

Islamic Pedagogy East and West

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My title breaches one of the first rules of public speaking, which is never to speak on a subject about which your audience knows more than you do. I am, however, comfortable about breaking the rule, for three reasons. First, speaking across cultural divides is important. Second, I am speaking within a cultural community: just as the *umma* is a global community of believers, so the universities constitute a global community of intellectuals, one which can take the long view and avoid the rush to judgement. Third, I am speaking in a university that is in its origins bicultural, and retains that commitment. The very name Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College proclaims its cosmopolitan nature, as indeed does the name of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: the coupling of a British knighthood with a title that identifies him as a descendant of the Prophet (PBUH) states the case in a nutshell; the fact that the tutor who taught him to read and inducted him into Qur'ān was a woman also points to a remarkable feature of his formative years. To that I would add the fact that Sir Syed was the first Muslim to write a commentary on the Bible, arguing that common roots in the Abrahamic religions bind us together; we are all People of the Book, *أهل الكتاب* ('Ahl al-Kitāb). This is a capacious understanding that we should all welcome. Indeed, I regret that the parallel term in Hebrew, *אמ הא ספר* (Am Ha Sefer), is understood to refer to Jews alone, and not to all three Abrahamic religions; even worse, there is no comparable term in Christianity, and those from a Christian background often fail to understand that Islam is a sister religion, not a rival civilization. Both India and England have substantial Muslim minorities, and I like to think that neither country should be regarded as contested. The terms 'territory of Islam' (*دار الإسلام* *dar al-Islam*) and 'territory of war' (*دار الحرب* *dar al-harb*) can in radical circles be abused; I am instead attracted to the more recent notion of the 'place of safety' (*دار الأمان* *dar al-Aman*), and so aspire to an India and an England in which Muslim citizens are treated as equals.

The centrality of the Qur'ān in every aspect of Islamic civilization has inevitably shaped the pedagogy of the Islamic world. The first element that I would like to consider is that of rote learning. Consider the example of the *hafiz* (I do so conscious of the fact that some of you may be *huffaz* or whatever the plural of *hafiza* might be). I hardly need to explain to this audience that the word 'Qur'an' means 'recitation', and the first word that Allah revealed to Muhammad was *iqra*, which in its context must mean 'recite', but is also translated as 'read'. The memorising of the Qur'an and its recitation as a form of reading have been a central feature of Islamic education since the seventh century. The practice of memorising is still a mainstay of religious education throughout the Islamic world, but my interest today is that it has also spilled over into secular education. In poor areas, the practice is sustained as much by the shortage of books and paper as by religious ideals, but it also exists in the wealthier environment of universities.

The practice of memorising is not to be deprecated. Indeed, many academics in the West regret that it is no longer a staple of education. When I entered the profession, students of botany began by memorizing the names of several hundred plants, as that was deemed to give them a knowledge base on which to build their understandings; similarly, students of languages such as ancient Greek began by memorizing more than 200 parts of a single verb, recited in every tense, person, number, voice and mood, and that foundation was the basis of subsequent learning. I am one who regrets that memory no longer plays a part in Western pedagogy, but I also understand that an education system in which the principal mental discipline is that of memorising is not going to encourage independence of thought or analytical skills, nor is it likely to enhance the employability of students. I am of course alert to the sensitivities. The religious origins of memorised texts and the standing of the *hafez* render intervention in this practice problematical, and leaves Westerners and Westernisers open to the charge of cultural imperialism. That said, there are alternatives to the rote learning that I have witnessed in universities all over the Islamic world; my own view is that we need to encourage parallel forms of learning, both with the academic aims of fostering independence of thought and analytical skills and with the practical necessity for students to acquire skills that will lead to jobs.

