

Education and Universities in the Islam of Medieval Centuries

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1

Education constitutes one of our vital ambitions. A letter is a dead element, and the guarantee of the continuation of any social tradition and any cultural tradition is represented in the inception of a science that humans use always. In this sense, education is a continuous quest that is present everywhere. But sometimes thinking is revealed in an exceptional manner. Any one who had the chance of seeing al-Mustansiriyya in Baghdad or Al-Azhar in Cairo or the Qarawiyyin in Fas must feel the charm from the greatness of these places that took their shapes throughout the centuries. The effects that these places leave on us do not come out of mere studying that has become a historical memory but from our deep-rooted realization that these old institutions that gave education its structure.

But what is the structure that we mean? We must not resort to misleading comparisons. The mosque or the school is not a university in the modern sense, notwithstanding what a tourist guide may claim. Education that was given in medieval centuries was always of a special kind. Although at times it was supported by the ruler, but it was never an official education. The mosque however did not enjoy complete impendence because the Islamic law did not recognize collective responsibility but only individual.

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This we express as 'a legal person' or in French 'personne morale', an idea that comes from the Roman law and is familiar to the West since the medieval centuries. This is also not strange in the Arab world today, for every union or federation and every municipality is a legal person, and the best example is the Christian church, by which we mean not the building but the institution. The church, according to this concept, does not exist in reality at all; there are real individuals who belong to it, but the children of the church do not legally represent it. The same applies to the university. The university can take decisions, and although the university president applies them, these are not really his decisions but come out from a presumed body. Such an abstraction does not exist in old Islamic law and, more precisely, are only selectively used, such as is the case with al-misr (independent region) in Hanafi jurisprudence. The Islamic law recognizes only individuals, whether persons or things. This is why the mosque was the best place for education where the masters and their students met around one of its columns to discuss the affairs of knowledge. In addition to that, the mosque was not the only place for knowledge. The person who wanted to study medicine sought one of the teachers at a hospital; and for administration, the student had to attach himself to a specialist, so he would visit him at home or one of the public libraries that the ruler established-Dar al-Hikma that was established in Cairo was such a place. The choice of place depended on the scholarly purpose for education, while the scholarly purpose was linked to the high ideals of society.

The high ideals were multiple; for there were the ideals of the literary figure, which spread among writers and the royal court, and there were the ideals of the scientist, like a medical doctor, an astrologer or a chemist. Further, there were social ranks and the etiquettes followed in politics, as the mirror of princes presented. Finally, there was the rearing of men of religion

that had to be prepared in all important religious sciences such as jurisprudence and exegesis. The competition between these ideals generated almost always social tensions that developed into stereotypes or led to biased views. The balance that finally spread was different from one area to another. For the Islamic world was multi-faceted and diverse, to a degree that would make it difficult for us to portray one picture. The geographic area was vast, extending from Central Asia to the West, which forced us to speak of an essential harmony that did not really reflect the realities of that time. But, in terms of our subject, we can say cautiously that the jurist was more fortunate than others throughout the centuries because religious education generated new models. The mosque was not a university but came very close to the idea of a church.

But what are the reasons? It is known that the Islamic world inherited two different civilizations: the Iranian and the Greek. Islam added to them a novelty, the revelation, which is the Qur'an. This revelation was not delivered in the language of the Iranians or the Greek but Arabic. This language took the form of a divine book. It is made up of warning and ideal type only but a divine commandment, which is God's word itself. In the domain of language and religion the Muslim identity was fulfilled. Also in the same domain the Muslim did accept any change or effect directly or indirectly. Allow me to give the following example: in the region of Ahwaz, which the Arabs called the Persian Iraq, there was a hospital that was established by the Persians. It had influenced the development of medicine in Baghdad, though most of the doctors were Christians. In addition to that, there were faculties of philosophy and theology, including Christianity and Judaism. Now, they have disappeared without any trace.

Since its inception, the mosque was the center of intellectual life for Muslims. It has this role because the Islamic civilization was an urban civilization, that is, it was a civilization of cities. For this was possible because the mosque does not oppose worldly affairs, which is different from the church. At the mosque, the judge issued his sentences, and foreigners can spend the night or people would take a rest and nap. Of course, the mosque was also a place for education. In principle, it was possible to study all sciences there if there were students on the condition that the subject taught did not include blasphemy. In the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fas, lessons on astrology, geography, and medicine were given, and this lasted till the end of the nineteenth century. But education also included religious sciences in general, including Qur'anic exegesis, science of Hadith, then jurisprudence in addition to support sciences such as grammar, linguistics, poetry, and history. It must be said that some religious sciences were neglected such as theology as well as philosophy. Contrary to Christianity, Islam focused on jurisprudence rather than theology, and theology was not possible without logic.

