

Time for 'enlightened moderation'

A call for Islamic nations to renew and reaffirm their commitment to science.

Atta-ur-Rahman and Anwar Nasim

The time has come for a renaissance in the Muslim world, for a new strategy of 'enlightened moderation'. In the wake of 11 September 2001, Islamic countries face myriad challenges and the gap of misunderstanding between the West and the Islamic world is widening. The way forward for Muslim countries is, in their own interest, to focus on internal reforms and socio-economic modernization, to shun extremism and to promote moderation.

The global security situation has given Islam a false image, that of a religion of intolerance, activism and terrorism. Islam is unfairly linked with fundamentalism, fundamentalism with extremism, and extremism with terrorism.

Muslims can argue all they like that this loose thinking is unfounded, but we are having little impact in today's battle of ideas. It doesn't help that some Muslim nations are probably among the poorest, the least educated and the least powerful on the planet. We must get out of this rut if we do not want to be marginalized and to condemn future generations.

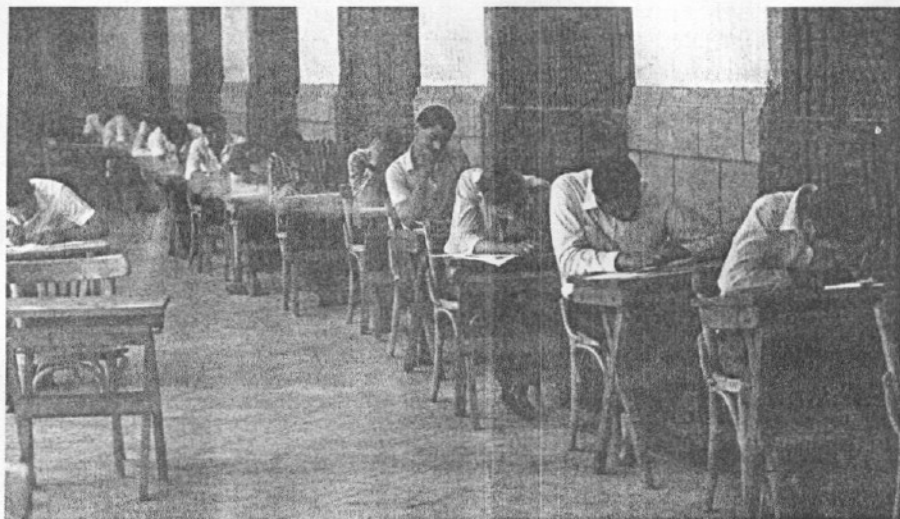
The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is a group of 57 geographically scattered countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Stretching from Indonesia to Morocco and from Uganda to Kazakhstan, they are home to 1.3 billion people, but their economies are generally among the world's poorest, and illiteracy levels are among the highest. Six of the eight poorest countries on the planet are OIC members.

This is a time for critical thinking and soul-searching among Muslims — in particular for leaders of Islamic nations, who can play a key role in bringing about 'enlightened moderation', as envisioned by Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf. We in Pakistan believe that science and technology are crucial to a knowledge-based renaissance.

There is no shortage of ideas and proposals. History will not forgive those who are at the helm of affairs today, but who fail to respond with enlightened policies and actions to shape the destiny of over a billion people. Bold initiatives in science must form part of any response, and the deep resurgence of science in Pakistan over the past five years, as described below, shows what can be achieved.

An exemplary society

Science and Islam share a glorious past. In its heyday, Islam was the standard bearer of a society of law and order, justice, tolerance



Science in higher-level education in many Islamic countries is underfunded, leading to a lack of research.



Al Azhar University in Cairo is the oldest in the world. It covers both science and religious studies.

and exemplary values. The Koran encourages the pursuit of science, and the Islamic world was a cradle of science from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.

The Muslim world of today has strayed far from those values. We have fallen behind in socio-economic development and in the generation of ideas. During our decline, we have shut ourselves off and refused to absorb knowledge from others. And our spending on science is dire. We can regret this deplorable situation, but we also need to face up to it.

The West can help to usher in an era of enlightened moderation by contributing to the planning and funding of centres of excellence in the Islamic world, where mutual understanding and tolerance could flourish. But in this article we will focus on what the Muslim world needs to do. We need to ask ourselves some tough questions: as Muslims, what are our ideas? Where are we going?

Will confrontation and political activism bring us back to our glorious past? No. We

must take an enlightened path dedicated to developing our human resources, and tackling the problems of poverty, education, health and social justice. We must abandon confrontation in favour of moderation, conciliation and individual freedom. It is time for renaissance of the Ummah (the global Muslim community). This is how we will eliminate the perception of Islam in conflict with modernity and democracy.

Science in Islamic states

One might argue that science is universal, and that it is impossible to speak separately of science in Islamic states, such as Pakistan, or Asian science. But by any comparison of international science indicators, Muslim states emerge as a well-defined cluster with many common characteristics and needs.

Political leaders in many Islamic nations largely fail to appreciate the importance of scientific research to their countries' development. Public spending is often skewed towards the military, educational standards are low and public interest in science is undeveloped.

For many Muslim countries, all the socio-economic warning lights are flashing, be it in terms of literacy, poverty, or the quantity and quality of scientific workforces and their output. The situation, to put it bluntly, is dismal.

The Islamic world's average science spending is at an order of magnitude below global averages¹. In contrast, spending on defence averages from 4% to 7% of the GNP. In many countries, the population of scientists is meagre and legal frameworks for innovation are largely non-existent. Only two scientists from Islamic states have won Nobel Prizes, Abdus Salam, a Pakistani