Learning within the context of faith and the intellect

A thinking Islam

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The world is a deep ocean
Its water is time.
Your body is like a shell,
Your soul the pearl.
If you wish to have the value of a pearl,
Raise up the pearl of your soul with learning

Nasir-i-Khusraw (Hunzai, 1998)

The role of the intellect in enabling human beings to expand their vision of creation and of ‘man as the best of creation’ is a pivotal consideration in the Muslim tradition. This intertwining of the spiritual and learning is well illustrated in a dialogue between Ibn Sina (c.980–1037), the philosopher, and Abu Said Abul-Khayr (967–1049), the Sufi mystic, in which the former says, ‘Whatever I know, he sees’ to which Abu Said responds, ‘Whatever I see, he knows’. In the understanding of life’s necessities, to engage in intellectual search is to seek a fuller understanding of the mysteries of life itself. Accepting stewardship and trust of the environment means that this intrinsically places the onus on human beings to leave the world a better place than they found it – this categorically places the being of the human and all its faculties within the domain of acquisition of knowledge. Thus, what characterises this approach to learning is its esoteric quality. This personal search includes the spiritual and the material, both of which cornerstones are established on the ethics of Islam, which link the realms of faith and existence, offering a critical balance. However, no individual can achieve this balance in illiteracy, poverty or ill health.

Learning carries a twofold meaning, each incomplete without the other – reason and logic activate intellectual knowledge, whilst the development of spiritual knowledge is derived from awareness and experience of the sacred in everyday life. Both operate in an intertwined manner, enabling knowledge to become a means of activating moral and spiritual consciousness, factoring in a social conscience that protects one’s inherent dignity as a human being. This chapter sees the sacred not just as a component of religion, but as an ‘active participant in the human being’s and society’s ongoing construction in terms of learning and finding meaning’ (Hirji, 2007). How do the two concepts of sacred and learning connect? The Qur’an (4:17) reveals learning and acquiring knowledge as one of Allah’s (God’s) attributes, the...
seeking of which is incumbent upon human beings in order to elevate each attribute to its highest degree. This is an approach to life, and learning is not seen as a thing apart. Unsurprisingly, lifelong learning is held in the highest regard and heavily advocated, with the proviso that it is nurtured with conscious intent. Like ethics, learning is part of the human DNA and it is in the ‘how’ that the meaning of learning is found embedded deep within the human heart.

It is this meaning of learning as an integral part of the human being and its co-relation in the dynamism of Islam as an everyday approach to a dignified lived reality, that particular attention is paid in this chapter. This is contextualised within the following questions: (1) how is learning related to faith? (2) how are learning and faith connected to human development? and (3) how does this embody the fusion of faith and intellect, the context given to the concept of learning from a Muslim perspective?

**Learning and faith**

While this chapter is not an historical exegesis in any way, no understanding of the Muslim perspective on learning could emerge without realisation of its inevitable context within the philosophical and constituent elements of the faith, and indeed, within the code of conduct that forms a non-dichotomous part of the Prophet’s enduring legacy to the Muslim world and beyond. The intellectual tradition of Islam, which is a faith of reason and logic, goes back to the seventh century, to the time of the Prophet Muhammad who encouraged industry and learning and who actively promoted the use of intellect in all peoples and especially in women. In several Muslim communities today, women study alongside men. In an economically stretched Muslim household, with one child of each gender, priority would focus on education for the daughter whose future as a mother would carry the responsibility of imparting spiritual values, general knowledge, the broadening of her children’s minds, as well as management of the household. Women in these Muslim communities, though not all, are considered full partners to men and are respected in their own right. It stands to reason not to ignore a group of people that makes up at least half of a nation’s population. Although there are unquestionably countries where women do not have this freedom, for example, in present-day Afghanistan, this does not reflect Islamic ethics and can be attributed directly to the socio-political struggle for power and control. These are attempts at subverting what are meant to be dynamically progressive and intellectually inspired traditions into monolithic and obscurantist stances.

