Islam: The Threshold of Western education

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Introduction

In the literature of the history of education, the invaluable contributions of Muslim educators are often neglected. A widely propagated misinformation is that modern fields of knowledge have their origins in Western civilization while Islam represents retrogression and ignorance.¹

This claim is misleading as verifiable facts reveal that Islam is the civilization which nurtured Western education and saw to its growth in leaps and bounds. This essay carries out a quick but meticulous scan through the annals of Homo sapiens to correct the lopsided view and place the facts and figures in the right perspective.

The Position of Education in Islam

Education is the way knowledge and values are passed to succeeding generations. Islam lays utmost value on seeking knowledge. It is significant to note that the first five verses² revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) commanded him to read. It is also instructive that knowledge was the singular criterion by which Allah elevated Prophet Adam above all the angels who were ordered to prostrate before him.³

Also, the Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said: “Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.”⁴ This explains why one of the maqasidu-sh-Sharia (objectives of Islamic

¹ Prominent among the proponents of such bogus claim are Islamophobes like Pamela Geller of the Atlas Shrugs, Robert Spencer, Eliana Benador, Brigitte Gabriel and David Yerushalmi as well as Islamophobic sites like Islam Watch and Jihad Watch
² Qur’an 96:1-5
³ Qur’an 2: 30-34
⁴ Sunan Ibn Mâjah, No. 224
Law) is protection of the intellect. Hence, seeking knowledge is not restricted to a particular age, gender, milieu or from a particular tutor.

**Tutelage of Western Scholarship by Islam**

The contributions of Islamic scholars to the development of western education are numerous pervading various areas such as arts, literature, sciences, medicine, philosophy, legislation and governance. For many centuries, Europe was steep in blatant ignorance in what has aptly been described as the Dark Ages – “a period of intellectual darkness and barbarity,” according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

> From the fifth to the tenth century, Europe lay sunk in a night of barbarism which grew darker and darker.  

During the same period,

> “For five centuries, from 700 to 1200, Islam led the world in power, order, and extent of government; in refinement of manners; in standards of living; in humane legislation and religious tolerance; in literature, scholarship, science, medicine, and philosophy.”

Baitul Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, the first recorded Muslim university, was established in the 9th century. From the 11th to the 14th century, Christian scholars and

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European students travelled to Muslim nations to learn in their institutions after which they carried their experiences back to their home countries.7

This is not surprising for Allah declares that “We have not neglected anything in this Book…”8 In another verse, He says: “…And We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything.”9 Further, that Adam was taught the names of all things10, and not just some things suggests that Islam is the universal source of all beneficial knowledge.

According to Cobb, a foremost Western scholar:

“For more than five centuries, that civilization [Islam] not only led the world in science, but was the only portion of mankind actively engaged in the systematic pursuit of knowledge.”11

In the field of Mathematics, the contributions of Muslims scholars are inestimable. Recounting the invention of the Arabic numeral notations by Muslim scholars, Dr. Malek wrote:

“These numbering and counting systems (called ‘Arabic numerals’) were developed by Muslim mathematicians, and are still in use today. The words “zero” and “algebra” are derived from their original Arabic names.”12

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8 Qur’an 6:38
9 Qur’an 16:89
10 Qur’an 2:31
Cobb saw this invention as an invaluable contribution to the sciences “without which the achievements of modern science would be impossible.”\textsuperscript{13} Also, the treatises of Al-Khawarizmi on Algebra and Logarithm written in about 820 A.D. became pivotal and were still widely used by Western scholars till the 16th century.\textsuperscript{14}

The field of medicine also grew under the influence of Muslim scholars who drew motivation from the fact that the Qur’an is a healing for the believers.\textsuperscript{15} To make a case study, Ibn Sina (called Avicenna in the West) wrote the Canon of Medicine (al-Qanun fi at-Tibb) which Encyclopaedia Britannica (2000) calls the world’s most famous single book in the history of medicine. It remained authoritative both in Arabian and European institutions for a longer period than any other work.\textsuperscript{16}

In his book, The Qur’an and Modern Science, Dr. Maurice Bucaillle of the French Academy of Medicine showed that various modern scientific findings, which hitherto had seemed unintelligible, have been comprehensively explained in the Qur’an several centuries earlier. These include the creation of living things from water, creation of plants and animals in pairs of male and female, detailed description of the stages of development of the foetus and the 1898 discovery of the mummy of Pharaoh, which preservation Allah stated in Qur’an 10: 92.

In language and literature, the impacts of Muslim scholars have equally proved decisive. Libraries were furnished with various books and scholarship received a momentous boost. Prof. J. B. Trend of the University of Cambridge wrote that:

\textsuperscript{13} Cobb, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Qur’an 17: 82.
\textsuperscript{16} Myers, E. (1964), Arabic Thought and the Western World: In the Golden Age of Islam. New York: Frederick Ungar.
“During the golden era of Islam, excellent schools were established both in the Middle East and in Moorish Spain and Portugal. Libraries were filled up with books. These centres attracted students from all over Christendom.”

Al-Hakam in Spain boosted of some 600,000 volumes of educational materials at a time when Europe was steep in ignorance. The Royal Library of France for instance had only 900 volumes approximately 400 years later. Dr. Malek relates that:

*Some examples of English words of Arabic origin are admiral (AMEER AL-Ma’), alchemy, alcohol, algebra, almanac, attar, candy, cotton, gazelle, henna, gibraltar, giraffe, jar, jasmine, kohl, lemon, safari, sesame, sharif, sherbet, sofa, spinach, and wadi.*

Also, in his book, Civilization of Faith, Dr. Mustafa as-Sabaa‘ie showed how phenomena like fundamental human rights, kindness to animals and holding academic conferences sprouted from Islam.

**Conclusion**

Today, Muslims have lost their glorious past and scholarship has suffered grave setbacks under the influence of the West. It is paramount that education be re-Islamised and infused with pristine values. Like David Orr said, *“It is not education that will save us, but education of a certain kind.”* 

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19 Bader, Ibid.
Bibliography


12. Mustafa as-Sabaa’ie, Civilization of Faith, International Islamic Publishing House


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