

The reform of Muslim education and the quest for intellectual renewal

Keynote address by Anwar Ibrahim at the Symposium on “Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies,” organized by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) on December 9-10, 2013 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC



Introduction

The crisis in higher education in Muslim societies is manifested in myriad ways not the least of which are impacting socioeconomic development. Among the root causes of the crisis are those related to choice, content, quality and financial resources and issues of governance. It is said that Islamic education has not progressed much from its traditional form with its emphasis on Qur’anic and Hadith studies and while other societies have transformed their systems, Muslim countries are still grappling with the challenges of integrating within modern education.

Another major concern is the accessibility of education to the people. The need to democratize access to education has been canvassed for some time but this has remained a long-standing problem in Muslim countries.

It is obvious that the traditional system, without more, is unable to meet the needs of contemporary Muslim societies what with the additional pressures of globalization and the increasing need for education to produce problem-solving capacities. I believe all these issues are being discoursed in our two-day symposium and as such I shall confine my address today to the conceptual issues pertaining to the ummah and the intellectual crisis.

The economics of education

To begin with, there is a general perception in the discourse among many Muslim scholars that Western education and philosophy is secular and bereft of an ethical and moral dimension. To my mind, this is unfounded.

In John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, it is clear that the driving concern is morality which for him, "is the one area apart from mathematics wherein human reasoning can attain a level of rational certitude."¹

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which debunks the notion of him being the free market fundamentalist, Adam Smith asserts:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.

Expounding his moral philosophy, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen is of the view that Adam Smith has two fundamental propositions on the functioning of the economic system in general, and of the market in particular. The first principle, being epistemological, is that human beings are not guided only by self-gain or even prudence. The second is one of practical reason: That there are good ethical and practical grounds for encouraging motives other than self-interest.

According to Professor Sen, Smith argues that while "prudence" was "of all virtues that which is most helpful to the individual", "humanity, justice, generosity, and public spirit, are the qualities most useful to others".

The point is that these are principles about which "unfortunately, a big part of modern economics gets both of them wrong in interpreting Smith." Making him out as an advocate of pure capitalism, with complete reliance on the market mechanism guided by pure profit motive, is altogether misconceived.²

So, it appears that the misperceptions are not only pervasive among Muslim scholars but even among Western scholars in this regard, Smith – the icon of 'capitalism' – has been seriously misread.

Coming back to our original concern, I believe these 'moral sentiments' are not at loggerheads with Islamic precepts. After all, the guiding principle in political economy as summed up by al-Marhum Ismail al-Fārūqī is that economic action is the expression of Islam's spirituality: The economy of the *ummah* and its good health are of the essence of Islam just as Islam's spirituality is inexistent without just economic action.³

According to al-Fārūqī, if charity is to serve as a tool of religion whose purpose is the well-being of mankind, then it must have for its object goods of economic value. Religion,

¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-moral/> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in P.H. Nidditch (ed.), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, based on the fourth edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

² <http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2010/04/smith-market-essay-sentiments>

³ Ismail Raji al Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, 2nd ed., Herndon: IIIT, 1992, p. 157

therefore, seeks to subject Man's economic behaviour to the norms of morality. Islam, the religion of world-affirmation *par excellence*, seeks to order human life so as to make it actualize the pattern intended for it by its Creator. Hence the Islamic dictum: *Inna al din al mu'amalah* (Religion is indeed man's treatment of his fellows).⁴

In looking at the economics of education, while the profit motive may be a legitimate factor, it cannot be driven purely by self-gain. On the contrary in line with the Islamic dictum on charity as expounded by al-Fārūqī, where the purpose of religion is the well-being of mankind, the promotion of education must be conducted as a virtue at par with such other virtues as "humanity, justice, generosity, and public spirit."

Going back to first principles

It is important to remind ourselves that Muslim societies will not be able to progress by merely resting on the laurels of its time honoured labels. It is doubtful indeed that anything productive can emerge from the exercise of finding fault with the Western systems. The crisis in higher education – and for that matter, crisis in education at all levels – is most acute in Muslim countries, not in the West.

In fact, in the West, much less is said about the need for moral rectitude and ethical behaviour in education, yet the universities are at the forefront in producing the most sought after graduates, and in research and development. In saying this, I am not suggesting that moral rectitude and ethical behaviour in education are irrelevant but that this has to be seen in deed and action, not in proclamation of intentions.

In analysing the causes of the decline of the ummah be it in the field of education or any other field of significance, we should do away with the defensive mind-set that seems to have exemplified Muslim writers. Though Islamophobia is indeed a real problem, it is nevertheless not a cause or a factor that may be legitimately linked to the decline.