Over the centuries, Islam transformed into one of the great civilisations of the world, spreading beyond the Arabian peninsula into regions including the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and beyond to the Western hemisphere. According to Daftary (2000): within three centuries, Islamic civilisation had dominated the world, constituting diverse intellectual traditions in various fields of learning, whilst Islam as a faith presented itself in a plurality of interpretations, cultures and communities, but with a common emphasis on intellect, tradition and Islam itself. This must not be mistaken for a precise and continuous generic unity, homogeneity and coherence, or a common Muslim stance on pluralism, education or faith interpretation; however, for several communities within the Muslim tradition, education is paramount.

The intellectual tradition in Islam that flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries brought rich learning by adding Muslim modes of thinking to those of the Indian, Greek and Roman eras and passing this heritage on to the European Renaissance. However, after the fourteenth century, eminence eluded Muslim communities until the establishment of a further three empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This intellectual progress did not continue into the modern period for the entire Muslim community. Since the last half of the twentieth century, however, universities have begun to regain their intellectual vigour and become focal points of international expectations. These centres of learning are now seen as the pathway to a better quality of life. As Ibn Sina: the great physician and philosopher once said:
My profession is to be forever journeying
To travel about the universe
So that I may know all its conditions.

It is serious engagement of the mind, rather than rote learning, pushing horizons in keeping with the discoveries of science – and the subtle parallels with the sacred – that constitute true education. It is known that the laws of science are not bound by cultural or geographical boundaries, and academic freedom also carries responsibilities that encourage free and ethical inquiry, respect for all peoples and moral education. Freedom must not be allowed to degenerate into licence, whether in universities or in society as a whole. When it has so degenerated, it has invariably destroyed the very civilisations that gave it birth (Aga Khan, 1983).

Indeed, this is clear in the Qur’an’s explanation that divine Intellect both transcends and informs the human intellect. This simple yet complex concept requires reflection and contemplation to enable acquisition of knowledge, to become informed in a ‘knowing’ manner that impacts upon the psyche and thought-processes that dictate behaviour and attitude. It is this intellect that propels the human being towards two aims dictated by the faith – that he should reflect upon the environment that Allah (God) has given him and that he should know himself, a perspective also adopted by the philosopher Mansur al-Hallaj (c.858–922), ‘If you do not recognize God, at least recognise His sign’ (1913: 32). Without this distinguishing quality of the intellect, the totality of the human being is reduced to that of a human animal, and developing this intellect through unfettered enquiry is the human being’s saving grace.

A far greater scope for learning is opened up to those who act upon their knowledge and particularly for the benefit of others. It is a central tenet of Islam that profession of faith must be intertwined with action. This accounts for the Muslim penchant for voluntary service and hospitality – a concept that has become embedded within the psyche. As The Prophet said: ‘whosoever acts upon what they know, Allah [God] will grant them knowledge of what they do not know’ (Hadith).

This power of knowledge is freely available in both the inner and outer worlds. It is fundamental to the being and makes accessible a kind of inner truth and sacredness. An important point centres around the role of education as a way of ensuring that each new generation is prepared from childhood to realise and understand its ‘creaturehood’, thereby maintaining intellectual humility at all times. Knowing and acknowledging the ‘other’ as an interconnection with the world and ‘an opportunity and a blessing’ is a matter for reflection that can take several forms. It is a central understanding within Islam that the only part of the human being that is eternal is the soul and that it is the responsibility of all Muslims to ensure that they meet both their spiritual and material responsibilities – and by so doing, the soul, which here is defined as the divine spark that resides at the centre of the human heart, is elevated through learning. The learning, knowledge and wisdom gained is believed to live on in the eternal soul after the end of physical life.

Learning, faith and development

What is readily apparent in this approach to knowledge and learning is the fusion of the methodical thought of Aristotle and the reflective approach of Plato, which enables the merging of intellectual discipline and the contemplative spirit that typifies the works of the Arab al-Kindi and the Persian al-Farabi (Alfarabius), as well as the renowned tenth century philosopher, Ibn Sina. This was possible for those scholars/philosophers because their own departure point, which centred around a single Creator, formed a firm reference point for all essential aspects of lived reality, as is the case for Muslims in general. Morewedge (in Hunzai: ed. and trans, 1998) says that, for Khusraw the eleventh century philosopher, there were two types of knowledge, the macro-theoretical one and the practical one, which is the implementation of that knowledge received through the archetypal expression of religious laws enabling a hermeneutic return to the Intellect that is our primordial origin. ‘Faith is the psychic state between fear and hope [is this Otto’s (1923) ‘mysterium
tremendum’ and ‘daemonic dread’?], but the actual saviour is knowledge.’ We recognise that thought, memory, perception and emotion are all acts of traditional knowing that establish the apparent concreteness of what appears; they also express inbuilt dynamic creativity and, when consciousness attributes form and meaning and structure to what has manifested, this also is knowledge in action.