The second element in Islamic pedagogy that I should like to consider is the standing of the teacher. The figure of the teacher in the Muslim world is traditionally vested with greater authority and treated with greater respect than his or her counterpart in the West. The teacher explains the facts, and the student learns from the teacher. The student is taught to respect the teacher. There are versions of this relationship in the West, and in many European countries the relationship between teacher and student is a formal one, and appropriately formal forms of address are used. In England it feels different. Forms of address are a good indicator of the difference. First-year students call me Mr, Dr or Professor, and are often unaware of the distinctions. Second year students, however, call me Gordon, because first names are an indicator of social proximity, whereas titles are indicative of social distance. Whenever I have visited Indian universities, I have found a wholly different relationship between tutor and student; indeed, the fact that students often stand when I enter the room is an indication of respect that at first I found startling. This cultural difference in the standing of the teacher has important pedagogical implications: in university systems shaped by the Islamic tradition the teacher is a figure of authority, a transmitter of knowledge; in the university system in which I work the teacher is a resource, and there is a greater emphasis on the role of the student as a learner. That means that some aspects of our practice are slowly becoming redundant. The principal example is the lecture. Indeed, it could be argued that the tradition of the university lecture has not yet caught up with the implications of the invention of printing in the fifteenth century. What is the point of reading a lecture to students when students are able to read printed material? Is it simply a vestige of the wish to assert the authority of the teacher? It is certainly inconsistent with any aspiration to student-centered learning.

The third element that I wish to explore concerns the comparatively cerebral nature of knowledge in the Islamic world. Academics in British universities often find that students from the Muslim world are better informed about the conventional wisdom of their subjects than are their British counterparts, but perceive a difficulty with the ability of the Muslim students to accumulate knowledge through investigation. In the sciences this anomaly may be traced to the convention of the demonstration lab. It is common in the Arab world to see a lecturer speaking beside a technician performing experiments; students note what happens, but often have little or no hands-on experience in the laboratory. This example is indicative, I think, of a larger issue. Traditional Islamic education was not vocational, and even subjects such as mathematics and science were speculative rather than applied. Technical and vocational education did not have the same level of respect. Contrast this with a country like France, where the *École Polytechnique*, which is essentially an engineering university, has the same standing as the Sorbonne, which has its roots in a faculty of theology. This development has parallels in India, where it is now as common to see the background of senior figures in Indian society as coming from the Doon School and an IIT as from the Doon School and Stephen's. Such a respect for applied science (with the exception of Medicine) seems rarer in the Islamic world; indeed, the only world-class technical university that I can think of in the Islamic world is METU, the Middle Eastern Technical University in Ankara, but that emerged from a culture that was only nominally Islamic. My point is that education in the Islamic world is peculiarly intellectual; it values the life of the mind more than the ability of the hands.

The fourth strand is a particularly sensitive one, because it centres on science. It also subverts some of what I said under my third heading about the high value placed on the intellect rather than the hands. The source of this subversion is the success of the Islamic world in producing applied scientists. This university is an excellent example, with its Faculty of Engineering and Technology and its Faculty of Medicine, though the fact that you also have a Faculty of Unani Medicine points to the older intellectual tradition. The Islamic world has produced a huge number, possibly a disproportionate number, of the world's greatest doctors and engineers; at the other end of the scientific spectrum, it has produced many of the world's greatest mathematicians. What it has not produced is comparable numbers of world-class biologists and physicists. I am not certain why this should be the case, but as I am among friends, I shall hazard a guess. In the case of biology, the problem may be that of the Darwinian model of evolution. In the case of physics, the problem may be occasionalism, which is a metaphysical theory of what we take to be causation, according to which events are not caused by relations between physical things or in accordance with natural laws, but rather as a consequence of God's will; the apple falls from the tree not because of a law of gravity but because God directly and consistently wills it to fall.

This notion entered the Islamic tradition in the tenth century in what is now Iraq. Abū al-Ash'arī, the founder of the Ash'ari school of theology, seems to have been the first to mount a sustained argument against secondary causation, arguing that any assumption that there could be causality independent of God's direct action

diminished God's agency. The most famous proponent of the doctrine was Abū al-Ghazālī, whose standing is perhaps comparable to that of Thomas Aquinas in the church in the West. Ghazālī was by any measure a great figure, and medicine (especially anatomy) is among the disciplines that owe a debt to him. His advocacy of occasionalism, however, marked the end of the golden age of Islamic science, the centuries in which Islam led the world in scientific thinking. I am neither a philosopher nor a scientist, but it seems to me that occasionalism and physics are at odds with each other, and that that may be the reason why the Islamic world does not lead the world in physics. These issues have implications for science education, especially in the pure sciences. In the case of the biological sciences, the difficulties are not unique to the Islamic world; think, for example, of the argument about creationism and 'intelligent design' in American schools and colleges.

