

ISLAM AT THE CROSSROADS

CHAPTER 4

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ABOUT EDUCATION

So long as Muslims continue looking towards Western civilization as the only force that could regenerate their own stagnant society, they destroy their self-confidence and, indirectly, support the Western assertion that Islam is a "spent force".

In the previous chapters I have given the reasons for my opinion that Islam and Western civilization, being built on diametrically opposed conceptions of life, are not compatible in spirit. This being so, how could we expect that the education of Muslim youth on Western lines, an education based entirely on Western cultural experiences and values, could remain free from anti-Islamic influences?

We are not justified to expect this. Except in rare cases, where a particularly brilliant mind may triumph over the educational matter, Western education of Muslim youth is bound to undermine their will to believe in the message of the Prophet, their will to regard themselves as representatives of the religiously-motivated civilization of Islam. There can be no doubt whatever that religious belief is rapidly losing ground among our "intelligentsia" who have absorbed Western values. This, of course, does not imply that Islam has preserved its integrity as a practical religion among the non-educated classes: but there, anyhow, we generally find a far greater sentimental response to the call of Islam -

in the primitive way in which they understand it ~ than among the more Westernized "intelligentsia". The explanation of this estrangement is not that the Western science with which they have been fed has furnished any reasonable argument against the truth of our religious teachings, but that the intellectual atmosphere of modern Western society is so intensely anti-religious that it imposes itself as a dead weight upon the religious potentialities of the young Muslim generation.

Religious belief and unbelief are very rarely a matter of argument alone. In some cases the one or the other is gained by way of intuition or, let us say, insight; but mostly it is communicated to man by his cultural environment. Think of a child who from his earliest days is systematically trained to hear perfectly rendered musical sounds. His ear grows accustomed to discern tone, rhythm and harmony; and in his later age he will be able, if not to produce and to render, at least to *understand* the most difficult music. But a child who during the whole of its early life never heard anything resembling music would afterwards find it hard to appreciate even its elements. It is the same with religious associations. As there possibly are some individuals to whom nature has completely denied an "ear" for music, so -possibly but not probably -there are individuals who are completely "deaf" to the voice of religion. But for the overwhelming number of normal human beings the alternative between religious belief and unbelief is decided by the atmosphere in which they are brought up. Therefore the Prophet said: "Every child is born in original purity, and it is but his parents who make him a 'Jew', a 'Christian' or a 'Zoroastrian'" *al-Bukhiirii*.

The term "parents" used in the above *hadith* can logically be extended to the general environment family life, school, society, etc. -by which the early development of the child is determined. It cannot be denied that in the present state of decadence, the religious atmosphere in many Muslim houses is of such a low and intellectually degraded type that it may produce in the growing youth the first incentive to turn his back on religion. This may be so; but in the case of the education of young Muslims on Western lines the effect not only *may* be but most probably *will* be an anti-religious attitude in later life.

But here comes the great question: what should be our attitude towards modern learning?

A protest against Western education of Muslims does not in the least mean that Islam could be opposed to education as such. This allegation of our opponents has neither a theological nor an historical foundation. The Qur'an is full of exhortations to learn "so that you may become wise", "that you may think", "that you may know". It is said at the beginning of the Holy Book:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ

"And he imparted unto Adam all the names" (2:31) -and the subsequent verses show that owing to his God-given knowledge of those "names", man is, in a certain respect, superior even to the angels. The "names" are a symbolic expression for the power of defining terms, the power of articulate thinking which is peculiar to the human being and which enables him, in the words of the Qur'an, to be God's vicegerent on earth. And in order to make a systematic use of his thinking, man must *learn*, and therefore the Prophet said: "Striving after knowledge is a sacred duty) imposed on every Muslim, male and female" (*Ibn Majah*). And: "If anybody goes on his way in search of knowledge, God will make easy for him the way to Paradise" (*Sahih Muslim*). And "The superiority-of the learned man over a [mere] worshipper is like the superiority of the moon on a night when it is full over all other stars" (*Musnad Ibn Ifanbal, Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Sunan Abi oau« Sunan Ibn Mijjah, Sunan ad-Diirimii*).

But it is not even necessary to quote verses of the Qur'an or sayings of the Prophet in defense of the Islamic attitude towards learning. History proves beyond any possibility of doubt that no religion has ever given a stimulus to scientific progress comparable to that of Islam. The encouragement which learning and scientific research received from Islamic theology resulted in the splendid cultural achievements in the days of the Umayyads and Abbasids and the Arab rule in Sicily and Spain. I do not mention this in order that we might boast of those glorious memories at a time when the Islamic world has forsaken its own traditions and reverted to spiritual blindness and intellectual poverty. We have no right, in our present misery, to boast of past glories. But we must realize that it was the negligence of the Muslims and not any deficiency in the teachings of Islam that caused our present decay.

Islam has never been a barrier to progress and science. It appreciates the intellectual activities of man to such a degree as to place him above the angels. No other religion ever went so far in asserting the dominance of reason and, consequently, of learning, above all other manifestations of human life. If we

conform to the principles of this religion, we cannot dream of eliminating modern learning from our lives. We *must* have the will to learn and to progress and to become scientifically and economically as efficient as the Western nations are. But the one thing Muslims must *not* wish is to see with Western eyes, to think in Western patterns of thought: they must not wish, if they desire to remain Muslims, to exchange the spiritual civilization of Islam for the materialistic experimentation of the West, whether Capitalist or Marxist.