According to Sayyed Hossein Nasr (1984): the ultimate goal of education, whilst preparing human beings for a better quality of physical life, ‘is the abode of permanence and all education points to the permanent world of eternity’. However, to enable mental and spiritual growth so as to make this higher elevation possible, secular life must also be lived to the best of one’s intellectual standard. There is a premium placed on competence and meritocracy, and intrinsic to this notion of merit is the idea of equality of access to opportunities of learning and education. It embraces all communities and all meritocratic citizens and the need for access to good education, good health and prospects in order to advance through creative purpose and a keen mind. To gain the merit currency, this equitable access to opportunity is crucial. Educated and skilled communities, confident in both their identities and deep knowledge of their own and others’ cultural and religious traditions, will be the ones with the wherewithal to grasp a secure position within a pluralist society.

A thousand years ago one of the greatest universities of the Muslim world was founded in Cairo. That tradition of promoting scholarship and learning of Muslim cultures and societies is being revived and is evolving into a student-centred approach that is aimed at developing critical-thinking skills that form the foundation of continuous learning. An outlook that embraces seamless thinking and strong spiritual and social values, as well as leadership skills, combined with a social conscience that is cognisant of the pluralistic nature of the world’s peoples, must lie at the core of any education system.

In the spirit of this approach to lifelong learning, in essence, albeit not always in practical terms, it is not problematical to see that what has been inappropriately presented as a ‘clash of civilisations’ by Huntington (1996) is really a clash of ignorance of Islam as a religion, and the plurality of Muslims as a thriving civilisation of over 1,400 years. Its intellectual contributions, its dynasties and its empires, its peaceful co-existence with Christians, Jews and other religious communities as in Egypt and Spain, its persecutions and its conflicts, both internal and external, are all part of its history and its presence. Herein lies the crux of the matter – the only antidote to ignorance is education. Education, not only so that one community or society can learn the truth about another, but that that truth must originate from within the primary sources of the community in question. Sources, besides sacred texts such as the Qur’an, must include renowned and widely respected Muslim scholarship, including Abu Hanifa al-Nu‘man b. Muhammad al-Tamimi, better known as al-Qadi al-Nu‘man (290 AH/903 CE), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Haytham, Jallaludin Rumi and al-Ghazzali, and others including Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim and Sijistani, as well as more contemporary authors, including Henri Corbin, Martin Lings, Farhad Daftary, Azim Nanji, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Paul Walker, Annemarie Schimmel, Mahmoud Arkoun, Titus Burckhardt and Fazlur Rahman.

Perhaps one way of maintaining the sacredness of learning and choice would be to ensure that all children at school, from early childhood years, are taught about all the great religions – not a watered-down version of events that do not tell the full story, rather the only version that is a fair and accurate account, remaining true to history, recorded by respected and authentic sources of that particular tradition – to truly educate young minds to go on to become fair judges who are accepting of the rich plurality and sometimes painful, but predominantly true, understanding of life that unfolds the meaning and the gift of diversity within the human species.

This would be learning in its true essence, its true nature, permeating all aspects of life, including the fact that the very diversity of humankind is its strength and must be recognised as such, defining its greatness and harnessing it to provide exceptional learning situations through constant and rich dialogue across communities and cultures. This learning would be the manifest form of true religion – providing the invisible unity for all the visible multiplicity. According to Al-Kindi (c.801–73) one ought not to be
ashamed of appreciating truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races
distant and nations different from one’s own.

