

## **Chapter IV**

### **Multiple Causes of the Islamic Decline**

The Islamic world has a glorious past and has contributed greatly to worldly civilization in various scientific and philosophical fields. But after XI/XVII<sup>th</sup> century a decline became noticeable in the Islamic culture. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the major reasons contributing to the downfall of the Islamic world. The political, economic, intellectual, and scientific causes will be focused in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the problem. How the process of dwindle started? What can Muslims learn from this draw-back? How can they go forward at the beginning of this new millennium?

#### ***Political Causes***

At the end of the second half of the XI/XVII<sup>th</sup> century, the European travelers in the Muslim world noticed some weaknesses: problems of structure, dysfunction, misery, ignorance, and inaction. The military power of Turkey started to dwindle at the beginning of the XII/XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. One of the main problems was due to the monopolization of lands by the Princes and their close relatives. The suppression of private lands reduced dramatically the development in agriculture, techniques, and arts. Poverty, ignorance, and fear were spreading under the tyrannical power. (Bernier, vol. 1: 269-320, vol. 2: 31-33; Brunschvig, 30)

Despotism, monopolization of lands, and commerce ended the fragile equilibrium and enriched individual owners. (Charles de Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, book 5, chapter 14, book 24 chapter 3, and book 24 chapter 4 quoted by P. Barrière, 373; Brunschvig, 31). Some Orientalists explained the agony of the Muslim world by the fact that the hegemony passed from the hands of Arabs and Persians to the Turks. (Renan, 1861, III-IV, this idea does not appear in the first edition of 1852; Brunschvig, 33) The '*ulamā*' (religious authorities) most often persecuted science and

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philosophy. (Renan, 1883a; Renan, 1883b, 375-401; Brunschvig, 33) Even some Muslims like ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī thought that the Ottoman despotism was responsible of the decay. The tyranny extended a lack of justice and liberty. The Muslims accustomed themselves to ignorance and disdained modern sciences. They thought that the religious authorities were the unique source of knowledge. The lack of capital reduced their economic activity. The excess of rigors coexisted with the negligence of certain religious obligations. The discord between schools was also disastrous. (Al-Kawākibī, 1900, 1902; Tapiero, 1956; Brunschvig, 39).

It will be an exaggeration to attribute the reasons of the decline, mainly to the Turkish-Mongolian invasion, as marking the end of the Arabo-Muslim spirit of search. Many people of different ethnic background (Kurds, Iranians, Andalus...) had contributed to the development of the Muslim culture. Therefore, it is not reasonable to accuse mainly the Turkish-Mongols to have dried up the source. Certainly the main cause of decline cannot be attributed to the Ottoman despotism because there were signs of decay before the Turks came into power. But the growing political power of the ‘*ulamā*’ who started to persecute philosophy and science since the III/IX<sup>th</sup> century had a far more negative impact.

The V/XI<sup>th</sup> century (a century later in Spain) was a crucial time in the evolution of the Muslim culture. Before there was a relative freedom of thought, after this flourishing era, some intellectual activities started to decline. We have to study the V/XI<sup>th</sup> century to search the socio-economic transformations which brought about a process of dwindling. At that time, the Persian and the Turkish Islamic cultures were developed. The linguistic division of the Muslim world where Arabic was only taught in schools decreased cultural contacts. A second problem emerged when the ‘Abbāsids decided to constitute a professional army of different people who were not well integrated in the Arab culture (Berbers, Kurds, Daylamites, and Turks). To maintain a professional army was expensive and it consumed a great part of the budget of the State. The resources of income-tax became insufficient and public properties had to be alienated. The officers who were conscious of their power enriched themselves at the expense of other social classes. The Europeans did more commerce with Egypt than

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with Baghdād and Constantinople. The army was taking progressively control over the State. (Cahen, 200-202)

The causes of the decay cannot be attributed uniquely to political conditions and the insecurity of military conquests. Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna d. 428/1037) who lived during these difficult times, was a prolific scientist and philosopher. The political conditions, during the lifetime of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) and Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), were neither easier.

