troubles has sprung from this pernicious tree of civilization and culture, making life hell for the peoples of the West. These troubles hurt every fibre of their being and they writhe in unbearable pain. Their souls are uneasy and restless and crave for the elixir of life; but they know not where to get it. Most of them still labour under the delusion that their troubles arise from this or that branch of the deadly tree; they are, therefore, wasting their time and energies chopping off the branches that appear harmful to them. It has not yet dawned upon them that all the trouble lies at the root, that their system of civilization and culture is poisoned at the heart, and that it is vain and foolish to expect a healthy branch from a rotten root.

On the other hand, there is a small group of rightminded men who have realized that the tree of their civilization is rotten down to its roots. But, since they have lived under the shadow of that tree for generations, and its fruits have become a part of their being and lives, they fail to see what

other kind of roots could be capable of growing into a sound tree and yielding wholesome fruits.

In the event, both these groups are in practically the same position. They both badly need a panacea for their ills and troubles, but do not know what that panacea is and where it can be had.

This is indeed the time when the way of life enunciated by the Qur'an and preached by the Prophet of Islam should be presented to the West. Its people should be told that this is the panacea and the elixir for which their souls are thirsting; this is the tree whose roots as well as branches are sound and healthy, whose flowers are fragrant and without any thorns, whose fruit is both sweet and nourishing, and whose breeze is pleasant and life-giving. They should be informed that Islam offers pure practical wisdom and provides a perfectly sound starting point for thinking and theorization. It offers the knowledge that is capable of shaping individual character in the most perfect way. It offers to men a spiritualism that is not meant for monks or other recluses but constitutes a source of solace and peace of mind for men of the world who are involved in the struggle for life. It offers to mankind sublime and stable rules of law and morality which are based upon a comprehensive knowledge of human nature and cannot be distorted in the pursuit of selfish ends. It offers sound and salutary principles of culture and civilization which override the unnatural distinctions of class and the artificial ethnic division and seek to organize mankind on purely rational foundations. Moreover, these principles help to bring about a sound and peaceful atmosphere of justice, equality, generosity and fair mutual dealings. This atmosphere rules out any conflict among individual or classes over their respective rights or interests: on the other hand it ensures ready and wholehearted cooperation among all groups and individuals in the promotion and private happiness and public welfare.

It is time that the nations of the West were warned of the impending catastrophe and told, that if they want to avert the disaster and save their culture from destruction, they should rid themselves of all the prejudices and hatreds that they have inherited from the religious bigots of medieval Christendom, and which they have retained in spite of having discarded all the other legacies of the Middle Ages. They should approach the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam with an open mind, grasp and assimilate them, and accept them.

The Muslim nations are in a different stage from that of the Western peoples. Their maladies as well as the causes of their maladies are different; but the remedy that they need is the same as that indicated for the West. They must return to the kind of life and the course of conduct that God has presented in His Last Book through the agency of His Last Prophet.

The conditions in which Islam came into conflict with Western culture in the preceding century were very different from those in which it had clashed in its heyday with earlier civilizations. Islam came into conflict with the civilization of Rome, Persia, India and China at a time when it governed and effectively directed the intellectual capacities and practical abilities of its followers. They were an active and vigorous people surcharged with the spirit of Jihad – pooling down all their energies and capabilities to uphold the Word of Allah and were prepared to sacrifice even their lives for the sake of their mission and causes. At the same time they possessed superb intellectual powers and through their wisdom and sagacity were able to understand and explain the law of Islam to meet requirements of changing times. Spiritually as well as materially, they were a powerful and dominant people and were in fact the leaders of civilized mankind. None of the contemporary civilizations could resist their advance. Wherever they went, they

revolutionized the people's ideas and way of thinking, their pet theories and ideologies, their morals and habits, their behaviour and outlook of life – in fact, they changed the entire fabric of their being. They were a dynamic people and had an extraordinary capacity to influence others but were not themselves easily susceptible to external influence. No doubt they did adopt what was good in others but their own culture and civilization was so superior and virile that whatever was adopted by them from outside adapted itself to the genius and character of their own civilization, and no external factor could produce any undesirable effect. On the other hand, their impact on other civilizations proved to be revolutionary. Some of the non-Muslim civilizations were totally absorbed by Islam and they lost even their separate identity; others, that had a stronger fibre, were so overwhelmingly influenced by Islam that their basic postulates and doctrines underwent considerable changes.