Why, then, has this concept of diversity produced such conflict in the world – a resistance to that which
is different from one’s norm, not just in physical appearance, but also in thinking, in faith and in culture?
Why is this diversity so threatening to human beings? All scriptures are encouraging of bonds between
different ‘nations and tribes’. One of the most powerful verses ever, in the Qur’an, talks of human beings
having been created out of a ‘Single Soul’ – if one were to unpack this idea, its implications could be
heart-stopping. If one were to go on and ask: one Single Soul – and therefore?

With the knowledge that there is possibly one Source that is the origin of all beings, comes responsi-
bility. This responsibility encompasses the provision and overseeing of social, spiritual, cultural and intel-
llectual development of self and the ‘other’. This is the responsibility, the raison d’être for striving in any
form, this is seen within Islam as one of the most practical ways to true understanding of the meaning of
archetypal knowledge – learning that takes place through and because of every action and interaction
between human beings and with the environment.

The Qur’an says that the divine Intellect both ‘transcends and informs the human intellect’, as is quoted
above. How so, one may ask? It is common practice for physical scientists to make scientific observations
on the evolution of human beings and entirely disregard mental science, including moral and ethical sci-
ence. The latter raise the questions that point to human frailties and, therefore, the need for deep learning
and archetypal knowledge to understand the world, what it represents for human beings and why it might
benefit them to learn from it in order to lead a life of quality, equanimity and service – all of which lead to
the development, not of self alone, but of the ‘other’. The very fact of development means that there is the
potential for growth and, therefore, something that was already in existence, something that had an origin.
Can this origin be explained in scientific terms? Darwin was not able to offer more than a few micro-organisms
of life attributed to God and a vague notion of universal life.

In the diverse Muslim world, as in other societies, science is seen as the unfolding of the mysteries of life
according to God’s plan and, therefore, there is complete comfort with this exoteric stream running parallel
to that of the esoteric one that is belief and/or faith. Faith, as seen above, is not simply profession of one’s
beliefs; faith is profession plus action. Action can only take place in community and within the infra-
structure of civil society, because a human being is born in community, is in fact, conditioned by com-
munity prior to birth in the manner of its conception and of its nurture in its pre-birth state. Learning has
to be taking place prior to birth as a preparation for entry into physical life – a life that has the structure of
a microcosmic society situated within a macrocosmic one, even as a particular community of people of one
faith is situated within an immensely larger and diverse community of several such communities, of faith as
well as of none. What then is the responsibility of the emerging human into the physical world? To live
independently of other beings? That does not appear to be the case. To live in community? That would
appear to be the norm. How, then, does the community grow as an enabler and a facilitator to accom-
modate its members in their striving to learn about the world they live in and to forge an individual as well
as a collective identity? Every being, born into community, whether specific or the universal family of
humans, carries an ethical responsibility that has little to do with creed or religion or belief – this ethic is
the ethic of mutual care. Period. All faiths embrace this responsibility because it categorically cannot be
otherwise.

And, therefore, the development of community – whether a community of faith, a society, a nation,
across ‘nations and tribes’¹⁰ – becomes the rationale for the betterment of the single human being. Every
human being is interconnected with the ‘other’, not only as is evidenced in dependencies that are played
out through each day of practical living, but also in the less tangible ways, as in the inexplicable recogni-
tion of a stranger, in the pull to help another human being in trouble, in the affection felt for a child who
reaches out and smiles. These are intangibles, yet they are indisputable, these are the invisible threads that
hold human beings together that not only remain unarticulated, but are often strenuously denied. Yet, that
does not negate the existence of such phenomena. There is no obvious explanation for the experience of a heart that can project love across oceans to reach another, creating an invisible link.

The fusion of faith and intellect

What then, is this link? What constitutes this link and how can it be understood? It is undeniable that it can be experienced, but is it possible for it to be learned if it is perhaps not understood? There is no great mystery about this invisible link if there is a possibility of understanding the extraordinary in our lives (Hirji, 2006b). This link is not extraordinary in the sense that it is rare; it is extraordinary because its essence is extraordinary, yet every ordinary moment of life is capable of exhibiting its presence – and it is as aptly described as ‘sacred’ as it is translated into a value such as ‘ethic’ or ‘generosity of spirit’ or ‘compassion’ or ‘care for the other’ or ‘moral compass’ or ‘love’ – the descriptions are unending, as are the attributes of the archetype.