### *Intellectual Causes*

It is important to dissociate the cultural decay from the political and military decline. For example, in Spain the Islamic culture was flourishing during the political decay of the *Reyes de Taifas* (V/XI<sup>th</sup> century) and during the apogee of the Ottoman Empire in XI/XVII<sup>th</sup> century the cultural renewal was quasi non-existent.

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of the thought, we will divide it in four periods and describe their main characteristics so as to discover in them the elements of decay. First period I/VI<sup>th</sup>-IV/X<sup>th</sup> centuries—The religious sciences arrived at their maturity rapidly. In the IV/X<sup>th</sup> century, diverse sciences like: Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), tradition (*hadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), divine Unity (*Tawhīd*) had already developed their methods and defined their aims.

Second period (V/XI<sup>th</sup>-VI/XII<sup>th</sup> centuries)— In this period, great figures emerged like Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1065), al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazzālī, and al-Shahrastānī. (see Steigerwald; Shahrastānī). During that time the *falsafa* (Islamic philosophy) in Spain brightened up with Ibn Bājja (d. 533/1138), Ibn Tufayl (d. 581/1185), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes d. 595/1198). Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) made a major contribution to *kalām* (Islamic theology) by his work the *Muhassal*. After the IV/X<sup>th</sup> century many apologetic works appeared. This period is characterized by the intense debate raised up by the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of Muslim philosophers*) of al-Ghazzālī and the establishment of the *kalām* of Moderns according to Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406).

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Third period (VII/XIII<sup>th</sup>-VIII/XIV<sup>th</sup> centuries)— Many authors contributed to different fields of knowledge like : in *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis) al-Baydāwī (d. 691/1291), in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) Khalīl with his famous Malikī compendium of law, in Shī'ī *kalām* (Islamic theology) 'Allāma al-Hillī (d. 726/1326), in Maturīdite *kalām* al-Taftāzānī and in Ash'arite *kalām*: al-Ījī (d. 755/1355) and al-Jurjanī (c. 729/1328). Scholars have often identified the end of the Muslim development with the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongol Hülegü Khān, the grandson of Genghis Khān, in 656/1258. But on the level of culture, there was no sudden drop. The VII/XIII<sup>th</sup> and the VIII/XIV<sup>th</sup> centuries were a period of large syntheses and compilations. In Sunnism, authentic synthesis appeared but there was no major original work. With the exception of the Hanbalite Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and his disciple Al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) who desired to enlarge the concept of *ijtihād* (individual thought). (Hallaq, 3-41) They were persecuted and officially condemned. It is only in the XIII/XIX<sup>th</sup>-XIV/XX<sup>th</sup> centuries that their ideas were upheld by the salafiyya movement. (Gardet, 94-95). In the VI/XII<sup>th</sup> and VII/XIII<sup>th</sup> centuries appeared major figures as 'Attār (d. circa 627/1229), Ibn al-Fārīd (d. 632/1235), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) (Steigerwald, 1999). In the VIII/XIV<sup>th</sup> and the IX/XV<sup>th</sup> centuries, appeared the Shādhilī works of Ibn 'Abbād (d. 793/1390) in Andalus and of al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565) in Egypt. The Syrian 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 820/1417) to whom is attributed the *Insān al-kāmil* lived during that time.

During the third period, the scope of the religious sciences was delimited. In Sufism, it was the period of the great founders of Sufi brotherhood like 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166) and Abū al-Hasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258). The Sufis developed the monistic understanding of being except the Shādhilī school. The decline of Sufism started definitely around 900/1500.

Fourth period (IX/XV<sup>th</sup>-XIII/XIX<sup>th</sup>)—This era was characterized by learning from handbooks and glosses. The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman troupes in 1453 swept away the entire Greek heritage toward Italy. From that time, the religious thought has entered in a long period of stagnation covering four centuries. In *kalām*, al-Dawwānī (d. 908/1502), al-Sanūsī of Tlemcen, al-Laḡānī, al-Bājūrī (d. 1277/1860) were excellent witnesses of the ankylosis. (Gardet, 95-96)

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During the first period, the rapid establishment of the religious sciences in only four centuries provoked a will of defense and retreat as well as a hardening of positions. The science of the principles of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*) contributed to the slowing down of the religious thought. The '*ulamā*' tried to elucidate the Qur'ān and the traditions by taking into consideration the changing conditions. In order to limit the scope of *ijtihād* and avoid a great variety of judgments, the four Sunnī schools of law were created. *Ijtihād* became extremely regulated within the limits of each specific school at the beginning of the IV/X<sup>th</sup> century.

