

*From: **Lost History**, The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers, and Artists*

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Introduction

LOSS IS A DEFINING human experience. Nothing in the physical world lasts forever. Memory of what has been lost can be both ennobling and painful.

History teaches us that civilizations flourish, die, and disappear. Sometimes they die swiftly, sometimes in a slow lingering death. And sometimes, as with Rome and others, echoes of that civilization find new life in later cultures.

To lose the conscious memory of an entire civilization is especially tragic and dangerous, because each civilization, no matter how grand or flawed, is a laboratory of human ideas and ideals, of dreams and nightmares. We can learn from all of them.

A few days after the 9/11 attack on the United States, I was asked to write a speech for a famous American business executive. While the original subject was to have focused mostly on her business and industry, the continuing national grief meant it would have been insulting to ignore the major issue of the day. And so she agreed to try and bridge the gulf between Muslims and non-Muslims by remembering the greatness the Muslim world had spawned, and how much it meant to us.

Rather than focus on the grim reality of the present, I decided to have her speak about the fascinating Muslim history that I'd uncovered in my reading and research, a Muslim history that was about invention, creativity, big ideas, tolerance, and coexistence. It is a Muslim history that had been more intellectually accomplished than Christian Europe of the day, and a Muslim past where Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists had flourished and worked together. It is a culture that had seeded the European Renaissance and enabled many aspects of the modern West and global civilization. It is a history that by the beginning of the 21st century had been forgotten, ignored, misunderstood, suppressed, or even rewritten.

I thought that her speech might get some attention and might draw some criticism here at home. What I hadn't expected was that Muslims overseas would also write

to her, wanting to know who were these historical figures she was referring to, and how could they find out more?

It was then I knew that there was a huge gulf of misunderstanding on both sides that needed to be filled. And so, I came to think, if a deeper appreciation of Muslim history could be recovered, then maybe the very premises of the emerging "clash of civilizations" could be re-framed.

The result is this book. I know there may be those on the non-Muslim side of the divide who will say that I'm distorting history, by choosing to emphasize the bright side of a very complex civilization. I will respond that I am simply balancing the incomplete and negative slant of most of what we non-Muslims have been given.

To apply the argument of these critics fully and fairly, we would need to include in the history of Western Christian civilization not only the thoughts of Voltaire and St. Thomas Aquinas, we would also need to include the thoughts and deeds of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

There may also be those Muslims who will say that I have sought to rehabilitate and glorify heretics and impure Muslims, who deserve to be suppressed and forgotten.

By no coincidence, all of the great thinkers, inventors and artists of Muslim civilization were creative minds. Much like today's scientific researchers, they were trained in their various disciplines to constantly question assumptions in a search for higher truth. Their number included some who followed other religions. While they were all versed in the tenets and philosophy of their faiths, few were rigid, doctrinaire thinkers. And they operated in a very different political context than we see today. The Muslim quest for knowledge often drove even the most devout rulers and religious scholars to support freethinking and empirical scientific inquiry. But fascination with the intellect came under increasing attack, beginning in the ninth century. One dispute was between Muslim "rationalists" who believed in finding divine truth through reason and "literalists" who stuck to the narrowly interpreted, literal statements and acts of the Prophet. It was not unlike the current and longstanding American debate between supporters of Darwinism and advocates of creationism or intelligent design.

By writing *Lost History*, I hope to show not only the contributions of an old and rich civilization. I hope to show, as Caliph al-Mamun concluded, that reason and

faith can be the same, that by fully opening the mind and unleashing human creativity, many wonders — including peace — are possible.

THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT ISLAM or any other religion. It is not about theology or religious doctrine. It is about a civilization in which Islam had a leading role.

By writing this book now, which is intended for popular rather than academic readers, I am entering a potential minefield. The minefield is now given greater intensity by the current convergence of radical Islamist terrorism, the rise in "literalist" fundamentalist religious models for organizing societies and individual lives, continuing battles between Israel and her neighbors, outbursts of anti-Semitism, the United States' invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and its "war on terrorism", and political and economic crises in selected Muslim societies.

Most Americans, including American Muslims, and even many Muslims from other parts of the world, know only the dimmest outlines of Muslim history, i.e., "they were great once, they invented arithmetic, but then they fell behind." Most Westerners have been taught that the greatness of the West has its intellectual roots in Greece and Rome, and that after the thousand-year-sleep of the Dark Ages, Europe miraculously reawakened to its Greco-Roman roots. In the conventional telling, this rediscovery of classical Greece — combined with the moral underpinning of the Judeo-Christian faith — led to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and the scientific and industrial revolutions. The intellectual contributions of Arabs, Persians, Indians, Chinese, Africans, and others in the Muslim world are relegated to mere footnotes.