This link reaches into the realm of the spiritual, or faith and the intellect. It is a process where the sacred and learning fuse through experience of the extraordinary moment (see Figure 50.1). This is

Figure 50.1 The How of Learning process model – the role of the transcendental in learning
demonstrated in the three diagrams (Hirji, 2007) and is presented here as ‘The How of Learning’ process model.

Figure 50.1 shows the unwalled type of learning that is central to the connection with the sacred. Learning that is initially undertaken transcendentally and tacitly manifests itself through the meaning given to experiences and becomes awareness of experience of the ineffable. Engagement in contemplation, deep reflection and conscious mental activity brings about a fusion of the inner and outer experiences as seen in Figures 50.1 and 50.2. This initiates outer transformation, affecting attitude and behaviour, eventually spiralling into another cycle of experiencing the ineffable. The experience is internal, yet the outer lifeworld, which is socially constructed with all its related influences, is impacted upon and learning is twofold. How far-reaching, therefore, is cultural influence on these experiences that may be called the ‘sacred’?

Different faith persuasions notwithstanding, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or other, such experiences, after a certain point, appear to be similar, and engender identical feelings of ‘we are all similar, religion is the difference’. How, then, do interpretations occur and how are learning experiences identified? There appears to be the need for a tangible container, be it physical, mental, an art form, architectural space, or other – these forms are all symbols of a belief. The symbol is the caveat to learning the sacred (Hirji, 2006a) – the only way to articulate the sacred is through the symbol. Without the symbol, there is
nothing to uphold and promote that profound experience so that it can be re-created and re-experienced by others. But, also very importantly, without the symbol, there is no way to even refer to the sacred. The symbol affords the experience and therefore learning of the fused ‘sacred’. See Figure 50.2, where the inner activity, which is normally lightning-quick, is depicted in an image of slow motion.

Awareness of one’s own potential, albeit inarticulate, occurs through engagement with the symbol. Herein lies the beauty of symbols, because generosity, care for others, compassion, morality, love and ethics are also symbols – inner symbols – which transform indelibly at each stage of the process (Figure 50.3).

The horizons of the human lifeworld project signs, including those of Creation, the natural world, beauty and suffering, light and darkness, awe and despair. This primary experience includes transcendental learning, the precursor to latent learning. It is recognised by the inner eye, which brings about a consciousness beyond consciousness, thereby unfolding another layer of meaning. This affords insight, within the space of a breath, of a connection with the ‘Other’, releasing grace and enabling a profound moment of self-knowledge which is the transformative moment. When the sacred and learning intertwine, when faith and intellect fuse into a state of ‘knowing’, then four things become clear:

- The experience might be ineffable and ungraspable, but that does not alter the fact of the experience.
- The learning may be transcendental and latent, but the fact of the learning is indisputable.
- The sacred may be a spiritual quality and seemingly unknowable, but the experience and learning of the sacred is unquestionable.
- The symbolic may be a cultural interpretation, but that does not take away the meaning of what it symbolises and therefore its articulation.

(Hirji, 2007)
Is this the sacredness of ethic, generosity, compassion, care for the other, morality and love? Suddenly a thread is apparent through all these descriptions and attributes – these are all values and qualities that are paramount in the nurturing of human development which happens through the above process. A fascinating process of one thought leading to another and naturally arriving at a conclusion that appears to bear out the notion of the intellect as a dimension of faith, both of which constitute tools for human development. And therefore a fusion of the two is what constitutes a balanced approach to learning from a Muslim perspective.

‘Sacredness’ – indeed, it is the seemingly lost awareness of ‘sacredness’ that makes possible invisible learning, embedding it in the heart and the mind – influencing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour. It is this sacredness that is perhaps lost in modern times, not only in the obvious world of religion, surprising though that might be, but also in human interactions in almost every aspect of life. Nowhere is this more truly obvious than in the breaking down of those boundaries that were seen as barriers to frontierless brotherhood. Indeed, the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR, as well as the demolition of the East–West German divide in the twentieth century brought a new physical freedom to communities by cleansing their lives of dogma; yet, new invisible boundaries that are more dangerous to the well-being of citizens across the globe have been erected by intellectual ignorance. These internal barriers are barriers of the heart and the mind which have become so entrenched in diverse societies that they have influenced how one nation’s people behave towards another and how this often translates into an attitude of indifference and self-centredness and, most damning of all, of such all-consuming fear of the ‘unknown’ (a person of different culture, colour and creed) that the world has become conditioned to the constant conflicts that have characterised the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

A Parliamentary Committee report entitled, ‘Exploring Canada’s Relations with the Countries of the Muslim World’ refers in its very opening sentence to, ‘the dynamic complexity and diversity of the Muslim world’, setting the tone of essential balance and perspicacity that permeates its recommendations and emphasis on history, education and the dire need for communication and general knowledge.