In this regard, going back to first principles is a better recourse. The Qur'an reminds us:

قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ سُنَنٌ فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ
عَاقِبَةُ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ

Similar situations [as yours] have passed on before you, so proceed throughout the earth and observe how was the end of those who denied. (Ali Imran: 137)

It is clear that much can be learned from the lessons of history. Malik Bennabi's central thesis is indeed relevant concerning the need for original ideas and that a vibrant

⁴ Ibid. at p.170

progressive society may emerge only if it can break free from the tradition of intellectual retardation.⁵

Bennabi tells us that a society's wealth is not measured by material possessions but by ideas and that it is only from creative ideas alone that great strides in civilization were made.⁶ In the area of scientific and technological advancement, it bears recalling that Bennabi was already advocating the importance of the inculcation of skills and competencies in all fields as well as vocational and technical training for the ummah. And this is absolutely essential for the ummah to move ahead with the times.⁷

Education, rationality and ijihad

Education must proceed on the basis of rationality and with that ijihad. I am using this term in the sense as explained by Al-Fārūqī, where he has said:

*As a methodical principle, rationalism is constitutive of the essence of Islamic civilization. ... Rationalism does not mean the priority of reason over revelation but the rejection of any ultimate contradiction between them.*⁸

Al-Fārūqī presented Islam as the religion par excellence of reason, science, and progress with a strong emphasis on action and the work ethic. Any suggestion that the advocacy of rationality in the articulation of educational policies and principles is grounded in secular thinking is therefore without foundation.⁹

For the advancement of the ummah, Al-Fārūqī advocates the fundamental processes of tajdid and islah in order to renew and reform the educational system.

To move ahead with the changing times is not tantamount to abandoning first principles or a rejection of tradition. Professor Naquib al-Attas, always mindful of the need to reassert the primacy of Islam as an intellectual tradition, persuasively argues that real modern education cannot be separated from the categories of knowledge fundamental to the

⁵ Badrane Benlahcene, *The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi's Approach To Civilisation*, IIIT, 2011

⁶ Malik Bennabi, *Mushkilat al Afkar fil Alam al Islami*, trans. M Ali, Cairo: Maktabat Amar, 1971, 56

⁷ Abdulaziz Berghout, *The Concept of Culture and Cultural Transformation: Views of Malik Bennabi*, Intellectual Discourse, 2001 Vol. 9, No 1, pp. 78-79

⁸ Ismail R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi, *Cultural Atlas of Islam*, Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1986, pp.78-79

⁹ *Islam and Knowledge: Al Faruqi's Concept Of Religion In Islamic Thought*, ed. Imtiyaz Yusuf, I.B. Tauris in association with IIIT and the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, Washington 2012

Islamic tradition whereas contemporary modern knowledge should be freed from its secular-bound interpretations.¹⁰

To al-Attas, the major cause of not just of the crisis of Muslim education but the general retrogression of the ummah is the failure to inculcate ta'dib, which is the cultivation of the inner dimensions of the self, centering on the spirit of knowledge and education.

To my mind, and in this regard, it might constitute a contrarian view, rather than viewing it as a clash of views, I see a convergence of approaches between al-Fārūqī and al-Attas. If I may use the analogy of the Baytu l-Harām, there are various entrances to the holiest of holy sites in Islam but by which ever entrance used, the ultimate destination remains the Ka'aba. In both their approaches, we can discern a unified concern for the revivification of Islamic knowledge and thought.

That concern was not entirely new. From the time of Muhammad 'Abduh, the call for change was couched in the language of modernity. Even back then there was the suspicion of 'Abduh attempting to introduce secularism through the back door of ijtihād but we know that such allegations are misconceived. On the contrary, what 'Abduh did was to subject the moral and epistemological premises of secular modernity to scrutiny and he came to the conclusion that Islam's modernity was both non-Western and non-secular.¹¹

Allama Iqbal reminded us of the inadequacy of fiqh for the requirements of his time and called for ijtihād. In doing so, he rightly cautioned that in the area of legislation for the State, ijtihād should be undertaken as a collective enterprise and not individuals going on their own ways.¹²

Nevertheless, it would be timely to reconsider the constraints on the adoption of the ijtihad, including those advocated by Iqbal, removing them and allowing the doctrine to apply beyond legal matters into the realm of everyday life.

In this regard, we are in complete agreement with Sheikh Taha's call for the revival of knowledge based on divine revelation against blind imitation of supposedly modern curricula in all areas of education where the dissemination of knowledge appears to be deliberately divorced from Islam's core values.¹³

One must not forget that taqlid can also refer to blind imitation of the West and falling prey, even subconsciously, to the influence of the biases latent in the language of discourse.

