

Excerpts from the book *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Education in the Islamic worldview

The traditional institutions of learning [were] based upon the unity of knowledge, the servitude of man to God, the centrality of the Divine Revelation and all the other principles which characterize the Islamic worldview.

[This worldview is] reflected on every level from the role of the teacher who in Islam is considered to have a very high position in society to the extent that there is a saying attributed to 'Ali that, "He who has taught me a single word, I will become his slave," to the role of the student within that institution, to the relationship between knowledge and ethics, between science and religion, the content of the curricula, the meaning and goal of education and all of the other fundamental elements which constitute education.

Influx of Modernism in Education

As in the Islamic world, so also in the West before the period of secularization and modernization during the Renaissance and the eleventh/seventeenth century, education was related to religion and the educational institutions were either directly or indirectly controlled by the Church. Schools in pre-modern Europe sought, therefore, to educate the young in the theological, philosophical, legal and ethical teachings of the Church or in the case of the Jews the Jewish religion and on the higher levels to prepare Christian students for priesthood and important ecclesiastical positions and Jewish students to become rabbis. This situation is very reminiscent of the Quranic schools, madrasahs and other religious institutions in the Islamic world attended by students from an early age.

Very early in the development of modernism, however, educational institutions were for the most part, although not completely, captured by the forces of modernism and modern education became the most important means for furthering the value system of the modern world, for the spread of secularization and for the criticism of the religious worldview. Through educational institutions, not only the sciences but also ideas concerning the amassing of wealth, furthering economic ends and creating greater social mobility within society were disseminated.

Religious schools

At the same time, however, the religious bodies, whether Catholic or Protestant, have also succeeded in preserving their own educational system from the kindergarten and elementary schools through the university. Furthermore, in both America and Europe there continue to exist to this day traditional Jewish schools called Yeshivas which resemble in many ways the Islamic madrasahs. Therefore, if one looks upon the general picture of education in the West, one will see that while there has been a continuous secularization of the older institutions which were originally founded by churches of various kinds and the establishment of numerous secular institutions, one can also observe the continuation of religious education on both sides of the Atlantic despite the great differences of educational philosophy between these two types of educational institutions.

Goals of secular education

These have consisted of the propagation of national ideals and philosophies such as the new secularism, nationalism, utilitarianism, public welfare · and have included, of course, economic goals spurred by the idea of material progress which in the thirteenth/nineteenth century became almost a religion of its own. The concept of education in the classical sense of training the mind and the soul has not disappeared, especially in older educational institutions and church sponsored schools, and wherever liberal arts education flourishes, but it has been seriously challenged by the new educational philosophy.

Consequently, the universities especially, and through their influence secondary and primary schools, have become on the one hand a kind of "secular church" for the spread of secular ideas and the professors and teachers have come to occupy to some extent the role of the earlier priesthood wielding definite authority in their fields especially in the field of the sciences. Almost all of the important secular ideas which have shaken the foundations of religion in the modern world such as evolutionism, the idea of progress, doctrinaire socialism, psychoanalysis, etc. have had their origin in or been spread by modern educational institutions and have spread from there to other parts of society.

On the other hand, however, precisely because the university attracts unto itself usually the most perceptive and intelligent members of society and the institution itself predates the rise of modernism, universities have continued to serve even in the modern world as a critic of that world. In fact, the most profound criticism of the very idols of modern thought such as progress and the like have also come from university circles so that the university has been at once a bulwark for the preservation and the spread of modern secular ideas and at the same time a critic of many of the ideas which are now tearing modern society apart.

The Muslim student

It is difficult for a Muslim student brought up even in the semi-traditional Islamic educational system, not to speak of the classical madrasah, to realize how the teaching of various branches of knowledge has become separated from religious values in modern education. There has come into being in fact a compartmentalization not only of the branches of knowledge separated one from the other with no cohesive unity in contrast to what one observes in the traditional image of the various branches of the tree of knowledge related to the trunk of the tree, but also a nearly total separation between knowledge and spiritual values.

There is no doubt that modern Western education has exercised a profound impact upon the Islamic world. This impact has come through the very large number of Muslim students who are sent to the West and who are sometimes bewildered to see the conflicts between what they are taught in class and services held on Sundays.

Morality and Education

As far as morality itself is concerned, precisely because of the gradual separation of the educational system from its religious background, the question has now arisen as to what kind of morality to teach if one were to consider morality at all. The ethical dimension of life has become relativized and sometimes even put aside precisely because the teachers, the state

and the various institutions responsible have not been able to agree as to what ethical norms should be taught to the students.

Today, in most modern Western institutions of learning one speaks seriously about the truth only in the natural and mathematical sciences, whereas in the humanities, the social sciences and the like one rarely hears a teacher speak about the truth and most subjects are presented in a completely relativistic manner as if there were no such thing as the truth.

Compartmentalization of knowledge

The compartmentalization of knowledge, which is one of the characteristics of the mental and intellectual scene of the modern world, is not only reflected in modern education but is also caused by it. A number of important Western thinkers have sought to overcome this excessive compartmentalization but they have not succeeded in doing so because there is no longer a worldview which would unite various disciplines. There is already the division between the natural and mathematical sciences on the one side and the social sciences and finally the humanities on the other, each with different perspectives and methods.