What did God give us alone of all creatures?
The intellect, by which we lord o’er all the beasts.
With intellect, we can seek out all the hows and whys,
Without it, we are but trees without fruit.

_Divan of Nasir-i Khusraw_ 33: 28–30

It is said that there is dignity in the individual’s ability to manage his or her own destiny … that the best of charity can take the form of human or professional support, such as the provision of education for those otherwise unable to obtain it and the sharing of knowledge to help marginalised individuals build better futures for themselves. The tools of the mind and the heart must be present to afford individuals the dignity they strive for. Once these two elements of faith and intellect are in harmony, they find a resonance in the spirit that accompanies all human interactions which is when learning becomes effortless and constant. Learning takes place of its own accord, whether with awareness, or as a matter of course; however, the possibility of constant awareness of one’s inner learning process becomes several times more enhanced when this fusion also becomes a constant context. This context has a role to play in both human worlds – the inner and the outer. How this takes place is where human agency plays a critical role in formulating a conducive learning environment. This learning environment has both concrete and abstract elements – whilst the concrete focus of learning may take any form or shape, the learning environment is more abstract and requires awareness of its impact upon that learning. What forms part of, as well as informs, this abstract element that we call the learning environment?

There are several factors that can enter into the learning equation, including time and space, the built environment, the objects within, the form of creativity that it embodies and the symbols it houses, amongst
others. Spatial dimensions constitute the learning environment, and this element of physical space can embody constituent elements of the sacred that enable the thread of ethics, generosity of spirit, compassion, care for the other, morality and love to become active elements that represent learning in its truest sense so that spiritual values, growth of the human being and development all fall into line as a matter of course. In fact, how did Harvard come to be connected with the Aga Khan University (AKU) in Pakistan? Through architecture as an indicator of the quality of life – as ‘Islamic’ an indicator as one could find anywhere; the AKU design incorporates inspirational use of open spaces, the way temperature or heat is managed, how users assemble or not and the traditions that govern gender habits of congregation, and the resulting complex is a university that provides students with an oasis of peace as a learning environment. Buildings must face challenges of design that strive to contextualise concepts of faith and history, yet unapologetically embrace change and modernity, expressing both the exoteric and the esoteric, and intellectual humility and awe towards the mysteries of Creation. These buildings, which illuminate the concept of the ‘Single Soul’ and therefore the hope of a common humanity, the dignity of the human being, and care for the ‘other’, speak to the student learner, teaching and imparting transformative and dynamic education at multiple levels.

In several Muslim communities, education is the single most important factor, in the tradition of the Prophet’s wisdom in seeking new solutions for problems that cannot be solved by traditional methods. This provides the inspiration for the conception of a truly modern and dynamic society, without affecting the fundamental concepts of the faith. This notion of the intellect and freedom was something that the Egyptian reformer, Muhammad Abdu (1865–1905) strove for. He was instrumental in highlighting the interface and mutual responsibilities between civil society and the government. In his book The Message of Monotheism (1897) he supports independent reasoning and promotes religious reform [by embracing change processes] as the underpinning to social and political reform – factors that impact on education through the indicators of excellence and equitable access.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that learning is not a stand-alone activity: it is an inherent part of lived reality in every creed, culture and tradition. However, without the support of civil societies, communities cannot grow effectively as they must, given the modern context of ignorance of pluralist traditions and cultures such as those of the Muslim tradition, which is erroneously seen as a monolith. If today’s youth are not educated in the reality of the world’s diverse peoples and the legitimacy of plural cultural and religious traditions, then the future could be a bleak and uncompromising one for the generations to come.

