

Rejoinder/Response

A Mirror Held Up to the Muslim World

Reflections on Askary's The Closing of the Muslim Mind

-KBS Sidhu

Ahmed Askary's essay, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, published in *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal* (Vol. 17, No. 1, 2025), is a rare and welcome contribution — a piece of honest, morally serious self-examination that refuses the comfort of externally directed blame. Its courage in calling for Muslims to 'own defeat' rather than aestheticise civilisational decline as evidence of moral superiority deserves both acknowledgement and a thoughtful response.

I offer these reflections as a respectful outside observer with, I hope, some claim to empathy on the subject. I am a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Service, having superannuated as Special Chief Secretary, Government of Punjab. I spent four of my most formative childhood years in Malerkotla — Punjab's only Muslim-majority town — which gave me a working knowledge of Urdu, an instinctive familiarity with the azaan at dawn, and an early and lasting appreciation of the humanity that flows so naturally across religious boundaries when it is allowed to. In more recent years, I have had the privilege of interacting with the Ahmadiyya community in their gentle and persistent endeavour for world peace. I count many Muslims among my closest friends, both in India and abroad.

Askary's identification of three concentrated catastrophes — the Ottoman dissolution, Communist repression of Muslim Central Asia, and the Partition of India — as the proximate causes of Islamic civilisation's institutional collapse is analytically compelling and historically precise in a way that blanket references to colonialism rarely are. His reconstruction of what was specifically destroyed — patronage classes, transnational scholarly networks, and the indigenous modernisation experiments of the Jadid movement, the Tanzimat, and Aligarh — is a genuine contribution to the literature.

What I venture to add, from the vantage point of a sympathetic outsider, are some gentle questions about dimensions of the challenge that lie closer to home. I raise them not in a spirit of criticism, but in the belief that Askary's own method — honest reckoning as the precondition for renewal — invites exactly this kind of fraternal engagement.

The Question of Intra-Muslim Political Solidarity

One of the more poignant puzzles, for an outside observer who wishes the Muslim world well, is the difficulty that Muslim-majority nations have found in sustaining durable political solidarity with one another — particularly in the Arab world, where the bonds of shared

language, shared scripture, and devotion to a common Prophet might have been expected to create a natural foundation for cooperative endeavour.

The Arab League, founded with such promise in 1945, has found it difficult to move beyond the competing interests of its member states toward a genuinely collective purpose. Conflicts within and between Arab nations have, over the decades, consumed enormous reserves of human energy, material resource, and political imagination that might otherwise have gone toward the institution-building that Askary rightly identifies as the urgent priority. One wonders, as a friend from the outside, whether addressing this dimension of the challenge might be as important as reconstructing the networks destroyed by the three external catastrophes.

The Sunni–Shia Question

In a similar spirit, one might gently note the ongoing costs — human, institutional, and intellectual — of the Sunni–Shia divide. This is not, of course, a simple matter, and an outsider is perhaps the last person who should presume to offer solutions to a question of such theological and historical complexity. But Askary’s call for institutions that compound knowledge across generations prompts the question: what would it look like for such institutions to genuinely bridge this divide? The classical Islamic world, at its most creative, found ways to hold diverse traditions in productive tension. Perhaps that history itself holds some of the answers.

The Space for Diversity Within

Askary speaks movingly of the destruction of the Jadid movement — a reform-minded Muslim intellectual tradition that sought to reconcile Islamic learning with modern knowledge, and which was crushed by external ideological force before it could mature. It is worth asking, with all humility, whether there are ways in which the space for such creative, heterodox thinking within the Muslim world today is sometimes constrained from within as well as from without.

My interactions with the Ahmadiyya community, whose members pursue their vision of a peaceful and compassionate Islam with remarkable quietude and dignity despite the legal and social difficulties they face in several countries, have left me with a deep admiration for their resilience — and a gentle wish that the intellectual space of Islam might find room for more of the diversity that characterised its most fertile periods. Sufi traditions, too, with their long history of bridging communities and nurturing poetry and music and contemplative thought, represent a dimension of the Islamic inheritance whose continued vitality seems important to any genuine renewal.

The Education of Women

One observation on which I suspect Askary would himself agree: no civilisation has ever reached its full intellectual potential while the education of half its population remained

incomplete or restricted. The classical Islamic world itself produced remarkable women scholars — Aisha bint Abi Bakr among the most authoritative voices in hadith literature, Al-Shifabint Abdullah a trusted administrator under Caliph Umar. That inheritance suggests that the aspiration for full and equal access to education for women is not an import from elsewhere, but a recovery of something that was always present in Islam at its best.

A Note from the Sikh Neighbourhood

I have tried, in my own small way, to work against the historical narrative of Sikh–Muslim relations as one of unrelieved conflict. In a piece published in *The KBS Chronicle* — Beyond Divisions: Chronicling Sikh–Muslim Instances of Amity in History — I documented the threads of cooperation and mutual respect that are woven, if less visibly, through the same history: Bhai Mardana, the Muslim companion whose rabab gave voice to Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s divine poetry; Mian Mir, the beloved Sufi saint who at Guru Arjan Dev Ji’s invitation laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple; and the Nawab of Malerkotla, Sher Mohammad Khan, whose solitary protest in the Mughal court against the killing of Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s younger sons was remembered by history — his town alone remained peaceful through the conflagration of 1947. It is that Malerkotla of my childhood that first taught me what Muslim grace and hospitality look like when they are lived, not merely proclaimed.

The Partition inflicted wounds on the Sikh community structurally similar to those Askary describes for the Muslim world: the severing of Lahore, the destruction of patronage networks, the refugee-state dynamic. What gave the Sikh tradition its resilience was the unbroken living presence of the Gurdwara and Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. I note this not as a boast, but as a small data point in the larger question of what sustains civilizational continuity through catastrophe — a question that Askary’s essay opens up beautifully, and that deserves the broadest possible comparative exploration.

In Conclusion

Askary ends with a call to ‘see clearly.’ It is the right call, and his essay does much to clarify the view. The Muslim world carries within its inheritance all the resources needed for the renewal he envisions: a tradition of rigorous legal reasoning, of scientific inquiry, of devotional poetry that has moved human hearts across every boundary of language and culture. That inheritance is not extinguished — it awaits rediscovery and renewal. The work of reconstruction that Askary calls for is urgent, honourable, and, I believe, entirely possible.

As a friend from the outside, I can only offer the hope that the honest inward gaze he models in this essay — clear-eyed about external catastrophe — might gradually extend to all the dimensions of the challenge, including those that are closer to home. It is in that spirit, and with the deepest respect for the tradition and the community about which Askary writes with such evident love, that these reflections are offered.

I must end with a sincere apology in advance. If anything I have said in the course of these reflections has caused offence, or has touched upon matters of faith and community in a manner that seems presumptuous or ill-informed coming from an outsider, I ask for the reader's forbearance and forgiveness. That was never my intention. My only intention has been to respond, in the spirit of Askary's own honesty, to an essay that deserves to be taken seriously — and to do so as a neighbour, a friend, and an admirer of much that Islamic civilisation has given the world.

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