Most of us are unaware of the details of Muslim history because of language difficulties, the passage of many centuries, a blur of unfamiliar names, places, and events, a triumphalist Eurocentric narrative of the Renaissance and later advances, orthodox Muslim excision of unorthodox Muslim thinkers, and the burning of books and destruction of libraries.

A fairly small group of serious academics have looked hard on these issues through often different lenses and have come up with different conclusions.

The first group, which has brought much of the detail of Muslim intellectual history to light, is the "Orientalist" camp. This group holds that the Muslim world had a period of intellectual brilliance, from about A.D. 800-1200, largely enabled by the translation of Greek thinkers, and that this essentially Greek body of

knowledge was then passed on by the Muslims to the Europeans. But later, because of a combination of the Mongol attacks and internal inconsistencies that prevented the development of a secular, freethinking society, the Muslim world fell behind.

The second group is the "neo-conservative" camp. This group, despite the fact that Arabs only constitute 17 percent of the global Muslim population, concludes from its focus on the troubled Middle East that there are elements in Muslim civilization that make it deeply antithetical to intellectual freedom, social and scientific progress, and liberal democracy. This neo-conservative group has come to have unprecedented influence over United States foreign policy and media, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Many non-Muslims around the world are probably most aware of this train of thought.

The third group is the "proto-science" camp now joined by a number of contemporary scholars. This group holds that until the 15th century, Muslim science and technology was far superior to that in Europe and that many of its breakthroughs seeped into medieval Europe, providing the seeds of the coming Renaissance. But then the Muslim world hit a glass ceiling of internal inconsistencies and barriers inherent in the culture, plus economic and climatic crises, so that as with China and India, the Muslims could not make the leap to modern science, which was left to Europe.

The fourth group could be called the "liberal" camp. This camp holds that rather than serving as limits or impediments, the higher values of Islam — such as desire for knowledge and equality of all men before God — promoted many advances in science, technology, and civil society that poured into Europe, and then to the world and are still of importance in the 21st century. These thinkers might hold that European Judeo-Christian civilization should add the word Muslim as well.

The fifth camp could be called the "Muslim partisan" camp, though it has few followers in mainstream academia. This group holds that the Muslims invented almost every aspect of modern science, medicine, technology, and social organization, but that attribution has not been given them, and they have been disenfranchised.

Lost History was written with an awareness of all these views and incorporates some elements from each. As such, it doesn't align with any of them, and it aligns in some ways with all.

But *Lost History* was not written to take a stand in this fairly esoteric academic debate. The purpose of *Lost History* is to fill in the sketchy lines of Muslim history that most of us have been given, to adhere to established fact but bring the most important characters and events to life, to make the obscure and remote and esoteric Muslim past immediate and real, and to show how the events and ideas of a thousand years ago are directly relevant to our lives today. Readers should be aware that the present-day sections introducing each chapter are imaginary, and that in the historical sections, the dramatized scenes, while adhering to facts drawn from often-sketchy historical accounts, are imaginary recreations, especially when presenting dialogue or inner thoughts.

And unlike many histories, which tend to focus on thinkers and inventors in the so-called Arab Golden Age that also included Persia and Spain from A.D. 632 to 1258, ending with the fall of Baghdad, this book rather focuses on the many "golden ages" of Muslim thought, including Central Asia, Ottoman Turkey, and Mughal India, up to the 18th century.

Lost History could never capture the immense detail and complicated nuances of a 1,400-year-old civilization that now incorporates one billion people. *Lost History* could never name every great name or capture every seminal historical event in the evolution of this huge organism we call the Muslim world. But ideally what will emerge is a shape and a meaning — a face — for an old and ongoing civilization that touches all of us.

What may also emerge is an understanding that all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim, are indebted to these often courageous and sometimes ruthless and sometimes misguided actors of long ago, that Muslim civilization is as much a part of Western civilization as it is not, and that many of the conflicts now filling the newspaper headlines had antecedents and parallels in the debates and conflicts of a thousand years ago.

Finally, by recovering our shared lost history, I hope that non-Muslims can gain greater respect and deeper understanding of their Muslim cousins than current headlines and policies would suggest and that today's Muslims can see how Islam was once applied in a way to support creativity, invention, tolerance, and diversity of thought and behavior in both society and in individual lives.

Then, by recovering the lost history, maybe we can begin to understand the issues of today that will never be solved by force. Because if there is no other lesson to be

drawn from Lost History, it is that force rarely ever positively resolves issues of the spirit and the soul — whether in individuals or in civilizations.