

Islāmising University Education: problems and prospects

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The view that the Western system of education and the values it imparts are different from, and even antithetical to, the Muslim concept of the good life has been with us ever since the beginning of the East's colonial history. When the Western colonial powers introduced their languages and their system of education in the areas they controlled, they let the old traditional systems continue in parallel with the new schools and colleges, so that to this day in all Muslim countries we have a kind of diarchy or dualism in education. The traditional schools (or *madrasahs*, as they are called) serve as theological seminaries and follow syllabuses that have remained unreformed for centuries. They teach no new subjects, eschew science and modern philosophy and are centred on Islāmic religious texts, the *Qur'ān* and the *Ahādīth*, turning out graduates who find it difficult to adapt to modern institutions. Whilst their role in the preservation of Islāmic learning is understood and appreciated, the process of modernisation that Muslim societies have been forced to adopt relies on the products of modern colleges and universities, some of whom seem almost totally alienated from Islāmic moorings. The phenomenon of parallel systems is to be found in Egypt, the Indian subcontinent, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and the (former Soviet) Central Asian Republics. Now that modern education has been introduced to Saudi Arabia as well, the same dualism has been replicated on Arab soil.

It is against this background that the question of Islāmising university education has to be considered and understood.

Those who insist on Islāmisation do not want modern universities to be scrapped and replaced by *madrasahs*. Nor do they advocate a boycott of Western education like the Muslim '*Ulamā*' in India in the nineteenth century who initially condemned Western learning as Satanic and persuaded many Muslims to give it a wide berth in the interest of their faith. It took men like Sir Syed Aḥmad and Nawab 'Abdul Latif years to convince their co-religionists of the folly of this policy which had begun to deprive the Muslims of all opportunities of getting on in life. Each step they took had to be carefully measured, for the feeling that Western education cuts a young man or woman off from their society was strong. At Aligarh, in north India, Sir Syed created what he thought to be an Islāmic version of Oxford colleges, where students could receive Western education in a setting which, outwardly at least, had an Islāmic look.

Sir Syed planned a reconciliation between Western and Islāmic learning by assuming that they could work in tandem, that a Muslim could be steeped in Islāmic culture and, at the same time, study Western science, philosophy and English. He himself, in his writings, sought to interpret Islām in terms which were intended to demonstrate that there was no basic opposition between modern science and the teachings of the *Qur'ān*. His commentary on Ghazālī's philosophy aims to disclose flaws in the latter's system which he considered indefensible.

Sir Syed's advocacy of Western education and, in particular, his belief that the *Qur'ān* was not at variance with science, earned him much opprobrium from some of his contemporaries. Some went so far as to question his faith in Islām, even whilst acknowledging his services as an educationist and political thinker. Those who did not dismiss him as an enemy of Islām, but were not prepared to accept all his ideas, thought he was apologetic in his approach. It was said that he proceeded from the premise that Muslim suspicion about the drift of modern science was groundless.

The writings of Syed Ameer 'Ali (particularly *The Spirit of Islām* and *The History of*

the Saracens) provoked a similar reaction in some quarters. He too was said to be apologetic in his attitude.

However, by and large it was the school of thought represented by Sir Syed and his younger contemporary Ameer 'Ali that triumphed over the old *madrasahs*. In spite of what the 'Ulamā at Deoband in India and other religious seminaries preached, ever larger numbers of Muslims flocked to modern schools and colleges to gain a knowledge of English and modern science. The seminaries have not died out but, whilst they have been responsible for what I have called a diarchy in Muslim education, their impact on administration and culture has ceased to be a matter of any consequence. Al-Azhar in Egypt, which enjoys the reputation of being the greatest centre of Islāmic learning, is increasingly being overshadowed, if our information is correct, by modern universities and colleges, and has been obliged to introduce a modern syllabus to run alongside the traditional one.

To understand the difference between the *madrasahs* and modern universities it is necessary to realise that it is not merely a dissimilarity in the matter of syllabuses. The *madrasahs* represent a world view in which the changes in our conception of the material universe, changes that we owe to science, are not reflected. The astronomy they teach is pre-Galilean; their geology has not gone beyond the findings of medieval scholars; they reject modern historical methodology where it seems to threaten legends embedded in the consciousness of our ancestors; their logic invokes Aristotle as the last word in analysis; their hermeneutics would not at all admit the validity of modern methods of textual scrutiny and interpretation; their concept of history as a discipline would rather ignore the labours of archaeologists and anthropologists than acknowledge that what is recorded in books written centuries ago could contain errors.