The voluntary sector can be part of the solution by creating an enabling learning environment that brings out optimal human potential by focusing on change processes vital for an educated future. Even the most advanced nations will need a huge effort to educate the world’s youth in a more thoughtful, effective and rounded manner for the global responsibilities that await them. Educational systems will require quality and relevant curricula for the twenty-first century, encouraging scientific problem-solving and peaceful co-existence over dogmatic subject matter.

The benchmark of an education will be for students to have the courage to engage with what they do not know, leading to new knowledge and informed judgement. But, for students to develop this capability will require them to learn to contextualise these judgements within an ethical framework – which, as stated earlier, connects the realms of faith and existence, or spirit and matter, offering a critical balance.

How can the central role of the intellect in the formation of Islamic culture and civilisation, with its continuing relevance in the contemporary Muslim world, be reconciled with the issues of gender equality and unprecedented change in global terms? This necessitates a revisit to the traditions of learning of Muslim civilisation within a reorganised contemporary context, echoing the determining influences and achievements in the areas of philosophical and scientific thought, through education, religious and cultural
pluralism, global healthcare and environmental concerns, underpinned by a rigorous culture of intellectual inquiry and debate. These challenges provide the rationale for educational approaches in the modern world – an all-encompassing exercise addressing the spiritual and the secular within common ground to provide that essential skill of discernment. The teaching of discernment is seen as constituting the work of parents, teachers and carers in all aspects of education, both religious and secular, beginning with the formative years of early childhood development.

The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson: twenty-sixth Governor-General of Canada, paraphrasing (2008), states that, in Islam, the worlds of faith and action, of ethical premise and society, are treated together and that education is one of the democratic pillars.

Addressing learning in subtle and non-insular ways, integrating a humane value system with the processes of change that inform the concept of learning, it becomes possible to understand the simple, yet complex notion of learning as a minute-by-minute change in the being, one that can be supported by awareness of the constancy of an interconnected world.

Notes

1 Qur’an (XLV:13). In the Qur’an no other form of creation is described in such detail as man and the dignity, respect and honour that is accorded him: ‘And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth’.

2 Ibn Sina (Avicenna), 980–1037; about 450 treatises were ascribed to Ibn Sina. The best-known amongst them is his 14-volume, The Canon of Medicine, which was a standard medical text in Europe and the Islamic world until the eighteenth century.

3 Pluralism denotes peoples of diverse backgrounds and interests, with varying aims and goals in life, working together and sharing creative purpose and forms of expression, that are valued by society.

4 According to a famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: The first thing created by God was the Intellect (’aql).

5 … or her …. The ‘him’ is used here generically to represent both male and female in this sentence.

6 Mansûr al-Hallâj; full name Abû al-Mughîth Husayn Mansûr al-Hallâj (c. 858–March 26, 922) a Persian mystic, writer and poet/philosopher, was accused of heresy and executed for his beliefs. Supporters of Mansur see him as a strict monotheist and interpret his statement as meaning ‘God has emptied me of everything but Himself’, never denying God’s Oneness, whilst scholars of other Islamic schools of thought continue to see him as a heretic and a deviant. His life was studied extensively by the French scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon (Perspective Transhistorique sur la vie de Hallâj, in Parole Donnée, 1983, Paris: Seuil, pp. 73–97).

7 Aga Khan IV, 2007, Speech at Graduation Ceremony of the Masters of Public Affairs (MPA); also refer to Otto’s (1923) ‘creature-feeling’.


9 Note: Some references are provided in this section as examples of works by some of these authors: Fazlur Rahman, Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, No. 15, 1982, 132; see M. Arakoun, 1977, The Islamic Consciousness: A Cultural Profile, Cultures, 4: 66–93, in which he also talks of a God who is no longer just a personal God; Ormsby, E. L., 1984, Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali’s ‘Best of All Possible Worlds’, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. A study of the controversies over al-Ghazali’s remarks in his later works when he turned to Sufism.

10 Qur’an (49:13): ‘O mankind! We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know and honour each other (not that you should despise one another). Indeed the most honourable of you in the sight of God is the most righteous.’

11 This model was originally presented as A Sacred Interpretation of Learning, PhD Thesis, University of Surrey, UK.


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