

Concept of Education in Islam

It is both fashionable and academically useful sometime to understand and analyze etymological definitions. In the case of English words, these are definitions in terms of the word from which it was derived (normally Greek or Latin). In this sense the word "education" is taken to come out either from *educere* or *educere*. In the first sense to educate is to "lead out or bring out," while in the second it means to "form or train." According to an eminent British scholar, G. Langford, education is an activity which aims at practical results in contrast with activities which aim at theoretical results. We agree with Prof. R.S. Peters when he says that education forms a "family" of ideas united by a complicated network of similarities which overlap and criss-cross.

It will be generally agreed that education forms the most important link between man's past and future. In fact, it constitutes that process of evaluation and transmission, of coping with the present and planning for the future, which determines a community's survival. It is through education that the cultural heritage, knowledge, and values of a social group are preserved and the continuity of its collective life ensured. In short, education imparts meaning to the existence of a culture and helps it sustain its world-view. As such, it cannot be equated with a mere inventory of the paraphernalia and instruments of instruction, including even institutions and external structures. On the contrary, in every meaningful and constructive way education is inextricably linked with the general intellectualism of a culture, the principal task of which is to provide a forum for self-analysis, criticism, and search for authenticity. Educational philosophy, therefore, not only shapes the destiny and identity of any historical community in its functions as the guardian and

cultivator of values, it is also the very basis of all culture and civilization.

Endorsing the above ideas, the well-known Pakistani educationist, the late Dr. Mahmood Hussain, writes in a collection of excellent articles entitled *Education and Culture*: "Education is a social process and it receives its meaning and essential logic from the human society of which it is a part. In its broadest sense the totality of human experience within the society, whether tangible or intangible, is called its culture.... This consensus within a society, which is both emotional and intellectual, is what gives a culture its inner source of strength and motive force.... The cementing force within a society is a system of sentiments which we can call its value-system. The system of values is essentially a set of inter-related ideas, concepts and practices to which strong sentiments are attached. The value system is nurtured and reinforced primarily by the system of beliefs of a group and by its sense of history and traditions."

In a similar vein the above mentioned ideas are emphasized by A.K. Brohi thus: "By education we understand a participation in a cultural process by which successive generations of men and women take their place in our national history upon the foundation of an ideological commitment to the Islamic way of life, and a certain manner of thinking and action conforming to its tenets and commands." (Cf., *Education in an Ideological State*, published in *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education* ed. S.M. Al-Naquib Attas).

One of the most damaging effects of Western colonialism has been the creation in all colonized countries, particularly Muslim countries, of a class of people called "the elite" but which may be more appropriately called the "deluded hybrids". They are the products of the imposed system of education, which is designed to create a class which is almost totally uprooted from its cultural and moral traditions. They were nurtured as alternatives to the *Ulama* (men of real knowledge and character) who had refused, with remarkable

consistency, to have anything to do with the colonial government. The Euro-Christian educational system of the colonial powers was purposely designed to destroy the identity of its victims while at the same time exalting the European race and culture. The elite class in many Muslim countries exhibits, like their European counterparts, a servile spirit, and can only play the role of slaves to political and cultural imperialism. This obtains even when they claim to be free. This is, of course, in marked contrast to those who are imbued with true Islamic values and are educated as Muslims. They have remained intellectually and morally independent and do not exhibit, even for one moment, the sickening servility and moral emptiness from which the colonial elite suffer. This is so because the Islamic education, as the celebrated African scholar, Edward Blyden has observed, elevates and exalts the human personality in Africa. On the other hand, the Euro-Christian education which dominates African education today, degrades and demoralizes the human personality. (Cf., *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, Edinburgh University Press, 1967.)

