

The Role of Religion in Education: Seeking the Knowledge of Things

Yusuf Islam

If we look back into history, it is clear that religion has always been a major force in motivating mankind towards the search for knowledge. At first, the teachings were from God, and the first teachers were the prophets of God. In Islamic understanding, Adam (AS) was the first of God's prophets who "*learned words from his Lord*"¹ and the first to be thus honored, "*And He taught him the names of all things.*"²

The "best schools" ever to appear on the pages of time were those schools and ecclesiastical institutions which were based on the teachings and curriculum of God and the best masters were the teachers of God's Words and Inspiration – the prophets (AS). The Qur'an relays to us the stories of so many prophets, and the original Books of Guidance and Knowledge, given to mankind through them. We are instructed – "*Say: We believe in Allah, and in what was revealed to us, and what was revealed to Ibrahim and Isma'il and Isحاق and Yaqoob and the tribes; and that given to Musa and Isa and that given to all the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between them....*"³

The Final Prophet sent to mankind was raised from the house of Ibrahim (AS), through his son Isma'il (AS); his name was Muhammad (SAW) and he was the final messenger and model teacher for the whole of mankind to learn from, till the Day when the world will be annihilated and humanity will be judged. He came to confirm the true teachings of all the prophets, and to invite people to the one religion of God, "Submission", or in Arabic "Al-Islam."

The first lesson Prophet Muhammad (SAW) taught was "La ilaha illallah" – there is no god but Allah. The first words (of the Qur'an) revealed to him were "*Read! In the name of your Lord Who Created... Who teaches by the pen, teaches man that which he knew not.*"⁴ From this we can see that education marks the beginning of the life of a Muslim, and that without it we cannot fulfill the purpose of our creation, nor will we understand what life is all about. The Prophet

(SAW) is reported to have said: “To search for knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim [Male and female].”⁵ Education, then, has a vital role to play in life.

Education in Europe

Apart from the elite Greek and Roman temples and some secluded monasteries, schools and general education came, it seems, rather late to the people of Western Europe. Education was, in fact, reserved for the aristocracy and the higher class, either in terms of status or spirituality. In those days, the primary institution of learning were “Schools of Divinity” where people (usually young men) were trained in the skills of reading and writing in order to become kings, lords, high priests or scribes, all learning the mysteries of the Divine Logos and the language of the heavens above.

In contrast, it is interesting to note the rapid development of schools, colleges, and universities in the Muslim World, fulfilling the command of the Final Prophet (SAW) to “seek knowledge.” Honest historians now admit that the European renaissance began and was fueled by exposure to Islamic civilization and centers of learning in Muslim Spain and North Africa. Avicenna, Averroes, Albeiruni, Abu Musa Jaber and Al Kahi are just some of the constellation of Muslim scholars, philosophers, and scientists who influenced the dramatic change in the academic and intellectual life of Europe.

Although it was primarily the methodology of Islamic education which was taken and used by non-Muslim scholars, not the Prophet’s teachings and message, this educational movement could well be said to have contributed to the European academics’ rapid disenchantment with Christian dogma and hierarchy leading ultimately to the (some would say) inevitable divorce between science and religion. Thus was the secular man born!

It should be no surprise, therefore, to see non-Muslims raising their eyebrows at the reintroduction of Muslim schools which do not divide knowledge into secular and religious. “Are we going back to the Dark Ages?” they ask. “Have we not evolved beyond the

need for such places?” Sadly, the reply must be: “ Sorry, no, you have not!”

Children: The Best Students

Children are, generally, the best students. Why? Because they are open-minded and ready to admit that they know nothing about a particular subject. They trust their teachers and their first teachers are parents. How many parents betray that trust by lying to their children, pretending to know the answer, or failing to act upon their own teachings and teach by example? We have before us a “School of hypocrisy”! Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: O people! Whoso knows anything, let him communicate it, and whoso does not know, let him say, ‘Allah knows best’; because it is a part of knowledge that you should say what you know not, ‘Allah knows best.’”⁶

Knowledge has been categorized by Muslim scholars, notably Iman Al-Ghazali, who explained that the most important knowledge is that which save you from the punishment of the Hereafter: to know the universal duties imposed on all individuals – *Fard Ayn* (Obligatory). After that comes knowledge of science and practices which are necessary for society as a whole, such as farming, weaving, building, mathematics, medicine, and so on. This body of knowledge is called *Fard Kafaya*.

Unfortunately, most schools today teach only the *Fard Kafaya* subject, and the first – *Fard Ayn* – class of knowledge is unknown. However, Muslim schools are places where the whole personality of the human being is developed and educated, reintroducing *Fard Ayn* into the curriculum. It is not an easy task, but it is most necessary if we are to fulfill our purpose in life and be prepared for the final examination. “Whoso acquires knowledge other than that wherein the pleasure of Allah is sought, does not learn it but for gaining therewith the frailties of the world. He will not find on the Day of Judgment the fragrance of Paradise,” said the Prophet (SAW).⁷

It is clear, therefore, that we have been created to worship our Lord and seeking knowledge is an essential part of that worship.

The Prophet (SAW) said: “One learned man is more powerful against the Devil than a thousand worshippers.”⁸

Abdullah Ibn Amr (RAA) reported that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) came across two assemblies in his mosque and said: “Both of them are doing good but one is better than the other. As for these, they call Allah and pray for help from Him. If He wills, He gives them, and if He wills, He denies [it to] them. And as for these, they learn theology and knowledge and teach it to the illiterate. They are therefore better. I have been sent as a teacher.” Then the Prophet took his seat in the midst of the second group.⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ Al-Qur’an Al-Baqarah 2:37
- ² Al-Qur’an Al-Baqarah 2:31
- ³ Al-Qur’an Al-Baqarah 2:136
- ⁴ Al-Qur’an Al-Alaq 96: 1-5
- ⁵ Mishkat Al-Masabih, Chapter on Education, hadith no. 37
- ⁶ Ibid., hadith no. 27
- ⁷ Ibid., hadith no. 42
- ⁸ Ibid., hadith no. 36
- ⁹ Ibid., hadith no. 97