The distinguishing feature of traditional Muslim education, the critics say, is that it offers given judgements and would not like them to be questioned. The pupil's duty according to the old system is to absorb rather than question; to assimilate rather than analyse; to memorise rather than try to understand rationally. The *madrasah* system is, however, a comprehensive fabric with its base in elementary education and its apex in courses corresponding to modern post-graduate education. It also projects a consistent world view rather than the kind of empirical deductions which form the staple of modern education. It is, to give it its due, a full-fledged alternative to modern education.

I have devoted all this space to a discussion of the main features of traditional Muslim education in order to bring to light an ambiguity or paradox which lies at the heart of the demand for Islāmisation being voiced in certain Muslim circles today. They do not urge a return to traditional education as our 'Ulamā did in the 19th and early 20th centuries. If not directly and openly, they acknowledge implicitly the utility of modern Western education; they would not reject science and technology as such but insist that there is an alternative, an Islāmic alternative, which needs to be discovered and substituted for them. Nor do they reject modern philosophy as such; they assert that within the framework of thought organised on modern lines, Islāmic concepts of political rights, economic justice, historical analysis, anthropological research, sociological theory and so on can – or must – be found so as to rescue Muslim youth from the meretricious lure of Western life which is totally at variance with the ideals laid down in the *Qur'ān* and the teachings of the Prophet.

The late Dr Ismā'īl Rāji Al-Fārūqī, one of the pioneers who held strong views on the subject, rejects even the term 'Social Sciences' in the statement he wrote on Islāmisation. Those who participated in the Kuala Lumpur Conference on Islāmisation, which was one of a series, also reiterated the opinion that the whole scheme of education followed in modern universities needed to be recast and remoulded on Islāmic lines because, they protested, no branch of Western knowledge was value-free. Not even the sciences, they

said. Not even architecture. Everything that has come out of the Western crucible bears the stamp of a culture which is imbued with either Christian, pagan or atheistic ideology.

This criticism is not at all different from the objections that led Muslim 'Ulamā in India in the 19th century to advocate the boycott of Western schools. But whereas the 19th century 'Ulamā called upon the community to stick to the *madrasah* system, the modern critics shy away from prescribing the same remedy. Nor, as far as I have been able to determine, do they have a comprehensive scheme like the *madrasah* system to suggest as an alternative.

It will perhaps be readily agreed that no system of education can be understood in a vacuum without reference to the social milieu in which it functions. That the Western system should reflect the values of Western society is not to be wondered at, but there is one respect where all systems converge. They make a distinction between primary and higher education. Children need to be subjected to a process which is little different from plain indoctrination. They have to be initiated into the values that a society cherishes by means which deny them any choice between what to accept and what to reject. A child has to learn to count, it has to acquire the alphabet, it needs to learn how to dress, eat in the accepted way, how to sit and so on. Training of this kind is basic, and if it were left to the children to decide whether assimilating the traditional alphabet is the right way of acquiring a language or whether they should invent a new alphabet, there would be no education at all. But higher education meant for young adults presupposes a much greater degree of choice. The purpose here is to enable the young to understand rationally the foundations on which their society rests; blind acceptance is at this stage much less important than freedom of enquiry. This vital distinction between the two stages needs to be kept constantly in view.

One of the chief attractions of Western education at higher stages is that whereas in the *madrasah* system from beginning to end the main emphasis is on faith and submission to given judgements, the learner in the Western system is called upon to use his reason to probe what he is offered; he is told that doubt is the first condition of knowledge.

Unless we desire to install the *madrasah* system in a new setting, we must try and understand what the implications of Islāmisation will be.

There are scholars like the late Dr Ismā'īl Rāji Al-Fārūqī who, without admitting that the *madrasah* alternative has been found unsuitable in the context of the modern world, insist on rejecting the entire scheme of Western education to the extent of not even using the term 'social sciences'. Speakers at the Kuala Lumpur conference, as I have said, inveighed against almost every branch of Western knowledge in analogous terms.