What produced this difference between Islam and imperialism, Blyden explains, is that "when the religion (Islam) was first introduced it found the people possessing all the elements and enjoying all the privileges of an untrammelled manhood. They received it as giving them additional power to exert an influence in the world. It sent them forth as the guides and instructors of their favored neighbors, and endowed them with self-respect which men feel who acknowledge no superior. While it brought them a great deal that was absolutely new, and inspired them with spiritual feelings to which they had before been strangers, it strengthened and hastened certain tendencies to independence and self-reliance which were already at work. On the other hand, Christian influences, along with other colonial menaces were imposed on the African when he had already been dispossessed of his freedom and had been put in chains." Along with the Christian teaching, says Blyden, "he [the African] and his children received lessons

of their utter and permanent inferiority and subordination to their instructors, to whom they stood in the relation of Chattels.... their development was necessarily partial and one-sided, cramped and abnormal. All tendencies to independent individuality were repressed and destroyed. Their ideas and aspiration could be expressed only in conformity with the views and tastes of those who ruled over them." Consequently, those who have gone through this slave education suffer from "general degradation" and could only play "the part of the slave, ape or puppet" as Blyden laments.

A system of education derives its legitimacy from its world-view. Contemporary Western concept of education is a sibling of the reductive, arrogant, and capitalistic world-view of Western civilization. The West "secularized" knowledge in order to overthrow religion and Truth. On the contrary, the concept of education in Islam incorporates positive spiritual and social dimensions. It makes sense only within the ethical and social frame-work of Islamic metaphysical world-view. As modern ecology has taught us, and Western science is rediscovering, nothing in nature behaves as an isolated system. Everything is connected to everything else — an all-pervasive principle of interconnectedness is in operation. Thus, there is no such thing as pure physics or pure economics devoid of social, political, cultural, environmental and spiritual concerns. Looking specifically on the subject of education, it is worth remembering that data or information of any sort is not generated in a vacuum. It is accumulated in accordance with a pre-conceived pattern and purpose. Its subsequent analysis and dissemination is thus only an extension of the data generation process. Indeed, an authentic classification scheme, or — to use a somewhat Kantian phraseology — a categorical framework must precede collection, processing, storage, and dissemination of information. If it is not sufficiently realized by a Muslim intellectual and educationist, he would unwittingly end up promoting an alien world-view. Saturation with information without the analytical capabilities to sift it, and the value-bias involved in the generation and use of

data, are the twin problems which need to be firmly kept in mind by a convinced and committed Muslim if one is not trapped in false illusion of the "information ocean" and if one is to remain faithful to one's tradition and metaphysical world-view.

For a true Muslim, Islam is the norm for judging and evaluating everything. Not very long ago the dearth of information on a particular subject was the limiting factor on one's correct cognition of events. With the advances in communication and information technologies, there is an avalanche of data being generated and exchanged. Now one can safely say the limiting factor on analysis of a particular fact or event is too much raw data and too little analysis or too ill-developed analytical tools or norms to handle the data adequately. However, as any intelligent person can see, there is a vital difference between the two situations. Previously the sheer lack of data meant that those privileged to have access could manipulate the information to serve their ends at will. Now, provided one develops sufficiently powerful analytical tools and normative categories, most situations can be understood in their proper perspective. The purveyors of information and so-called value-free empirical data have thus resorted to other means to confuse the public. They bombard the populace with a mass of raw data so that an impression is given that all that is to be known about a situation or reality is available, and the interpretation given to them by the media is the only valid one. Soon, an unshakable image about the "facts of the case" is formed in the public mind which, in turn, is used to shape events and achieve desired results. The Islamic concept of knowledge (*ilm*) and the process of education is diametrically opposed to all this humbug. In order to sift the relevant from the irrelevant, Muslims have their own scheme of classification, as the mental effort of "constructing" facts precedes their collection.

