

Jeremy Henzell-Thomas seeks an integrated approach to education and knowledge, Richard Pring answers the question – what is a university? Marodsilton Muborakshoeva examines the university in Muslim context, Abdelwahab El-Affendi thinks we need to reconfigure Islamic education, Abdulkader Tayob is convinced that educational reform must begin by reforming self and other, Martin Rose surveys the educational developments in North Africa, Paul Ashwin discovers three ways of measuring quality, Sindre Bangstad deconstructs the term Islamophobia, Ruqayyah A. Kareem argues that fiction is an important pedagogical tool, Farid Panjwani suggests we need more than one narrative of Islam, Moneef R Zou'bi wonders why science is so conspicuously absent from all attempts at reforming education, Mohammad Nejatullah Siddiqi reflects on a life spent developing the theory and practice of Islamic economics, Naomi Foyle seeks Islamic knowledge by writing science fiction, Iftikhar H. Malik, Shanon Shah, Mohammed Moussa and Merryl Wyn Davies try to grasp the significance of the madrasa, and Ebrahim Moosa has doubts about his own education.

Also in this issue: a short story by Cheli Duran, poems by the dynamic British Pakistani poet Ilona Yusuf and the celebrated Marilyn Hacker, and our list of ten key texts on Islamic education.

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## ON EDUCATING ONESELF

*Ebrahim Moosa*

It dawned on me, very late in life, that one must value the role of education in one's life. Yes, I did attend school in South Africa, did my homework, got decent grades, but for the most part it was a perfunctory performance and drudgery. My education made no connection to my surroundings or my psychological state as a teenager. Occasionally, the literature classes titillated my curiosity as did the history and geography lessons, about events a long time ago and places far away. All this made me yearn for adventures of my own. Mathematics and physics remained a black hole of incoherence: more truthfully, the physics did make sense. But trigonometry and solving for  $x$ , made no real-life connections for me.

On reflection, I was clueless about habits I ought to have cultivated within me. I did not realise how important it was to develop excellence in skills such as punctuality, reading, writing, arithmetic and thinking as life-long assets. I missed the importance of a proper sensibility of morality: to have a heart, a conscience and take an uncompromising stance on human dignity. I am not libelling my parents, for I was not a feral child who was raised by wolves. I was taught to respect others and to care for them, to be truthful and be good, the basics of morality. My point is, I never found a compelling moral narrative coming from within me, what philosophers call personal virtues that would make me acutely aware of the importance of the hallowed things in life. I think it had something to do with gutter 'apartheid' education. Or so I like to think.

Graciously, I did not entirely miss out on the vital lessons worthy of pursuit in life. What really set my mind and heart on fire as a youth, was my

six-year sojourn in India's madrasas, Islamic seminaries, as chronicled in my book *What is a Madrasa?* a subject of a symposium in this issue. The madrasas taught me a great deal not only about Islam as a faith-practice and an intellectual tradition, but more: about life, religion, politics and values. And later, my modest role in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle as a Muslim theologian, activist and as a professor of religion, clarified some lessons for me. I realised in hindsight, that these were values and meanings I should have craved for much earlier.

In some ways I am a latecomer to the complexities of life, but a fortunate person in many ways, gifts for which I give thanks. Yet, many like me, have to defy the aphorism of some idealistic and exacting Muslim sage whose linear imaginary of time made him write: 'one whose beginning is not red hot, cannot anticipate a luminous ending.' I will not feign modesty and say I am not seeking a 'luminous ending.' But I find the sage's wisdom too cut and dry, two-toned and implying that if you missed the first boat, then you are a loser. I prefer the wisdom imparted by literary critics and artists like Edward Said who explained this lateness, not as a chronological delay, but as an allegory: the recovery of an aesthetic sensibility that has the double burden of being simultaneously enchanted by new insights of the recoverability of the past, and the anguish of the shortness of time.