These four Islamic features – rote learning, the high standing of the teacher, the intellectual nature of knowledge, and the incompatibility of traditional Islamic thinking with certain strands of science – all testify to pedagogic traditions with a long and distinctive history. They are at odds, however, with some aspects of educational reform. The central challenge is that of reconciling the need for reform with the need to honour the pedagogic traditions of Islam. That challenge in turn means that it is inappropriate to think of imposing the pedagogy of the modernized West on the Islamic world, because that would simply be a revival of colonial imperialism. At the time of its founding this University existed in part to produce civil servants for the Raj, but that cannot be its purpose now. It sits at the top table of Indian education, ranking 14th in the UGC ranking of research universities, and that inevitably sets part of your agenda. It also raises the question of an aspiration to have a significant part of your teaching informed by research. This is not an idle cliché, because in an Islamic context it represents an alternative to passing on received wisdom; it means passing on new knowledge. There is nothing inherently unIslamic about this. After all, there is a hadith in which the Prophet (PBUH) enjoins his followers to 'acquire knowledge from the cradle to the grave' and another in which he says 'seek knowledge everywhere, even in China'.

In a context in which you aspire to achieve global standards in subjects at the edge of knowledge, you face some extraordinary pedagogical challenges, of two must figure large in your thinking. The first is the courageous decision last spring to integrate madrassa and mainstream higher education. The recognition of several hundred madrassas for purposes of admission will bring students from a wholly distinct pedagogical background to you. In madrassas that I have visited, albeit not in India, the pedagogy centred on *tahfiz*, the oral/aural transmission of knowledge. I can see how one might manage the transition to the lecture theatre, and the movement to a seminar might draw on the analogy of the the *halaqah* (the study circle in a mosque), but methods that involve investigative learning in library or laboratory will be fraught with difficulties.

The second challenge is your outreach programme, because disadvantaged students present real pedagogical challenges. In one respect you have decades of experience, because the Ahmadi School for the Blind [[is this Ahmadiyya or someone's surname?](#)], established by the University, is now the subject of education

aspirations. That said, it is a big leap from specialist provision, including courses in keyboarding, handloom weaving and chair re-canning, to bringing visually-challenged children into mainstream education system. I do not know how much that expertise will help you to meet the pedagogical challenges of establishing higher education centres in minority dominated areas of the country such as Bhopal, Murshidabad, Malappuram, Pune and Katihar; the presence of this list of a Bihari centre constitutes a challenge that is beyond the capability of any British visitor to contemplate. Teaching disadvantaged students requires serious thinking about pedagogical methods, in part because their study skills are often underdeveloped. There is also a tension with the research agenda; in the UK the universities that have been most successful in research tend to be those that are least successful in widening participation.

I am not confident that anything in the British experience of rethinking and reforming pedagogy can respond to the ambitions of this university to combine global standing with educational outreach. We have, for example, had to adapt to ever-expanding numbers: when I began teaching at Leicester my teaching was in groups of two, and now it is in groups of thirteen. Those numbers must seem tiny to you, but it has involved us rethinking the ways in which we teach. Another pressure has been to make our graduates more employable, and that includes literacy and numeracy skills for all students. In the English Department in which I teach, all students are taught some applied mathematics as part of their course in English language, which includes quantitative sociolinguistic research; that means that they have to be able to talk about standard deviations and scattergrams. A third pressure is the electronic revolution. Our students all know how to zap aliens in computer games when they arrive, but they have to be inducted into our electronic virtual learning environment and into a university library that is increasingly electronic.

These pedagogic concerns are not the same as yours, but we nonetheless have much to learn from each other. The biggest challenge that we have in common may be introducing pedagogic reform in a financial climate that reduces the unit of resource, which is the amount of money that government is willing to pay universities per student. As your vice-chancellor has said, funding from the Government of India is substantial but not sufficient for the development of infrastructure, including libraries and laboratories. Rich donors are invited to step forward! Beyond that, however, thinking is relatively economical, and the process at this conference of talking through mechanisms for the constant renewal and improvement of quality in our teaching is an essential prerequisite.

Bahut bahut shukriya.