

Islamic Contributions to Civilization

By Stanwood Cobb

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an excerpt from: Chapter I - A Blind Spot in History EVEN in this modern age of enlightenment few people are aware of the significant contributions made by the Islamic world to the progress of humanity. Yet for more than five centuries that civilization not only led the world in science, but was the only portion of mankind actively engaged in the systematic pursuit of knowledge. Beginning with the rise to power of Baghdad in the mid-eighth century and continuing beyond Islamic political decline five hundred years later, science and education flourished under Muslim influence. No such activity characterized any other part of the contemporary world. The lights of Graeco-Roman culture had been extinguished and Europe was engulfed in the Dark Ages; India was languishing in a period of stagnation; and China, while blossoming richly in the arts, was almost wholly devoid of science. These contrasting facts are little known for several reasons. For far too long our histories have concentrated on the rise and fall of empires, the militaristic clash of nations, and the succession of dynasties. Only lately have historians begun to trace the rise of civilization itself. Moreover, until relatively recently the West remained insular. Not until the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution did the history, arts and religions of Oriental countries begin to interest the Western mind. The inherent conflict between Islam and Christendom further contributed to the indifference -- if not hostility -- of West to East. The Crusades are a vivid evidence of the acerbated relationship which existed between these two great religions. Up to the nineteenth century it was as if a gigantic curtain separated the cultures of Islam and Christianity. Lack of proficiency in the Arabic language has also been a considerable obstacle. Until the present century, few Western scholars could read, let alone translate, this once fluent tongue. It is not, however, the purpose of this book to lament the past limitations which have tended to circumscribe peoples and civilizations. Today we may rejoice that in every part of the world -- Orient and Occident alike -- scholars are viewing history objectively and comprehensively. One of the first modern historians fully to realize the importance of Arabic for the study of world history was George Sarton, World War I Belgian refugee who found scholastic sanctuary at Harvard and continued there for years his valuable studies in Orientalism as well as his editorship of the magazine, 'Isis'. His epoch-making work, 'An Introduction to the History of Science', was the very first to give due credit to the Arabic-Islamic culture as regards the proportion and weight of its contributions to civilization. We are also greatly indebted to Philip K. Hitti, professor of Semitic literature at Princeton, for

his 'History of the Arabs', a treasure-trove of information about Arab culture in the Middle East and in Spain.

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Islamic Contributions to Civilization By Stanwood Cobb Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1826837 in eBooks
- Published on: 2009-08-30
- Released on: 2009-08-30
- Format: Kindle eBook

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