

## FOREWORD

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when computers and internet usage have become widespread, the most important change we can expect from these developments would be a great improvement in our analytical skills.

All manner of information can be stored indefinitely and we can now access this information from all around the world. Thanks to the internet, the human brain will no longer be used to store information: it shall be used to process information. This will also mean that education based on rote-learning shall disappear.

A new era will begin and the sayings and thoughts of self-proclaimed clerics and scholars, eminent and wise, will not be accepted unquestioningly as truth and wisdom. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be an era where people can think about anything and where rote-learning loses its significance.

Gushing biographies of writers, intended only for self-aggrandisement, will not be important either. Thus, what was said almost one thousand four hundred years ago, namely, "Do not criticise the speaker, just listen to what is being said," shall come to pass.



## INTRODUCTION

It was only after I had left Gazi High School in Ankara in July 1962, and got into İstanbul Technical University (İTÜ), that I discovered that there were answer keys to the problems at the end of each unit in the maths books we had used in high school. I had never looked for an answer key because I believed that students themselves should think through these problems and solve them.

It was an old friend of mine who had graduated from İTÜ five or six years before me who told me about these answer keys while I was working as a contractor in the Büyük Çekmece Dam Construction Project. He was looking for a job as a construction supervisor and assured me that he was more than up to the job and was quite surprised that I did not know about them. I gave him the job in spite of the extremely high salary he was asking for. Unfortunately, I realised three or four months later that he was not up to the job, and I had to dismiss him.

Based on this example, would it be possible to say that memorising the solutions to problems rather than solving them for yourself is a reason for failure?

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## PREFACE

We all know how efficiently books and the media can impose an opinion, and convince us no matter how wrong they are. Conditions in Fidel Castro's Cuba are a fine example.

We only have to compare the period when people were reading Che Guevara's diaries carefully and admiringly, and the slogan, "Hail to Che! Long Live The Revolution!" was being daubed everywhere in Turkey—before the military coup of 12<sup>th</sup> March 1971—with today's picture of a paradise island that has been transformed into an anachronistic hell-on-earth. This demonstrates well the immense power that the media have in orienting our thoughts and conditioning us.

At the same time, this example strikingly shows how Cuba perpetuates this illusion by selling T-shirts sporting images of their hero, Che Guevara, for a few pence to the very capitalist countries that he once struggled against.

Another important point about Cuba is worth noting here: identifying what is wrong with how a country is ruled and objecting to it is undoubtedly noble. However, the solution should not include falling prey to ambition, jealousy and complexes; the answer is not to destroy the existing order completely. We can see clearly that this approach has cheated and devastated large numbers of people. The right way is to focus on the parts of the

system that do have drawbacks and to replace them with something that works.

No matter how long the public might have held on to certain beliefs and perceptions, there is no guarantee that they are true. Just as nowadays these beliefs are provided by the media and our ideas of fashion, throughout history, even if it was relatively more difficult, there have always been various means of providing the people with beliefs. Often errors were more practical than the truth... and more popular.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In *What went wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis tries to give an answer to this pressing question, presenting analyses and interpretations of Islam that, though broadly correct, do fall down when it comes to basic principles.

The answer, however, is crystal clear. The greater, the more incredible, the more shocking the error, the simpler the answer. There is no need to be a great scholar, writer, cleric, researcher, imam or priest to find it. First of all, to dispel any illusions, we need to understand and accept that Islam does not, in fact, belong to those who think that they possess it. After that, we need to be able to understand what we read without having any kind of mediator; we need to be able to think, in other words.

How can we find people in Islamic countries who are capable of thinking? How, when for about one thousand four hundred years the misapplication of Islam has valued form over content and memorisation over thinking, nowhere more so than in education? Would it at least be possible to train them to think? *These* are the questions which are difficult to answer.

This situation can be seen in all Muslim countries including Turkey, and it goes against logic and wisdom. As a consequence of it, people are being dragged through despair and failure into an ever increasing chaos. Under such circumstances, people can only succeed abroad, outside of their own countries. Even the best willed

politicians have no chance of success once they gain power. People are trying to live inside a chaos and there seems to be no way out.

The fundamental mistakes that have led to this situation and the ways of correcting them are clearly put forward in this book.

Briefly put, the reply to Bernard Lewis' question is very similar to the story where the king asks his commander why he could not conquer the castle. The commander replied that there were twenty reasons. The king wanted to know what they were, but, when the commander said that the first reason was that there was no gunpowder, the king curtly replied, "OK, no need for the rest."

Similarly, if we were to answer the question, "What went wrong?" this first answer should be sufficient: for the past one thousand four hundred years Islam has not been practised in accordance with what was dictated by the Qur'an and by God.

To demand obedience to the letter of some of the formal regulations found in the Qur'an seems only to impose conditions prevalent one thousand four hundred years ago onto today, and this is in complete contradiction with the basic aim and spirit of the Qur'an. God's commandments are being ignored.

*Say: "O followers of the Bible! You have no valid ground for your beliefs -unless you [truly] observe the Torah and the*

*Gospel, and all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer!"...<sup>1</sup>*

A few words about the explanations in this book: Since the problem we are dealing with pertains to the Muslim world, I shall assume that the people living there believe that the Qur'an comes from God, as dictated by Islam. It goes without saying that all explanations here naturally reflect my own personal understanding. However, I have tried to base my reflections on verses of the Qur'an rather on than my personal opinion.

Another basic assumption that I have made is that anyone who reads the Qur'an carefully ought to be capable of interpreting it on his own, and that he can be judged by no one but God and that everyone shall account for himself before God.

The ego plays a fundamental role in human relations, and while making decisions we can never be free from its effects. This can and does lead us to make mistakes without being aware of it, as we labour under the impression that we are being objective.

Throughout this book, I have tried to avoid excessive details and examples, hoping to focus attention on the basic issues that I would like to explain. Also, since information can be reached more easily than ever before, I did not feel the need to flesh everything out with examples. I have, though, tried to emphasise certain

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 5:68

issues which I felt were especially important through repetition.

All the quotations of the Qur'an have been taken from Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an*.

The late M. Hamdi Yazır, who had a reputation for piety, spent many years writing serious and heartfelt works on the Qur'an. Whenever I had any difficulty understanding anything, I often had recourse to his nine-volume *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*; however, I noticed that its long comments did not improve my understanding. Nevertheless, I do feel that this provided me with an opportunity to double-check my beliefs about the points I have an opinion on.