The central place that jurisprudence occupies among other sciences comes from the idea that God's word came down as texts. God is the highest legislator and calls for interpretation of the texts. It is known what happened later on: in addition to God's word, there were the Prophetic Traditions and both became the most important pillars of Islamic law and consequently the focus of education in medieval centuries. Of course there was a difference between the two: The Qur'an was written down, and its reading was fixed. However, the Traditions had to be known and collected because they were memorized by the companions and then their followers who took them as they were handed down. This task had some dangers. Diverse pieces of tra-

ditions had to be collected, and the collectors found contradictory pieces, which then were investigated and sifted. They were cautious and questioned the legitimacy of this process. For there is nothing wrong in collection but was it right to write down oral traditions? Should they be limited? Knowing the conditions of every tradition is not always possible. And some thought that the Qur'an should alone be the written word. 'Umar Bin al-Khattab feared that Islam would produce a new mishne as happened in the Jewish religion. It is known that through the new revelation that the previous people before Islam, Jews and Christians, had deformed the word of God through their speeches and the dialectics of their reasoning. Interpretation then is desired if the word is to stay fluid without ossification but it must not be written so that it does not become deeply rooted and replace the original word.

At least, during the early centuries, interest was focused on the oral aspect of education. Often, the teachers depended on their memory and prohibited their student to write down their lessons. In general mosques were not equipped with libraries. However, large libraries that raised Islam's reputation were established by governments and sometimes individuals who had no official status. Most often libraries were attached to the palace of the ruler. Western orientalism has been mistaken in attributing to Muslim interest only in the oral method, and not the written. For the teacher who would give the lectures depended largely on written references. We have examples about the 'talking points' method as a way of remembering traditions, which was used to be known as 'atrafan' (margins), where the beginning and the end of the hadith were written. Students were able to write books, and these books were no more than the lectures they heard.

Islamic civilization was on a high level of culture because it was written on paper that is made of clothes instead of leaves, which the Arabs adopted from the Chinese during the second century of hijra. I say that the use of

paper was able to increase the spread of knowledge in an unprecedented way among people. As to the communication of content by means of publication was not very different from the earlier ages. In the Greek language, the note that the teacher wrote was known as hypomne mata, which is equivalent to aide-memoire in French, that is a refreshing points for a lecture in Arabic. There were books written according to such method, and it is clearly different from the books that were written according to syngrammata. The latter has a finished literary type, and the former, hypomne mata, was distinguished by their student authors who depended on their teachers. This is why it is sometimes difficult to understand. Aristotle's writings fall into this category because of his students. On the contrary, Plato's books were authored in a good literary way, and syngrammata applies to them. This is why his writings were more genuine than those of Aristotle's. This can be applied to writings of the early Islamic centuries. The biography of the Prophet reached us in different versions, and therefore we cannot classify them in one way or one text that underwent no change. In fact, this primitive Islamic teaching had aspects that are similar to our education today.

Even after the passage of five hundred years on inventing the printing press, we see that our university education is still mostly oral. It happens that a professor prepares a textbook for students and that the students themselves publish before or after the death of the professor. As is the case everywhere, inventing is no more than new notices and commentaries that are added to the original text. What happened to Aristotle's lessons and the lectures of Hegel, that is turning from hypomne mata into original works happens to a lot of lessons and lectures during our time, and this thanks to recording. The professor or the reader reads and the student hears in Oxford and in Germany as was the case in earlier times.

The Arabs used similar terms, the shaykh or the advanced student would

read the text, and at the end of the session the students would acquire a certificate of listening, as it was called them. It is a certificate for reading. It stipulates that the student did not only listened and heard the lesson but that he himself could read it to others. Listening then would grant the student a permission to teach. This certificate does not assume teaching in a specific field but the material that the student studied, or the text that he listened to. Listening was not placed in a student book by the shaykh or studienbuch, but the book that the student studied and copied was is no more than the book written and edited by the shaykh himself.

The above-mentioned style of education was not only restricted to Traditions but included all topics. During those days, sciences were not specialized and independent, and were to a large extent affected by teachers. The shaykh transmitted to his students everything that he knew, and some were teaching and studying at the same time. The listener and the chain of teachers would confirm the license to teach more than the content.