But that was in the heyday of Islamic civilization. For centuries, the Muslims continued to hold sway over a large part of the world. Their sword as well as their pen ruled supreme. (Militarily as well as intellectually they were the greater power on the surface of the planet). But ultimately their zeal began to waive and their energies began to flag. Their spirit of endeavour declined and they lost the ability to interpret the *Shariah* in the changing conditions. The Book that had for centuries the source of all knowledge and the fountain-head of all their power and dynamic existence was forsaken and began to be treated merely as an object of veneration and formal respect. The precepts and life example of the greatest of men that ever walked over the earth had given their civilization the best of forms possible, a comprehensive and complete system of thought and action, was ignored and abandoned. Consequently, their progress was retarded and the running stream of their life and civilization turned into a stagnant pool. They lost the

leadership of civilized mankind, and the deep and far-reaching influence of their thoughts, sciences, civilization and political supremacy on the other nations of the world began to wane. And then another civilization came on the scene and began to advance rapidly. The principles of endeavour and struggle and intellectual discernment which had been abandoned by the Muslims were taken over by the Western nations. While the Muslims fall into a stupor, the West started for going acting upon those very principles to achieve progress which the Muslims had forsaken. They marched on until they captured the leadership of mankind which the Muslims lost. And then their sword conquered the better part of the globe. Their thoughts and ideas, arts and sciences, and principles of civilization and culture dominated their lives and engulfed completely their minds and souls. And when, after many long centuries, the Muslims woke up from their slumber, they found that they lost the field and that their leadership and eminence in all fields of life was a matter of past and the nations of the West were ruling the roost. They realized that they were equipped with all the knowledge essential for progress and their ideas and sciences dominated the world of learning. Their culture prevailed, their law held the field. They were the rulers of the best part of the world. The Muslims had lost everything.

Today, Islam and Western civilization are in conflict with each other in very different conditions and circumstances. Western civilization is of course no match for Islam: indeed, if the conflict had been with Islam as such no other civilization could possibly have the better of Islam. But the tragedy is that Islam with which Western civilization happens to be in conflict today is a mere shadow of the real Islam. The Muslims are devoid of Islamic character and morals, ideas, and ideology, and have lost the Islamic spirit. The true spirit of Islam is neither in their mosques nor schools neither in their private lives nor in the public affairs.

Their practical life has lost all its association with Islam. The Law of Islam does not now govern their private or collective conduct. No aspect of their civilization or culture has remained firmly embedded to truly Islamic pattern. In the circumstances, the conflict is not between Western civilization and Islam as such: the struggle is between the stagnant and backward cultural position of the present-day Muslims and the civilization of the West which is throbbing with life and zeal, with the light of knowledge and the vigour of activity. The results of this highly unequal struggle are only natural: the Muslims are in retreat; their civilization and culture are being worsted, and they are gradually losing themselves in the rising tide of Western civilization. Their minds and souls have passed under the sway of the West. Their thinking is being moulded by Western ideas and their intellectual powers are developing in accordance with the principles of Western thought. Their ideas and morals, their economy and social life, their law and politics—all are dominated by the West and rapidly adopting its complexion and character. The new generations of Muslims are growing in the belief that the law of life that they have learnt from the West is the true law of life. This is, in fact, the defeat of the Muslims; but unfortunately, it is being treated at the discomfiture of Islam itself.

The problem is not confined to any single Muslim nation; the entire world of Islam is passing through this critical revolution. And much of the blame for this dangerous situation must be accepted by our leaders of religion. It was their duty, right at the outset of the revolution, to bestir themselves and try to comprehend the principles and essential features of the new civilization of the West and to go out to the Western lands to study the intellectual and scientific foundations on which the edifice of that civilization was being raised. With the help of *ijtihad* they should have striven to persuade the Muslims to accept

and press into service the useful practical knowledge and scientific discoveries that had enabled the Western nations to achieve such remarkable progress. And they should have sought to fit these new instruments of progress, in keeping with the principles of Islam, into the educational system and social life of the Muslims. They could thus have helped the Muslims to make up the loss that they had suffered as a result of centuries of stagnation and to catch up with the times. Unfortunately, however, most of the *ulema* had themselves lost the true spirit of Islam. They did not have the ability to interpret the principles and laws of Islam in the light of the changing conditions. They had little juristic insight or practical wisdom. They had lost the power of action and were utterly incapable of deducing the eternal and flexible principles of Islam from the Book of God and the teachings of the Prophet, and applying them to the changed conditions of life. On the contrary, they were obsessed with the past and addicted uncritical acceptance and blind imitation of our dead elders. With the consequence that whenever any problem arose they did not turn to divine Book, which is above the limitations of time and space, but, instead, devoted their attention to books produced by men who were not Apostles of God and whose wisdom and foresight could never transcend the limitations of time and conditions and varying circumstances of life. The teachings of these persons however wise and pious were, therefore not all the capable of guiding the Muslims at a time when the conditions of life had changed radically, and the world of knowledge as well as the practical fields of human activity had undergone revolutionary changes which only God Almighty could know and which could not possibly have been foreseen, centuries earlier, by any person not endowed with prophetic insight and powers. It is true that the *ulema* did try to meet the challenge of the new civilization; but they were not equipped with the instruments required for effective resistance. The sweeping tide of a new civilization