While I agree that something needs to be done to arrest the erosion of Islāmic values among university students, I feel somewhat confused when I consider the recommendations of these scholars. They appear to me to mistake methods of research for its findings in both the humanities and the sciences. They urge the necessity of indoctrination at higher stages in the same manner in which for over seventy years the communists in Russia and elsewhere enforced the teaching of Marxist thought in all disciplines. Every student in the USSR admitted to a university, whether from outside or from within the country, had to submit to a process of immersion in Marxism in order that he might acquire the ability to judge every problem from a definite Marxist angle. The result, as the erstwhile communists themselves agree, has been stagnation, distortion and falsification, all of which combined to bring about the disaster which the communist world now faces.

It is certainly not my purpose to equate Islām with Marxism. But I am afraid that those who think that, its basic beliefs apart, there is an immutable Islāmic perspective in every area, misinterpret Islām's approach to knowledge, and are advocating something totally different from the broad-minded outlook that characterised our forebears in the early

history of our faith. The Arabs who were the first to come in contact with the Greek world intellectually did not reject Plato and Aristotle right away; they assimilated Greek science and philosophy but constructed systems of thought that reflected their own basic religious beliefs. There was no attempt to divide knowledge into compartments, Islāmic and un-Islāmic, and shun whole areas of research for fear that such investigations might lead to results which might at first prove difficult to reconcile with faith.

The weaknesses in the argument in favour of wholesale Islāmisation at higher levels of education appear to me to fall into several categories.

First, I do not agree that knowledge can be classified as Islāmic or non-Islāmic or, for that matter, into Christian and non-Christian, or pagan and non-pagan. Knowledge implies understanding the universe we inhabit, and no one but a fool will ever claim that man can or has been able to comprehend the whole of the mystery that is the universe. While men of faith attribute real knowledge to God alone, others resort to agnosticism to account for the same ignorance as to the nature of reality. The frontiers of human understanding have advanced from age to age, but each advance in knowledge reveals further riddles which continue to baffle us. To say, therefore, that all Western learning is value-charged is to confuse knowledge with the uses to which Western man has put his acquirements to consolidate and perpetuate his power, to buttress his imperialist conquests, to provide justification for his racial bias, to belittle the achievements of others even where Western scholars in their sober moments acknowledge their debt to Oriental sources. But notwithstanding this tendency to distortion and concealment, historians with any degree of intellectual honesty admit that civilisation is a many-layered structure consisting of deposits, each resting on or having its foundation in what has gone before. If the Arabs in the Middle Ages did not reject Greek science and philosophy on the grounds that they came from pagan sources, neither did Western man refuse to accept the findings of Arab science and philosophy. But, unfortunately for us, a kind of intellectual torpor descended on the Muslim world sometime during the 16th and 17th centuries, and creative activity amongst Muslims practically ceased. This was a reaction to political defeat, as political defeat was accelerated by the cessation of creativity. Newton, Huygens, Planck and Einstein have no counterparts in the Islāmic world. We do not have an Edison, a Pasteur or a Lister; nor do we have a Rutherford or a Ford. Are we to cover up our lack of progress in science and industry by pleading that we must shun modern electricity, telegraphy, radio and the innumerable inventions which we now use?

The participants in the Kuala Lumpur conference, as well as the late Dr Rāji, Dr Hossein Nasr and other proponents of Islāmisation seem to me to content themselves with abstract criticism rather than descend to the concrete and declare in precise terms where the line between Islāmic and non-Islāmic knowledge must be drawn.

One of the participants in the said conference, Hussein M. Ateshin, strongly criticised Western architectural concepts taught to Cairo University students. Western architecture naturally reflects Western concepts of beauty, but is it possible to deny that architectural creations are dictated as much by the architect's aesthetic ideas as by the state of technology at any given stage? The Alhambra, the Taj, the Badshahi Mosque in Delhi and the Qutb Minar in the same city are very different from the earliest monuments erected in Madīnah, as are the King Faisal Mosque in Islāmabad, the Regent's Park Mosque in London and the Washington Islāmic Center. Is the use of electricity in mosques and the installation of modern plumbing to be regarded as sacrilege? The Gothic churches in Europe differ in design and look from mosques in Iran, Turkey, Central Asia, India and the North African countries but they are alike in using the principle of the arch, which was invented by pagans. To give one more example: multi-storied buildings in the modern world have been made possible by advances in technology of which neither the West nor the East had any knowledge even in the 19th century. Can we truthfully say

that they have been religiously inspired? They can be, and have been, criticised on various grounds, but I believe that to condemn high-rise architecture as un-Islāmic would be to betray the same confusion of ends and means that I have referred to earlier.