3

The student became a shaykh when he received the license, and because he would only read from one book, he would not be worthy of being a scholar. He had to learn other books from other shaykhs so that he can teach different sciences and not only one lesson. The need necessitated this because of Prophet sunna because sacred knowledge would only be beneficial unless it was complete. The jurists were exercising reasoning, and wished that they could find a Prophetic tradition for every situation. Some scholars determined without hesitation that this was pure imagination and that it would be impossible to fill the gaps in many branches of jurisprudence without resorting to other means, including analogical deduction. While many insisted

on traveling around the Islamic land to collect the hadiths, the mujtahids that insisted on collecting the prophetic heritage, they believed that this was the most noble thing to do in this life and the hereafter. In their travel in different cities, they were sure that they would find new sources for knowledge. In addition to this, they were able also to teach because they themselves carried knowledge with them that others did not have. This new phenomenon is similar to our modern 'visiting professor', and along with this, knowledge and experiences were exchanged to a large extent, which perhaps contributed to the spirit of tolerance and understanding the strange habits that the traveler was not used to.

But travel was expensive, and the supporters of knowledge for the common good did not exist, as is the case in our days. The scholars of medieval centuries had to pay their own travel from their own private funds. They were able to do this because most of them were traders. The sociologist, Marx Weber, was wrong when he assured us that the fighter or the Mujahid was the model of the perfect Muslim. It must be said that the trader was the example of that urban civilization that was individualistic.

Islam did not acknowledge the legitimacy of clergy, and religious knowledge was spread by people that did not have a religious status, as was the case of Christianity. In general, these people were not paid by the state except judges and some time mosque imams. If we look at the lower social classes, we find that there is a lot of craftsmen that were proud to carry little parts of the prophetic sunna that were owned by him. But for those individuals who did that at a greater level, the quest for knowledge that was expensive was not possible without outside financial sources. These sources guaranteed for them meeting with shaykhs or colleagues that level in other places. Moreover, traveling was considered to be a duty that must be followed somehow: the pilgrimage to Mecca was a duty on the Muslim once in

oneself. From the beginning, Islam was prepared to international communications. And travel was itself a professional necessity in commerce. The trader sought knowledge all over since he could have business deal anywhere. During his travel, he would stay at hotels where he met people that sought knowledge or provide knowledge. In addition to the mosque, the hotel was a place for education. Therefore, the fixed center for the world, *stabilitas loci*, was turned easily into kind of bedouin meeting place, as is the case today.

But this situation was only a transitional phase. Since the fourth century of al-Hijra, the state tried to reduce the burden of scholars by not having to deal with daily affairs and the market. The new place was called al-madrasa, school, that is the place where people study.⁷ It appeared first in eastern Iran where there were large cities such as Bukhara, Sumarqand, and Nayspour, which were abolished during the invasion of the Mongols. The notables and nobles were those who established these new institutions and not governments. Therefore, schools were private and provided its visitors with shelter, but originally they were created for the love of education. A lot of these schools were originally built around domes. But there was also another reason for building them, that is, people protected their wealth by investing in these schools so that after their death their wealth would not disperse or was taken by the state. They turned these schools into endowments.

Endowment means that the person decided to leave his wealth after his death to good work and benevolence. If it was used for education, then the person kept running the education center and therefore bequeathed it to his children as such, according to the legal school that was applied during that period, i.e., the Hanafi school. Nonetheless, it was necessary that the person had male children; otherwise he would have to give one of his daughters in marriage to a jurist who could teach. It should be understood that this de-

ended to a large extent on general political conditions and its continuation was tightly linked to the survival of the bourgeois class.

In reality, the political atmosphere changed after a few generations. The Suljuqs seized power and removed the notables of the cities and were replaced by military elites. The military started sponsored education centers, and the most important among them was Nizam al-Mulk who was famous for his sublime ambitions. Notwithstanding this change, the schools stayed private and elitist because the law did not allow that, as mentioned earlier. For government did not represent 'a moral person', and government was represented by the sultan or his minister. The great institutions in Baghdad or the Nizamiyya schools in Naysapour and Baghdad stay private but was not anymore part of family inheritance. Hizm al-Mulk and his children were not teachers of jurisprudence but men of administration and scribes. They paid money for teachers from the endowments who were encouraged and supported by the state. Thus, the school became a tool in the hand of the state so that religion was served and some schools of jurisprudence were preserved and strengthened.

On the other hand, the spread of schools was a factor in their change. Jobs increased and teachers increased and were divided into ranks, which led to strong competition among them. The founder of the endowment was able to appoint or dismiss them at will, and normally he would entice them with money. In fact, the teachers were not exactly employees but they had lost the freedom that they used to have when they worked in trade. Nonetheless, they were the focus of society. They had the right to have more than one post and appoint deputies and keep some part of salaries. They had aids who would teach in the elementary classes and instructors who would teach preparatory classes for students that were less intelligent. The students lived at schools for free and got little stipends. They were said to live a parasitic

lives, for the endowment took care of all their needs. This way of life had to bring about changes in lifestyles of both teachers and students.