cannot possibly be stemmed with inertia and at a best some out-dated stagnant ideas. Dynamic forces cannot be defeated with inertia and inaction. The trend of events cannot be altered with out-dated logic and outworn arguments. New and uptodate weapons cannot be met with old and rusty ones. The lines on, and the methods by, which the *ulema* sought to organize Muslim resistance to the new civilization were inherently incapable of achieving success. It was obviously impossible for a nation that had been overtaken by the tide of Western civilization to shut its eyes to the reality and escape the effects of the tide. Nor could a nation that had passed under the sway of modern civilization, backed by political supremacy, protect its life from its inevitable influences. What ultimately happened was, in the circumstances, practically unavoidable. After having been worsted on the field of battle, the Muslims were naturally defeated in the spheres of civilization and culture also. And today, we find the tide of Western civilization and culture rising rapidly in all parts of the world of Islam, sweeping the new generations of Muslims farther and farther away from Islam.

Unfortunately, most of our *ulema* are not yet able to see their fault. In almost all the Islamic countries, a large section of the leaders of religion still stick to the old attitude that was initially responsible for their failure. With a few exceptions, the *ulema* just do not try, seriously to comprehend the prevailing trends and the mental make up of modern men and women. Of course, they never tire of denouncing and decrying the factors and forces that tend to alienate the new generation from the fundamental principles of Islam; but they are not prepared to take the trouble of providing the necessary remedies. They have proved incapable of solving the various complicated intellectual and practical problems that the new conditions of life have created for the Muslims of the present age. These problems

can be solved only through the interpretation of the principle of Islamic theology and law in the light of the changed conditions (*ijtihad*), but our *ulema* seem to shun any such endeavour. The manner in which they are trying to explain the teachings and laws of Islam is calculated to repel rather than attract the modern-educated mind. Indeed some of their explanations are so crude and unacceptable that one earnestly wishes that they were never heard or read by any non-Muslim or a misguided Muslim. These *ulema* are still living in the eighteenth century, they still breathe, live and think in that old world, and talk in terms that could have meaning and relevance only in that world. In fairness to these *ulema* it must be conceded that Islamic learning survives in the present-day world largely due to their efforts; they must also be given credit for whatever religious education we find amongst the Muslims today. Nevertheless, the two centuries that stand between them and modern times practically rules out any effective association between Islam and the present day world. Consequently, a young man who devotes himself to Islamic education, as it is imparted today, is ill equipped for the struggle of life and the race for progress. On the other hand, one who wants to succeed in worldly life remains indifferent to the teachings of Islam. This explains why everywhere in the Muslim world we find two groups and school of thought diametrically opposed to and often at loggerheads with each other. One of these is the standard bearer of Islamic learning and culture, but is incapable of leading and guiding the Muslims in all spheres of life. The other group is controlling the intellectual, literary and political affairs of the Muslims, but is ignorant of the principles and essential features of Islam, alien to the spirit of Islamic culture, and unaware of the character of the collective system of Islam and its cultural values. Except for a spark of faith in the recesses of his mind, a Muslim belonging to this latter group does not at all differ from a non-Muslim. But it is this group that possesses intellectual

and practical power, and it alone has the capacity and the strength to run the affairs of the community. Accordingly, this group is misleading the nation and taking it farther and farther along the path of perdition, and there is no opposite force to stop it and show the right path to the people.

I can foresee the disastrous consequences of this situation, and shudder at the prospect. Unfortunately, I cannot claim the high degree of learning and knowledge that one would need to guide the community back to the path of redemption; nor do I have the power to reform such a large community out of such hopeless degeneration. But God has endowed me with a sensitive and sympathetic mind which prompts me to press into service the little knowledge and insight that I have, and call both these groups to revert to the principle source of Islamic teachings and the mainspring of Islamic civilization. In view of my awareness of my own limitations and the immensity and difficult nature of the task that I have undertaken, my endeavour seems rather insignificant to me; but even an insignificant effort is better than inaction, and final success or failure can be determined only by the Creator and Supreme Sovereign. Man can only try, and for my part I am determined to extend the scope of my endeavour as far as I can.