As a matter of fact it is the Islamic concept of knowledge — *ilm* — which must form the basis of the theoretical and institutional structure of education in Islam. In other words, what makes education truly Islamic is the fact

that it is based on a genuinely Islamic notion of knowledge. The concept of *ilm*, as has been argued forcefully in recent years by numerous Muslim scholars, integrates the pursuit of knowledge with values, envelopes factual insight with metaphysical concerns, and promotes an outlook of balance and genuine synthesis. This is the ultimate difference between the western notion of knowledge which keeps "knowledge" and "values" in two separate compartments, and does not appreciate any form of knowledge which is not gained by sense perception. The integral world-view of Islam, on the other hand, furnishes us with a number of concepts which, when operationalized and actualized in all their sophistication at various levels of society and civilization, yield an integrated infrastructure for the distribution of knowledge. In addition to the core concept of *Tauheed*, at least five other Islamic concepts — of *ilm* (knowledge), *adl* (justice), *Ibadah* (worship), *Khilafah* (trusteeship), *istislah* (social welfare) — have a direct bearing on education to be pursued in the true Islamic spirit. The all-embracing Qur'anic concept of *ilm* shaped the outlook of the Muslim people right from the beginning of Islam in Arabia. Islam actually made the pursuit of knowledge a religious obligation: by definition, to be a Muslim is to be deeply entrenched in the generation, production and dissemination of knowledge. This is significantly borne out by the first revelation of *Iqra* (Read!) given to our beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Again the concept of *ilm* here is not a limiting or elitist notion. *Ilm* is distributive knowledge — it is not a monopoly of a few individuals, or a certain class, group, or gender; to acquire it is not an obligation only for a few, absolving the vast majority of the society; it is not limited to a particular field of inquiry or discipline but covers all dimensions of human awareness and the entire spectrum of natural phenomena. Indeed, it seems that the Holy Qur'an places *ilm* at par with *adl*; the pursuit of knowledge is as important as the pursuit of justice. One is an instrument for achieving the other. Only when knowledge is widely and easily available to all segments of society can justice be established in its Islamic

manifestations. The Islamic civilization has rightly been described by some historians as the civilization of "the book."

Dr. Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, in his perceptive work entitled *Tawhid: Its implications for Thought and Life*, has unfolded in a very scholarly fashion the paramount importance of the concept of *Tauheed* in the ideational and practical spheres of a Muslim polity. We fully agree with him that *Iman* is primarily and basically a cognitive or gnoseological category. That is to say, it has to do with knowledge, with the truthfulness of its propositions. And since the nature of its prepositional content is that of first principle of logic and knowledge, of metaphysics, of ethics and aesthetics, it follows that it acts in the believer as a light which illumines everything. As Al-Ghazali has described it, *Iman* is a vision which puts all other data and facts in the perspective which is proper to, and requisite for, a true understanding of them. It is the grounding for a rational interpretation of the universe. In itself, the prime principal of reason cannot be non-rational or irrational, and hence in contradiction with itself. To deny or oppose it is to lapse from reasonableness and hence from humanity.

In the end it must be said that only by rooting their education policy firmly in the matrix of Islamic concepts can Muslim countries generate the type of intellectual energy and productivity needed not only to meet the problems of the contemporary *Ummah*, but also to rejuvenate and re-establish Islam. A Muslim needs to penetrate beyond the external form of the Modern Age to understand and grasp its transcendental nature and reality. We firmly believe that a dynamic and pulsating faith is not possible to attain unless our knowledge-edifice is firmly based on the spiritual foundations of the Qur'an and *Hadith*. It is heartening to note that a number of Islamic revivalist movements as well as organizations in the private sector are engaged in educating and training youths and scholars from the Islamic perspective. Markazi Anjuman Khuddam-ul-Quran Lahore and its affiliated societies, along with numerous Qur'an Academies and Qur'an Colleges, have been established to

make a humble contribution in this very direction.

Absar Ahmad

According to a tradition reported by Abdullah Ibn Amr (RAA) and transmitted by Darimi (RA), once Allah's Messenger (SAW) happened to pass by two groups (of Muslims) in the mosque and he said: Both of them are good, but one is superior to the other. One group is supplicating Allah and praying Him. If He so wills He will confer upon them and if He so wills He will withhold. As for those who are acquiring the understanding of religion and its knowledge and are busy in teaching the ignorant, they are superior. Verily I have been sent as a teacher. He then sat down amongst them.