Completing *What is a Madrasa?* and the contemporary debates, politics and controversies surrounding this institution, I realised that I was actually both enchanted with the madrasa-tradition after a period of disenchantment and, that I was also trying to say something more. If I was trying to create harmony and resolution between the rhythms and traditions of the madrasa with that of the modern tradition, then it was a misguided attempt on my part. That assumes I have ready-made answers. More honestly, I was possibly thinking more ambitiously of Islamic education as a state of intransigence and difficulty; where the old and the new jostle in unresolved contradictions but posing so many questions that it promises a new wave of creativity. Yes, I yearn to recover the madrasa as a knowledge tradition in all its glorious complexity in order to render it an institution that makes a meaningful contribution in our age.

Proponents of madrasa education have regrettably not put enough daylight between themselves and those brutal groups who often trade on the legacies of the madrasas in pursuit of their violence, such as the Taliban

and other groups. Hence, the monstrous severities perpetrated by some extremist groups blackball all of 'Islamic education.'

Yet, having witnessed a few revolutions in my lifetime and the frightening aftermath of each, I always surprised myself to be an optimist, to believe in the human capacity to do good. But now, I must confess, the voices of scepticism rise disturbingly in my head more often than I would welcome. The ugly consequences of the Iranian revolution, the contradictions and paradoxes produced by the Arab spring, the dehumanising civil wars – all only reinforce a gnawing pessimism. One day millions of Egyptians protest in the streets for change and some eighteen months later, these same millions beg for the return of a military dictatorship. Syrians prayed for change and their society spawned revolutionaries, some of whom have since morphed into humans who commit unspeakable acts on their fellow beings in the name of Islam and in pursuit of a craven idea of a caliphate.

Conditions of death and destruction force us to ask the question: what is wrong with human beings? What is the human condition? In other words, what dehumanises our souls, minds and sensibilities to commit such unspeakable acts to each other? Why do some of these muscular devotees of Islam produce teachings that violate human dignity at every turn? I need not be reminded that their super power adversaries are equally craven. But I also often wonder why Muslims who live inside and beyond the West always use the West as the benchmark of morality. Does the West's use of unbounded violence mean unbounded violence in return? Is that what a religious sensibility teaches? Is it not time that conscientious Muslims produce what can be called the 'violence critique?' Have we failed to provide people an education that produces decent human beings? I have seen decency in shantytowns and in spaces of grinding poverty around the world: so I am not so sure about the bread and butter causes of violence.

These days I find myself frequently murmuring the comment made by Immanuel Kant and popularised by the political philosopher, Sir Isaiah Berlin, 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' Yet I also hear another message. 'Hope,' I hear the novelist Annie Lamott pushing against my cynicism preach, 'is a revolutionary patience.'

So I often ask myself how did I and countless others dodge internalising the slogan, 'Islam is the solution,' a meaningless refrain made popular by

well-intentioned but utterly misguided Islamists? While I concede my education was imperfect, but from somewhere I acquired the sensibility to question the unquestionable. The example of the hierodules, those slaves who served the ancient Greek temples come to mind. The hierodules had the advantage over the priests when it came to the secrets of the cult. They were surely no less knowledgeable than the priests, but because they were servants they were prepared to take risks and were more willing to expose, question and explore the secrets of the cult. I too behaved like the hierodules.

As I was becoming more religiously literate in my teens, I always found the idea of corporal penalties propounded by Shari'a jarring to my human nature even though all the learned scholars of Islam fiercely threatened with their constructed dogmas that such questioning is tantamount to unbelief. But once I was skilled enough to read my madrasa texts as well as other texts of the Muslim intellectual tradition, I began to think of Islam as both a faith tradition as well as a world civilisation. Both were subject to the vicissitudes of culture and complex historical processes. Even the loftiest religious proclamations, I discovered in the madrasa, were constructions produced by human intelligence and subject to refashioning. That discovery became my shield against craven ideological constructions peddled in the name of Islam. Questioning opened the way for greater awareness and served to be my best teacher. 'Is not to question the best remedy for ignorance?' the Prophet Muhammad was reported to have asked.