This change affected the method of instruction. During that period, the pieces of hadith were collected and classified. The students and teachers did not need to travel anymore, for they stayed at their centers where they got paid and were given stipends and lodging. The age of the visiting professor was gone, and instead, there appeared, since the fifth century, inaugural lectures. Licenses were not anymore given for one book only but in a whole field. The license became equivalent to a degree in general education that is given in the West till our day or what might be called in French, *Licentia ubique docendi* or *venia legendi* that are given in German universities. But this basic change occurred only in the field of jurisprudence.

The degree used to be called a license to teach and provide fatawas. Instead of accumulating knowledge, it became a must to have a method. For jurisprudence was an interpretative science, as is the case always and everywhere. The muftis had to review all opinions and compare among them, then issued the fatawas on similar texts and defend them. This meant that they had to know a huge amount of arguments that could be used in controversial topics. Disputation was the center of the educational system and was almost run like a competition, which served as an exam for students.

4

When looking at all of these details, we recall the medieval centuries in the West. It appears that Islam was ahead of the West for a few generations, but there were limits that the Islamic civilization did not cross. Although the school housed a lot of professors, there were no faculties and were not free from the intervention of the government. It was only a place where teachers

and students lived. At times many legal schools were housed in one building or that students of certain regions were put together. But the school as a legal institution never existed. In other words, the school was not a university but rather like the mosque. Its function was closer to a British college. This unofficial institution, which is linked to an individual, had its disadvantages: the degrees given were no more than a certificate that was given by a shaykh. The Islamic world did not develop a degree like the Ph.d. in the West. We can still, though rarely, today find traces of these certificates in recent publications. Of course, what we call the ministry of education did not exist then.

On the other hand, not following any formality allowed the maintenance of free education. During those days, freedom was not a given; for the educational authority was not external, like a bishop or the pope, for instance. The authority was in the hands of the teachers themselves, each exercising it within his circle. They could express their individual opinions but without tending to unbelief and on the condition of respect for the sunna and the Qur'an. The college of scholars supervised such activities. In the beginning of Islam, the person who had an opinion his opinion would be respected. Later, during the period we are studying, people became more cautious and moderate. But still people believed that the person who had a wrong opinion deserved reward for his efforts and reasoning.

But the priority that jurisprudence enjoyed led to some damages. The way of thinking became polemical as well as much formalistic, sometimes. Establishing proofs and arguments were immersed in definitions and precision, which made the scholars fall into nice distinctions and refinements of terms. The result is that the attained precision led also to less invention. Another result that must be indicated is that the dominance of jurisprudence minimized interest in literary sciences. In the West, and during the later

medieval centuries, the affairs were conducted in a similar fashion. Transformation took place later with the coming of the Renaissance. And the Islamic world did not know such a renaissance. It is undoubted that the Arabs had, like older western literatures, an old literary heritage that they return to dip from. But this heritage, poetry, was purely Arab. They wholly shunned learning foreign languages and their literatures. The situation changed only with the coming of colonialism, where Muslims started to learn mainly French and English. Till now, Chinese and Russian literatures have not taken their place in Arab universities. The same applies to Persian and Turkish studies, which are a part of the heritage of the Islamic world, not to mention the languages of Urdu and Indonesia.

The weak points that had been hidden were not noticed during those days. If a criticism was directed, it was one-sided. Some noticed that juristic learning did not care much about disciplining the soul—a criticism that was made by the Sufis. Criticism was directed to the content of that knowledge as well as its methods. It is not wise to reduce philosophy, and knowledge be limited to mere ability and defensive plans. We must be warned against arrogance that is based on selectivity and specialty that aims at accumulating knowledge. What a student must learn, as the critiques have said, is humbleness before God in the first place and virtue, and not managing the affairs of this vanishing life. As to the teacher, he must not only be a scholar but must be a psychological educator. His influence is derived from God directly, and his knowledge comes from allusion and existential experience rather than intelligence or reading book. There is no doubt that education is based on traditionalism all over all countries.

Traditionalism here means obedience, absolute obedience, without questioning. And self repression and its discipline are only a means that facilitate for the student adjusting his character. In that civilization that is based on re-

ligion such a model exerted tremendous influence on the souls to a degree that the school's existence was threatened by the establishment of many corners related to sufi paths. Therefore, the Azhar mosque lost much of its influence during the Ottoman rule. Since then we see two educational systems, juristic and sufi, though the Sufis tended to transmit their traditions orally and through personal initiative in the quest for knowledge, as was the case during the first centuries of Islam. In fact, it was not difficult to harmonize between these two systems at the individual level, at least. At the level of society, the unification of the two systems could have led to many disadvantages as well as advantages. For purely practical reasons, at least to maintain their political role, those in charge had to finally bring in European education to their schools, such as sciences and medicine. By then, the time for combination had gone, and a new critical stage of transformation had started because of cultural admixture that we have not seen its end. This is another matter that should not be treated here.