The Muslim jurists consider the religious law (*sharī'a*) as perfect and immutable in all its details. During the Muslim history, the Princes have used a secular legislation which could be modified. This secular legislation was separate from the religious law. The religious law recognized the decrees of Princes as administrative not as legislative edicts. The major factor of the decay in jurisprudence was due to the belief of '*ulamā*' that nothing can be changed in the religious law. This conception appeared in the II/VIII<sup>th</sup> century and was caused by the search for a decisive authority i.e. companions (*ashāb*) of the Prophet, the respect of traditions, the formalist and literal thought. Al-Shāfi'ī (d. 205/820) brought juridical schools to accept the traditionalist point of view identifying the true *sunna* with formal traditions attributed to the Prophet. This fact was a major factor of wane. The early notion of *sunna* did not have any specific *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the traditions were anonymous. In the pre-Islamic time, a new *sunna* could be introduced by a political leader. The concept of *sunna* admitted possibilities of development, but this became impossible when the *sunna* was identified to the formal traditions of the Prophet. Therefore the scope of *ijmā'* was reduced. (Schacht, 141, 143, 146).

Another important concept was *taqlīd* (imitation), defined as an assent to the words of an authority. Al-Shāfi'ī rejected *taqlīd* at the profit of *ijtihād*. The *taqlīd* of ancient schools admitted a development whereas the *ijtihād* of al-Shāfi'ī brought jurisprudence to dwindle. The rejection of *taqlīd* by al-Shāfi'ī marked a rupture with continuity. The formalist and literal thought which gave a definitive shape to Islamic jurisprudence in the II/VIII<sup>th</sup> century was responsible for the decay.

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The argument which always comes forward in Islamic law is derived from the literal interpretation believing that the Qur'ān gives answers to everything. The traditionalists were also convinced that the Golden Age is irrevocably of the past and the process of decay is inevitable.

Many Muslims believe that the ancients who lived during the lifetime of the Prophet were gifted with the best knowledge. They based this belief on a tradition attributed to the Prophet: “The people of my generation are the best, then those who follow them, and then those who follow the latter. After that there will come some people whose witness will go ahead of their oaths, and their oaths will go ahead of their witness.” (al-Bukhārī, vol. 3, book 48, number 820) Science, ethics, and religion degrade with time, in spite of a little renewal at the beginning of each century of *Hijra*. Al-Shātibī (d. 790/1388) said that Muslims should know that the ancient books are more valuable than recent ones. He cited many Prophetic traditions to uphold this view according to which science can only decrease to end in a commentary of the Qur'ān: “This day have I perfected your religion” (V: 3). (See Gibb; Brunschvig, 36)

At the end of the II/VIII<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the III/IX<sup>th</sup> centuries the works of philologists and traditionalists had already reached a summit in their development. There were already signs of decay during that first period. The early Muslim thinkers were opened to foreign culture but the '*ulamā*', with their increasing political power, started to impose their rigorous ideology. The Greek philosophy had a great influence during al-Ma'mūn and few of his successors. The Mu'tazilites elaborated a rational way of thinking to enlarge the intellectual horizon of the Muslim community. They brought the attention on problems, which they learned from the Greeks, placing them in an Islamic perspective. They promoted the use of intellect ('*aql*) and the Aristotelian logic.

But under the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861), the liberty of thought and expression was restricted. The strictest '*ulamā*' limited even the scope of secular disciplines. They won a victory and imposed dogmas more accessible to the masses than the complex Mu'tazilite reasoning. Before al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) gave a definitive shape to the religious thought, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) benefited from the '*ulamā*' reaction against the Mu'tazilite movement and started to fix elements of

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Arab culture. He gave more importance to questions of religious knowledge at the expense of secular knowledge.

