

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

## **'Islamic science is a creation of Euro-American universities'**

Religion and science : 'Jihad Or Ijtihad'

mardi 9 octobre 2012, par [IRFAN HABIB S.](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 6 octobre 2012).

**THERE WAS a time when the Islamic world was at the forefront of scientific ideas and discoveries. Today, the narrative has been turned around to cast the religion as a hindrance to modernisation and free thought. In his new book Jihad or Ijtihad [1], historian of science S Irfan Habib, 59, examines the uncomfortable relationship between Islam and science. He tells Kunal Majumder why the two must co-exist.**

---

**Kunal Majumder - Your book talks specifically about Islamic science. What made you choose the subject ?**

S Irfan Habib - The book is a critique of 'Islamic science', which I find an exclusivist and essentialist project. There are people in the Euro-American universities who are trying to project a category called Islamic Science, which according to them, is a counter to Eurocentrism. Science, unfortunately, spread into the non-European world as part of the colonial baggage. For example, in India or South Asia, it came as part of the colonial empire.

**You talk about how Greek knowledge spread worldwide through Islamic translations. Wasn't the Islamic world carrying colonial baggage then ?**

I have built this background to talk about the essentialisation of science that is taking place today. Philosopher Seyyid Hossein Nasr actually came up with it in 1968-69. It didn't pick up that much, but after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, there was a sudden surge in the Islamic world. People felt this revolution would change things. In India, for example, parties like Jamaat-e- Islami were enthused by Ayatollah Khomeini's call for Islamisation, though he stood for Shia Islam. They saw it as something that will change the Islamic world, however, it just ended up as a challenge to the longstanding Saudi control.

**'Ijtihad' is free thinking. But free thinking must also be extended to politics and society. Isn't it then detrimental to autocratic regimes like Saudi Arabia and Iran ?**

Of course, it is. That is why they want to control. *Ijtihad* is a challenge to *taqleed* or tradition. These are actually binaries. *Ijtihad* was not switched off suddenly. It took about two centuries before it was marginalised in Islam. And it was not only marginalised in the realm of science ; it was marginalised in the realm of *fiq* or jurisprudence of Islamic intellectual realm, and replaced by *taqleed*. The cleric stronghold suddenly came up. Islam didn't come into this world with any mosque or clerics

commanding any special position. There was a book and there was *Hadith* (teachings of the Prophet). People were asked to read them and follow Islam. It remained like this for 150-200 years. Lots of things happened in the Islamic history after this.

### **Is the post 9/11 turmoil in the Islamic world a part of the conflict between religion and science ?**

To some extent, yes. This whole control of Wahhabism started in late 18th century. Saudis had their influence, but for the past 25-30 years, Saudi money and power have been used consciously to spread medieval Islam into all parts of the world. They have succeeded in propagating this monstrous phase to an extent that any deviation from this is seen as deviation from Islam.

### **What about Iran ? While on the one hand, many women study in Iranian universities, on the other, some cannot leave house without male relatives.**

Persian and Arab are two different traditions. There has been a conflict between them as they've had a totally different approach towards culture, life and world. Before 1979, Persian tradition was always strong in sciences, mathematics and physics. Now if you come in with repressive regimes or measures, you can put in some controls but that tradition cannot die. It has to continue, and it is continuing. There are large numbers of people who have migrated to Europe and America, many scientists, who were critical of this regime. There are about 67 percent women in Iranian universities, much more than men. This is a positive sign. This is also the difference between the Arabs and the Persian world. Both have restrictions, but still there is a difference. Persian women have access to universities, to modern subjects, sciences as well as social sciences.

---

### **P.-S.**

\* Source : Tehelka, Vol 9, Issue 41, Dated 13 Oct 2012.

[http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main54.asp?filename=hub131012Irfan.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main54.asp?filename=hub131012Irfan.asp)

also at : <http://www.sacw.net/article2905.html>

\* Kunal Majumder is a Principal Correspondent with Tehelka.

---

### **Notes**

[1] Jihad Or Ijtihad. S Irfan Habib  
HarperCollins. 200 pp ; Rs 299