Take another technological invention which has revolutionised civilisation: printing. Printing has advanced far from the days of its originators in China, or the time of Gutenberg and Caxton. In Europe it helped in the diffusion of Biblical knowledge, but this did not prevent the Muslims from using it with the plea that those who developed printing in Europe had a religious motive in mind.

What I am driving at is that the sweeping condemnation of modern technology and science which has become the staple of recent protests against Western colonialism actually clouds the real issue and is based on wrong and unprovable premises. I wonder how one could maintain that men like Kepler, Tycho Brahe and Galileo, who risked their necks by challenging the astronomical theories cherished by the Catholic Church, were deliberately trying to promote any cultural imperialism. Newton was a believing Christian but his theories cannot be shown to have been inspired by any religious impulse.

Knowledge is neutral but there is no area of knowledge that cannot be used for wrong and immoral purposes. The executioner's sword which can be used to impose the death penalty on criminals can also be a tool in the hands of murderers.

The social sciences (or 'Ummatic sciences' as Dr Rāji calls them) appear to be different in this respect. However, the difference is superficial. Consider, for example, historiography, which is a matter of organising and interpreting facts. There is a Christian interpretation, as there is a Marxist interpretation, and there are interpretations which differ from both. Arnold Toynbee thought history represented a series of challenges and responses. We are aware that Ibn Khaldūn in the 14th century saw history differently. But the basic question which cannot be ignored is that historiography should not involve deliberate distortion and must be based on proven and provable facts. Bias of one sort or another is perhaps impossible to eliminate, for historiography is not an exact science. But the methods of analysis, the sifting of evidence which over the centuries has led to the differentiation of legend from fact, are tools in the hands of scholars which can be, and have been, used differently by different historians. The accusation that this methodology is value-charged is untenable because it has on numerous occasions been employed by non-Muslim writers in their disputes with one another. No Christian writer today would defend without qualification Bede who wrote a history of the English church in the 8th century, or the Chronicles of Froissart, or the accounts of the Crusades written by Joinville and Villehardouin. Herodotus and Livy are judged differently from Thucydides and Tacitus. Mommsen, Ranke, Gibbon, Macaulay, Croce, Braudel – no one escapes continuous scrutiny, and they are apt to be evaluated differently as new research discloses new data, though from the Muslim point of view they might all appear to project a world view which is anti-Muslim.

What I mean is that while a Muslim must beware of being won over by a judgement which gives a slant to facts, he has to make a distinction between methods of research and their interpretation.

In political science and economics, the difference between Muslim perspectives and Christian/non-Muslim views is bound to be sharper. But again the distinction between methods of analysis and the interpretations must not be lost sight of.

The solution to the dilemma the Muslims face in higher education in modern universities is not the imposition of a rigid pattern of knowledge in the name of Islāmisation, a pattern that will admit of no deviations. For one thing, the moment we sit down to work out a scheme in detail we will be confronted by the insuperable difficulty of agreeing among ourselves as to what the Islāmic view is. The *Ummah* today numbers over a billion, spread over several continents and representing a diversity of races, languages

and cultural traditions. The differences between *Shia* and *Sunni* are paralleled by differences between the various schools of thought in both groups. If it is objected that all Muslims accept belief in God and faith in the Prophethood of Muḥammad ﷺ, we have to reckon with the fact that the unfortunate but historically inevitable fragmentation of the *Ummah* into national units has been characterised by internecine strife between one Muslim group and another, and a common Islāmic perspective in these areas will be impossible to achieve.

Secondly, unless we advocate a reversion to the old *madrasah* system, where some kind of unity of outlook can be perceived, and unless we think that a multiplication of the sort of university that the Saudi government has created in Madīnah for the study of the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* (which really is a *madrasah* with a different name) can help us Islāmise knowledge, we cannot avoid modernisation; this implies the acceptance of the world of knowledge that has come to be thought of as Western not, however, uncritically. The bitter and unpalatable truth that it is by mastering modern science and technology and philosophy that the Muslims can survive has, frankly, to be recognised and faced. The Muslim world's experience in the Gulf War of 1991 underlined the causes of our weaknesses. To put a false gloss on these weaknesses by preaching the theory that there exists an Islāmic alternative to every branch of knowledge is not only to mislead the Muslim public but also to encourage communal suicide.