In the second period, the Saljūq Turks created religious schools in order to preserve the Arabo-Islamic culture in the V/XI<sup>th</sup> century. The teachers were designated by the authorities to transmit the official teaching for the formation of '*ulamā*'. All the disciplines and the methods taught became official and closely supervised. The basis of the instruction was founded on the Islamic law which cannot alone provide a real general culture. The Saljūq Princes distrusted speculative thoughts, especially mystical trends and Ismā'īlism. The Sunnī '*ulamā*', considering new ideas as suspect, contributed to the sclerosis and the Muslim intellectual decay. The Islamic philosophy was harshly criticized and the philosophers were persecuted.

During the third and fourth period, the notion of *taqlīd* (imitation) had a harmful influence on the speculative theology (*kalām*). The topics were not renewed because the Sunnī '*ulamā*' rejected the notion of Divine Mystery (*Ghayb*). The *kalām*, highly influenced at the beginning by the Islamic philosophy, ceased to develop topics with a philosophical perspective. The theories and concepts became rigid. It is interesting to notice that some Sufis affirm that at the beginning of Islam, Muslims accomplished great things because they devoted more time in extra forms of devotional practices such as early morning meditation and the remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

### *Scientific Causes*

The negation of the natural laws by Ash'arism did not help the development of sciences. Ash'arism became the official philosophy of the Islamic orthodoxy in the VI/XII<sup>th</sup> century. Is it by concurrence that the same century marks the end of the great scientific era? Al-Ghazzālī, by rejecting Ibn Sīnā's philosophy, reduced considerably the intellectual quest of knowledge. With this prevailing attitude, there was not much hope left for the development of a science based on human capacity. In Spain, the era of scientific development lasted until the end of the VI/XII<sup>th</sup> century. The Caliphs of Cordoba favored the development of sciences, but later the Sunnī *fuqahā*' (scholars of law) gained

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more power and suppressed all intellectual activities. As an illustration, the *Wazīr* of the Caliph Hishām II, Ibn Abī ‘Alī al-Mansūr burned without distinction astronomic books and philosophical books. He even imprisoned the great scientist Sa‘īd Ibn Fathūn al-Saraqustī. The attacks of the *fuqahā’* were most often directed toward philosophers rather than scientists. When the Caliph al-Mansūr wanted to please the Mālikites, he consented to banish Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and his philosophical books were burned except the scientific works.

Until 906/1500, scientists were compiling and commenting preceding works with a certain degree of originality, one of the last greatest scientists was Mīram Celebī who died in 931/1524-5. When the Caliphs favored the scientific researches, there was a development, but when the cultural climate became hostile to philosophy and science there was a decline. Some Muslim scientists did not pursue the acquisition of new knowledge because they considered the past discoveries irrefutable. For this reason the progress of sciences was limited and no room was left for innovation.

### ***Economic Causes and Colonization***

Until the IX/XV<sup>th</sup> century, the Silk Road was the only link to India passing through Muslim land. The caravans expanded the commercial and cultural exchanges. The progress of navigation opened also a new way to India at the advantage of the West. In the X/XVI<sup>th</sup> century, the great discovery of America turned away the international commerce from the Near-East; this factor contributed partly to isolate the Muslim world.

Another factor of economic problems was the scarcity of iron which excluded the Arab world from the development of primary industry. At that time the Europeans had a metallurgic industry. The consequence was major, tools and equipments were missing in the Arab world, essential for the development of mines, architecture, weapons, and the construction of ship etc. This lack of industrial development was a source of weakness and reduced considerably the wealth and the commercial exchanges.

Max Weber (d. 1920) noticed that the majority of Muslims were not in favor of the



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accumulation of productive capital which is the basis of capitalism. Many institutions of the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) had refrained the economic development with the interdiction to take interests for loans. The sale contracts and the legal document of the company were almost inapplicable in Muslim jurisprudence. The risky contracts, on which all kinds of insurance are based, were forbidden. The *waqf* (property administered by the State) had increased so much that it had caused economic problems.

The Turkish part of the Ottoman Empire reached its apogee in the X/XVI<sup>th</sup> century. Two centuries before the European took effective control over the Muslim world, the signs of decline were already present. The colonization refrained drastically the development of the Muslim world. The Europeans took advantage of these weaknesses to extend their hegemony.

In Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana and in other countries of Africa, the Christians believed that they were superior and desired to impose their religion. They were using the colonial schools as ideological propaganda against Islam. Aware of that the Muslims asked the colonial administration to recognize their schools, their requests were rejected. Therefore many Muslims refused to send their children to the Christian schools and their children were deprived from modern education. (Kateregga, 68-69)

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Perhaps the most fundamental source of the decline can be tied down to the religious authorities who most often persecuted philosophy and science. Even in the first period in the evolution of thought, there were signs of draw-back. The rapid establishment of the religious sciences, in only four centuries, provoked a retreat as well as the hardening of positions. The science of the principles of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*) contributed to slow down the religious thought. The scope of *ijtihad* was reduced and the '*ulamā*' believed that nothing can change nor could be changed in the religious law (*shari'a*). Another factor of decline happened when the notion of *sunna* was reduced to the formal

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traditions attributed to the Prophet. The attitude of '*ulamā*' to qualify all practices which do not follow the *sunna* as an innovation (*bid'a*), did not certainly promote a pluralist viewpoint. The Sunnī Muslims considered all new ideas as suspect and contributed to the sclerosis and the intellectual decay.

Muslims should change their point of view according to which the Golden Age is irrevocably of the past, by adopting the progressive attitude of Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1323/1905) and Muhammad Iqbāl (d. 1357/1938). After the second half of the XIII/XIX<sup>th</sup> century, Muhammad 'Abduh explained that Islam does not mean exclusive attachment to the forefathers, and those who follow blindly the words of the ancients are ignorant. The ancients were not more intelligent nor more knowledgeable than their descendants. But the descendants can meditate on the past events and benefit from the experiences of the past. (Abduh, 108; Brunschvig, 37-38 note 28) The essential progress will only be possible when the Muslims will understand the ethical principles behind the conduct of the ancients.

At the beginning of this century, Muhammad Iqbāl went against this regressive vision of the evolution and believed in a human progress. (Iqbāl, 161; Brunschvig, 38) The idea of progressive evolution can be found in the Qur'ān LXXI: 14): "Seeing that it is He that has created you in diverse stages (*atwāra*)?" and LXXXIV: 19): "Ye shall surely travel from stage to stage (*tabaqa 'an tabaqin*)."

Today the problem is becoming worst where the Muslims are not their own masters, but partners in the governance of the country and their real power is neither effective nor dominant. In these countries, the progressive Muslims, who use *ijtihād* and look for a new path in the field of progress, do not benefit from the support of conservative Muslims. Instead of collaborating, they are getting further apart from each other. The state of affairs is extremely complex. In order to find solution to problems, the '*ulamā*' and modern educated people should sit together and discuss about a modern Islamic way of life. The field of knowledge is becoming so complex that neither a single group of '*ulamā*' nor a single group of modern educated people may undertake effective *ijtihād*. The new challenge in the present age compels Muslims specialized in different fields to collaborate and undertake *ijtihād* together.

In the lifetime of the Prophet, the Islamic laws suited the need of the time. After his death, the

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Caliphs suspended many laws and introduced new forms adapted to the new condition. For example, the second Caliph 'Umar forbade chopping off the hand of the thief during a famine period. (Khan, 54) Even more, today after a lapse of fourteen hundred years, the conditions have changed completely. It would be un-Islamic to apply the Islamic laws in their original forms. Since Muslims believe that each Prophet brought new laws adapted to their time, it implied that laws must evolve in accordance to the actual context.

In order to adapt Islamic laws to the new modern context, the specialist of *ijtihād* must understand the spirit of Islamic laws and have: a command of the classical Arabic since the Qur'ān was revealed in this language, a knowledge of the *sunna* in the proper context, a knowledge of the socio-economic conditions of the period since laws were greatly influenced by them. (Khan, 55-56)

During the classical period, Muslims learned Greek philosophy and adopted its theoretical and practical aspects into an Islamic viewpoint. But today this quest of knowledge is not part of the curriculum of '*ulamā*'. They reduce their study to the Qur'ān and traditions. In order to regain their past glory, the contemporary Muslims must enlarge their intellectual horizon and become more receptive to all knowledge and integrate them in an Islamic perspective. The economic success of Muslim countries is in the hand of the new generation who has to master new technology. Only the Muslim society which accepts to change their productive methods according to the demands will keep the leading position.

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