

## *Editorial*

As Mehmet Mahfuz Söylemez documents in his “The Jundishapur School: Its History, Structure, and Functions,” Southwest Asia has long been a site for a cross-fertilization of ideas that have led to productive societies. Although Jundishapur’s excellence as a medical center predates the coming of Islam, it nevertheless played a key role in transmitting knowledge to Muslim physicians as well as contributing to Baghdad’s development as an up-and-coming center of excellence. In an open and welcoming climate, the scholars and physicians of Jundishapur and Baghdad fostered a learning environment that allowed Muslim civilizations to flourish.

Today’s Muslims often look back to such “golden ages” with wistfulness, admiration, and frustration. Given the constant defeats and subjugation faced by Muslim countries since western colonization, this wistfulness is not surprising. In order to bolster their identity to defend themselves against this continuing subjugation, Muslims often offer this glorious past to an Islamophobic world: “We are not barbarians! See what Muslim civilization was capable of!” And in the face of Eurocentric curricula that largely deny any role to a non-European civilization in the history of ideas since Plato, such reminders are crucial.

But as Dieter Weiss’ “Paths toward an Arab Knowledge Society” inadvertently highlights, such wistfulness is underscored by an ignorance of just what it takes to produce a golden age. For a society to flourish, it must create the conditions that enable its inhabitants to engage in knowledge creation: the freedom to think, debate, and discuss. While he focuses only on the Arab world, one would have to be blind to reality not to realize that the same deplorable situation can be found in most Muslim countries today.

Imagine what kind of Muslim cultural and political society must have existed for Ibn Sina, who produced great medical and philosophical works while denying the resurrection of the body. Compare that with the assassinations, death threats, and the like facing contemporary writers who engage in independent thought about Islam and the modern world. Think of the role of caliph Ma’mun’s *bayt al-hikmah* (House of Wisdom), where Christians, Muslims, and scholars who followed other religions worked side-by-side to

translate the great works of Greek philosophers and doctors; the collection of manuscripts from China, India, and Persia; the gatherings of philosophers, artists, and so on at a ruler's court. Compare such an environment with what we see today in the Middle East, where Christian communities and sometimes even fellow Muslims are attacked for being "unbelievers." Compare today's rulers, who isolate themselves from society and "watch" it suspiciously through the secret police, with their predecessors.

The corollary of the *bayt al-hikmah's* intellectual climate and the patronage of ideas that it represents in the modern capitalist world is a free academia, an unfettered press, and an independent civil society. And yet, as Weiss documents through his discussion of the Arab development reports, these are the very freedoms that are feared and kept at bay by authoritarian political structures and the cultural and educational systems that support them. So, while Muslims may long for the golden age, they are not proactive in re-creating the conditions that helped produce it.

Haifaa Jawad's article on Seyyed Hossein Nasr only cements this point. As Jawad states, his parent's library contained philosophical, literary, and medical books from both the Islamic and the western traditions. In addition, having been educated in both western and Islamic societies, he was able to use his varied experiences to formulate his own deeply spiritual approach to the world – an approach that has touched many people with its profound analysis of the crisis of modernity and its recommendations for improvement.

Thus, Weiss' article should be read with those of Söylemez and Jawad as a kind of triple analysis of the Muslim world's current paralysis, along with some prescriptions. A great many Muslims need to learn that an environment in which thinking is cultivated need not be one that ensures or even represents the end of Islam as a living faith tradition. In fact, as Weiss points out, just the opposite is true: How, one might ask, can a society survive the lack of relevant thought and the ensuing knowledge acquired, for such a condition hampers its ability to respond to the ever-fluid circumstances of life. As we can see today in the Muslim world, the end result of such a policy is stagnation, if not outright backwardness. Muslims need to learn that they should not feel threatened by different and novel ideas. We do not have to agree with all of our fellow Muslims' arguments; we simply need to engage them in reasoned dialogue. Naturally, this holds true for our interaction with non-Muslim individuals and civilizations as well.

Umar ibn al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) once advised Muslims to "criticize and appraise [your]selves before [you] are criticized

and appraised on the Day of Judgment, and weigh out [your] deeds before they are weighed out for [you].” Self-criticism is only possible in a society that allows the freedom of thought and expression. The Muslims’ ongoing post-colonial inferiority complex prevents them from embracing this attitude (or, more specifically, re-embracing it), for self-critical thinking only arises from people who are self-confident and have a high (yet realistic) opinion of themselves.

Of course, we also need to be leery of any international institutional body, as Weiss documents in the *Arab Development* reports, that targets child-rearing practices as the solution to a nation’s problems. After all, that was one of the ultimate goals of western colonialism. We need to be self-critical, open to knowledge and insights from all sources, and to be able to sift them through the prisms of the Qur’an and the Sunnah. This was the brilliant achievement of the early Muslims, who did not display the same kind of fear and siege mentality that we often see today among Muslims.

The article by Abdus Samad, Norman D. Gardner, and Bradley J. Cook, “Islamic Banking and Finance in Theory and Practice,” is an empirically based case study of two Islamic banks in Malaysia and Bahrain. The authors show us precisely how this kind of openness, when combined with a commitment to core values, can be achieved by modern Muslim institutions. Founded on the prescriptions of the Shari’ah, Islamic banking offers a sustainable investment and banking alternative to the globally dominant interest-based system of capitalism. Their paper highlights that, despite the conclusions of detractors, Muslims are capable of rising to the challenges of modernity without compromising their core religious and social values.

Pedro Brieger’s article on al-Qaeda, in our “forum” section, shows us a possible alternative world to one of open dialogue, cross-cultural exchange, and mutual respect – the Manichean world promised us by al-Qaeda, and its western counterpart, courtesy of the neo-cons of President Bush’s administration. Both groups seem to believe that terror and violence are the foundational ingredients for a “blessed way of life.” Bush endorses killing in the name of spreading “freedom” and is blind to the giant’s trampling of different opinions in its arrogant belief that only it knows how to lead the good life. And for its part, al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers are blind to their termite-like destruction, eating away at the foundations of the global civilizations that sustain us all.

This issue of AJISS is unique because we have translated two articles from European languages into English: Weiss’ article was originally published in German, in the journal *Orient*, and Brieger’s “fourm” piece and

conference report were originally written in Spanish. Through this translation effort, we hope to open up new vistas by, in the tradition of the *bayt al-hikmah*, bringing into our conversation those who are writing in other languages about topics relevant to AJISS and its readers.

Due to scheduling conflicts and other professional obligations, our assistant editor, Layla Sein, is stepping down from her post. We would like to thank her for her years of dedication and commitment to improving the academic quality of the journal. May Allah grant her success in her future endeavors.

It seems like something of a new tradition, one unplanned but perhaps unavoidable, to close the editorial of each issue with an obituary. Mention must be made here of the passing away of Pope John Paul II, a truly historic moment, especially for the world's Catholics. As Muslim organizations have noted in their condolences, Pope John Paul II was a "Muslim-friendly Pope." He promoted interfaith dialogue with all of the world's great faith traditions, including Islam. In addition, he was the first Pope in history to set foot inside a mosque when he visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, in 2001. In his autobiography, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Knopf: 1995), the Pope, while naturally disagreeing with Islamic theology, expressed his admiration for the Muslims' devotion to prayer. He also strongly promoted justice for all oppressed peoples, spoke out specifically about Palestinian suffering, and condemned the American invasion of (and subsequent war in) Iraq. His call for mutual respect and dialogue can only be admired and appreciated. Many Muslims have expressed the hope that his successor will pick up where he left off.

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