The main cause of the erosion of Islāmic values among the young at universities lies in our failure, even in such Muslim countries as Pakistan and Bangladesh, to enforce a system of primary and secondary education that is designed to impregnate children at an impressionable age with basic Islāmic principles. In Bangladesh, thanks to the erroneous educational policies adopted by successive administrations from the fifties onwards, a generation has grown up to whom Islām is unknown except as a legend. They are less conscious of their spiritual and cultural heritage as Muslims than even some Muslim children in Britain who have been forced by the pervasive hostility towards their identity in the society they live in to rediscover the validity of their own culture. That a thorough grounding in the basics at primary education level pays excellent dividends is amply demonstrated by the fact that few Saudi scholars exposed to higher education in American and British universities, whether in the humanities or the sciences, return wholly brainwashed. I spent ten years teaching in Makkah and in the course of that decade I remember encountering only one young man who had accepted Western values lock, stock and barrel. On the other hand, at home in Bangladesh where I taught in the University of Dhaka for 21 years from 1948 to 1969, each new generation of students coming up with an increasingly changing background in primary and secondary education seemed further away from Islām than its predecessor. They lacked elementary knowledge about Islām and even resented being reminded that the roots of their culture were to be found in their religion.

It is at this level that the problem has to be tackled. Where governmental help is unavailable, Muslim society must depend on private initiatives, as Muslim communities in Britain, France and the USA are doing. The scale of these initiatives will, of course, be determined by the nature of the challenge in each case. I am firmly persuaded that to neglect the base of the educational pyramid and run after false mirages at its top will mean stagnation, retardation and ever greater dependence on the West and its science and technology.

Parallel to efforts by government or non-government organisations at lower levels, a determined and well-planned effort is called for at higher levels to promote outstanding Muslim scholarship on a par with the competence of Western scholars, to produce books that will expose the inaccuracies to which the Muslims object. It is idle to fulminate against Western scholars without being able to demonstrate by positive action that

Muslims are capable of looking at the world differently. This has to be an intellectual exercise instead of being an exercise in polemics and rhetoric. The right answer to Orientalists like Goldziher, Muir, Montgomery Watt and Cantwell Smith, to name but a few, is not to thunder against them from various platforms but to accompany our vocal protests with books of the highest intellectual standard by Muslim scholars which, by virtue of their quality, will be read by all. Shoddy scholarship, however well-intentioned, will not do. I am afraid that little along these lines has so far been attempted.

Indictments of the concept of progress are often used to conceal our intellectual incompetence, our failure to produce competent works and make advances in knowledge. This is the malady that needs to be remedied. Those who inveigh against progress are unconsciously inspired by the fear that advances in knowledge might demolish their pet theories about Islām. There is a kind of indefensible conservatism at work which would not tolerate any challenge to ideas and theories which have come from mediaeval Muslim scholars. Not only men like Sir Syed Aḥmad and Syed Ameer ‘Ali, whom I have mentioned before, but also even Iqbal did not escape suspicion about their loyalty to the basic tenets of Islām. We stand more or less where the Christian world in Europe stood at the end of the mediaeval period when any interpretation of dogma which deviated from the teaching of the Church Fathers was condemned as heretical. Interestingly, even St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest Christian thinker of the Middle Ages, had to contend with some animosity at first, although today he is regarded in the Catholic Church as the very basis of authentic Christianity. Human knowledge is a constantly changing process in the humanities as well as the sciences; nothing the source of which is man can ever stand still. To imagine that a set of books written in the twentieth century will forever solve the problem of Islāmisation is to nurse an illusion. Every new generation of Muslims must be prepared to re-examine knowledge in the light of their understanding to keep pace with advances outside the community. Torpor and stagnation will confront us with the same dilemma in every age.

I propose to conclude this discussion with one of the most impressive examples that I have come across of childhood upbringing causing a complete reversal of a man’s outlook late in life. Those who have read the works of Alexis Carrel, a Nobel Laureate, who returned to Christianity after a lifetime of disbelief and scepticism, realise with a shock how belief planted early can, at any age, enable a person to turn around. Carrel’s *Man the Unknown* discusses human anatomy but in a perspective which is designed to bring to light mysteries which only religion recognises. His knowledge of the subject is impossible to fault but he arrives at a reconciliation between faith and science which astonishes by its reach. As I read him he seemed to remind me more than once of those Muslim thinkers in the past who excluded nothing from their purview, and succeeded in producing works whose intellectual competence no contemporary could question.

(Prof Syed Sajjad Husain passed away in 1995)