Yet asking the right questions in order to educate the next generation of Muslims has been elusive for generations of modern Muslims. Conferences held in holy cities like Mecca, universities brandishing 'Islamic' qualifiers, knowledge baptised as 'Islamic' and the 'islamisation' of everything under the sun, have yet to even yield mediocrity. Rather the harvest has been to produce closed minds and even worse: dangerous minds whose ugly deeds carry the imprimatur of a distorted faith. If the mindset were inward looking and defensive it would be a consolation. Instead, it has produced a pandemic of destructive behaviour. How to make human beings out of the crooked timber of humanity remains our challenge. Perhaps if serious questioning displaces the trumpets of hollow triumphalism there is hope for a future.

Is it because I, and perhaps some of the readers, have seen too much and have now become sceptics, given the state of the world? I, perhaps we, have now painfully realised that if the human soul is not sufficiently tempered and formed by education, then the best intentions and the most precious opportunities given to our species are guaranteed oblivion. This is hardly any major discovery: it's only a brutally painful realisation I reluctantly admit.

I think of the enormous human sacrifices made in the twentieth century in pursuit of revolutionary change. And then most hopes were dashed into nightmares because the human condition was never nurtured. Think of the revolutions – Bolshevik, Cuban, chairman Mao's cultural revolution, the wars of independence against colonialism and the Iranian revolution. All were instances of great hope claiming to heal humanity but alas, they left many corpses along the road. We are passing through another stage of world history where both the powerful and the powerless have the potential to leave only utter destruction on the world stage.

As a teacher I often wonder whether I am educating a generation that will reproduce the errors that the previous generation had committed. I hope not. In order to secure a better future, the priority is not to stuff heads with facts and information. These are resources even a machine can be fed. It is to create human beings who can feel for their fellow beings.

And yet I cannot afford to accommodate the darkness of the pessimist and thus have to turn to the light of optimism. I have to believe that we do have gems within us. Therefore, a real education must of necessity instil a sensibility to care for all of humanity and treat all wisdom as our own. In the words of the invincible Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi, one must hope for an audacious pluralistic future. He claimed and wished for others to see the 'other' within the self, when he sang the following lines:

'My heart can take on  
any form:

for gazelles a meadow,  
a cloister for monks,

For the idols, a sacred ground,  
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim  
the tables of the Torah,  
the scrolls of the Qur'an.

I profess the religion of love.  
Wherever its caravan turns  
along the way, that is the belief  
the faith I keep...

## TEN KEY TEXTS ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION

You want to be happy, educated and true to the spirit of Islam? Well, good fortune smiles on you: there is no lack of great thinkers eager to walk you through to your destination. The issue of knowledge and education has preoccupied Muslims right from the inception of Islam. There is a vast body of Islamic literature on how young minds should be nurtured, how critical insight can be inculcated, and how to be happy and virtuous. It all starts with the first word of the revelation we call the Qur'an – 'Read', and the Prophet's injunction that 'seeking knowledge is a duty of all Muslims', and moves forward with a plethora of classical scholars, philosophers and thinkers exploring and delineating what a good education ought to be. A good education, they thought, is not simply about transmission of knowledge but also includes emotional, social and physical well-being of the student. It is about creating a well-rounded moderate person with passion for thought and learning. The kind of individuals who ended up pursuing higher education at al-Azhar University in Cairo and al-Karaouine in Fes, established in 970 and 859 respectively.

The Islamic literature on education and knowledge is as fresh and relevant today as it was in the classical period. Of course, the world has moved on. But just as we still study Plato and Aristotle, so we ought to be reading works such as *The Treatise on Matters Concerning Learners and Guidelines for Teachers* by al-Qabisi (936–1012) and *Exposition of Knowledge and Its Excellence* by ibn Abd al-Barr (978–1070). Or exploring the classification schemes of al-Kindi (801–873), al-Farabi (d.950) and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (864–925) to see how knowledge was organised in the classical period. Or scrutinising the *Fihrist* (Catalogue) of al-Nadim (d.995–998) to determine what the young folks of the tenth century were reading and studying. The legacy of classical Islam only has meaning as a living heritage; only as a dynamic