¹⁰ *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995

¹¹ *Tradition and Modernity – Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall, Georgetown University Press, 2013, Chapter on "Muhammad 'Abduh – A Sufi-inspired Modernist?" by Vincent J. Cornell p.108

¹² Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Kitab Bhavan, 2000

¹³ Taha J. al-Alwani, *Islamic Thought: An Approach To Reform*

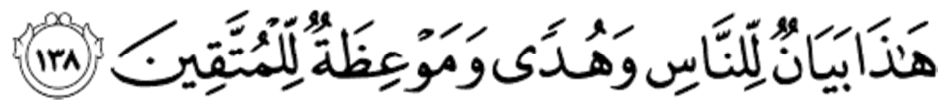
Hence, the need to propound alternative views and articulate a greater degree of independent thinking.¹⁴

The caveat against blind adoption of liberal views was sounded by Fazlur Rahman: “Universal values are the crux of the being of a society: the debate about the relativity of moral values in a society is born of a liberalism that in the process of liberalisation has become so perverted as to destroy those very moral values that it set out to liberate from the constraints of dogma.”¹⁵

A tentative prescription in the tradition of IIIT

In formulating a new prescription for Muslims one can do no better than to echo the calls made in the tradition of the International Institute of Islamic Thought on the Islamization of knowledge as pioneered by al-Marhum Ismail al-Fārūqī. I use the word ‘echo’ deliberately with the rider that a fresh interpretation is called for in order to do justice to the purport of this approach. This fresh interpretation is in tandem with the commitment to the core values of Islam.

In my humble view, this is necessary because in failing to do justice to these fundamental principles, certain scholars and ulema have confounded the plain message of the Qur’an and the Sunnah. They call for the adoption of the Shari’ah without a deeper understanding of the maqasid, giving preference to scholastic views and speculative opinions, many of which rely on unauthentic hadith and a skewed understanding of hudud law.¹⁶ Indeed, this is clearly contrary to the clear message of the Qur’an:



This [Qur'an] is a clear statement to [all] the people and a guidance and instruction for those conscious of Allah. (Ali Imran: 138)

Though we would expect it to be taken for granted, yet it is imperative to remind ourselves that the Qur’ān is more than just a moral code. Indeed it is a universal guide for the community. If we take the definition of education as a social extension of culture and culture as a definitive or core ingredient of civilization, then this approach of the Islamization of knowledge will lead to a truly holistic adoption of Islam’s core values. This indeed will be the best answer to the question what is the Islamic weltanschauung:

¹⁴ *Epistemological Bias in the Physical & Social Sciences*, Edited by A. M. Elmessiri, IIIT

¹⁵ *Liberal Islam – A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kruzman, Oxford University Press, 1998, Ch. 31 on Fazlur Rahman’s *Islam and Modernity* p.317

¹⁶ Mohammad Omar Farooq, *Toward Our Reformation: From Legalism to Value-Oriented Islamic Law and Jurisprudence*, IIIT, 2011

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ
عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَوْ ءَامَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ
لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ مِّنْهُمْ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمُ
الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾

You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoy what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah (Ali Imran: 110).

Secondly, to my mind, there is some substance in the observation that in the current approach to the Islamization of knowledge endeavour, there is a preponderance of focus on the social sciences while the crisis of the ummah in practical terms can be traced to it being technologically and scientifically lagging behind the non-Muslim communities.¹⁷

The project should therefore be broadened to attract more scholars and participants from the physical sciences and in time this will add a more balanced critical mass to the intellectual force. After all, the Bayt al-Hikmah of the Golden Age of Islam gave birth to not just philosophers but eminent scientists. In fact, the bifurcation between the two was not the norm as the holistic pursuit of knowledge saw the genesis of “philosopher-scientists” competent in a wide spectrum of intellectual disciplines.¹⁸ At the core of this focus, I believe, is the divine injunction on the use of the intellectual faculty.

Thus, the Qur’an enjoins the use of reason to ascertain the truth as provided by the senses, and truth grounded on revelation:

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ
لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

¹⁷ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, “Islamization of Knowledge: A Critical Overview”, *Islamic Studies* Vol. 30, No. 3 (Autumn 1991), pp. 387-400

¹⁸ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. “The Teaching of Philosophy.” In *Philosophy, Literature, and Fine Arts*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, pp. 3–21. Islamic Education Series. Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, 1982

And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth - all from Him. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought. (al-Jathiyah:13)

Finally, we must consider it a jihad to free ourselves from a new shroud of ignorance that has been cast upon the ummah. Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali reminds us that “ignorance combined with bigotry and caprice are a great misfortune.” The antidote to this is the pursuit of knowledge which will widen our horizons and strengthen our resolve and will-power for individuals as well as communities.¹⁹

Thank you

¹⁹ Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an*, trans. Ashur A. Shamis, rev. Zaynab Alawiye, IIIT, 2000, pp. 516-517