Knowledge itself is neither Western nor Eastern: it is universal -just as natural facts are universal. But the angle of vision from which facts can be regarded and presented varies with the cultural temperaments of nations. Biology as such, or physics, or botany, are neither materialistic nor spiritual in their scope and purpose; they are concerned with the observation, collection and definition of facts and the derivation from them of general rules. But the inductive, philosophical *conclusions* which we derive from these sciences -that is, the philosophy of science -are not based on facts and observations alone but are to a very large extent influenced by our pre-existing temperamental or intuitive attitudes towards life and its problems. The great German philosopher Kant remarked: "It seems surprising at first, but is none the less certain, that our reason does not draw its conclusions *from* Nature, but prescribes them *to* it." In short, it is only the subjective angle of vision that matters here, for it may basically influence our interpretation of the various phenomena under consideration. Thus, science, which is neither materialistic nor spiritual in itself, may lead us to widely divergent interpretations of the Universe: interpretations, that is, which may be spiritual or materialistic, according to our own predisposition and, therefore, our angle of vision. The West, notwithstanding its highly refined intellectualism, is materialistically predisposed and, therefore, antireligious in its conceptions and fundamental presumptions; and so, necessarily, must be the Western educational system as a whole. In other words, it is not the study of modern, empirical sciences that could be detrimental to the cultural reality of Islam, but the spirit of Western civilization through which Muslims approach those sciences.

It is very unfortunate that our own age-long indifference and negligence, so far as scientific research is concerned, have made us entirely dependent on Occidental sources of learning.

If we had always followed that principle of Islam which imposes the duty of learning and knowledge on every Muslim man and woman, we would not have to look today towards the Occident for an acquisition of modern sciences in the same way as a man dying of thirst in the desert looks towards the mirage "of water on the horizon. But as the Muslims have neglected their own possibilities for so long a time, they have fallen into ignorance and poverty while Europe has taken a mighty leap forward. It will take a long time to bridge this chasm. Until then we naturally will be obliged to accept modern sciences through the educational media of the West, and be grateful for it. But this means only that we are bound to accept the scientific matter and method, and nothing else. In other words, we should not hesitate to study exact sciences on Western lines, but we should not concede to their *philosophy* any role in the education of Muslim youth. Of course, one could say that at present many of the exact sciences, for example, nuclear physics/have gone beyond a purely empirical investigation and have entered philosophical domains; and that it is in many cases extremely difficult to draw any distinct line between empirical science and speculative philosophy.

This is true. But, on the other hand, this is exactly the point where Islamic culture will have to reassert itself. It will be the duty and the opportunity of Muslim scientists, when once they reach those border-lines of scientific investigation, to apply their own powers of speculative reasoning independently of Western philosophical theories. Out of their own -Islamic attitude they probably will arrive at conclusions quite different from those of the majority of modern Western scientists. But whatever the future may bring, it is decidedly possible, even today, to study and to teach science without a slavish submission to the intellectual attitudes of the West. What the world of Islam urgently needs today is not a new philosophical outlook, but only an up-to-date scientific and technical education and mental equipment.

If I were to make proposals to an ideal Educational Board governed by Islamic considerations alone, I would urge that of all the intellectual achievements of the West only natural sciences (with the aforementioned reservations) and mathematics should be taught in Muslim schools, while the tuition of European philosophy, literature and history should lose the position of primacy which it holds in today's curricula. Our attitude towards European philosophy should be obvious from what I have said above. And as for European literature, it should certainly not be overlooked -but it should be relegated to its proper philological

and historical position. The way in which it is taught at present in many Muslim countries is frankly biased. The boundless exaggeration of Western values and concepts naturally induces young and unripe minds to imbibe wholeheartedly the spirit of Western civilization before its negative aspects can be sufficiently appreciated. And so the ground is prepared not only for a Platonic adoration of Western values, but also for a practical imitation of the social forms based on those values: something which can never go hand in hand with the spirit of Islam. The present role of European literature in Muslim schools should be taken over by a reasonable, discriminating tuition of Islamic literature with a view to impress the student with the depth and richness of his own culture, and thus to infuse him with a new hope for its future.

If the tuition of European literature, in the form in which it is prevalent today in many Muslim institutions, contributes to the estrangement of young Muslims from Islam, the same, in a far larger measure, is true of Western interpretation of world history. In it the old attitude "*Roman versus Barbarian*" very distinctly comes into its own. Their presentation of history aims -without admitting this aim -at proving that the Western races and their civilization are superior to anything that has been or could be produced in this world; and so it gives a sort of moral justification to the Western quest for domination over the rest of the world. Since the time of the Romans, the European nations have been accustomed to regard all differences between East and West from the standpoint of a presumed European "norm". Their reasoning works on the assumption that the development of humanity can be judged only on the basis of European cultural experiences. Such a narrowed angle of vision necessarily produces a distorted perspective, and the farther the lines of observation recede from the presumed European "norm", the more difficult it becomes for Westerners to grasp the real meaning and structure of the historical problems under consideration.

Owing to this egocentric attitude of the Westerners, their descriptive history of the world was, until very recently at least, in reality nothing but an enlarged history of the West. Non-Western nations were taken into account only insofar as their existence and development had a direct influence on the destinies of Europe or America. But if you depict the history of Western nations in great detail and in vivid colors and allow only here and there side glimpses at the remaining parts of the world, the reader is prone to succumb to the illusion that the greatness of the

Occident's achievement in social and intellectual respects is out of all proportion to that of the rest of the world. Thus it almost appears as if the world had been created for the sake of the West and its civilization alone, while all other civilizations were meant only to form an appropriate setting for all that Western glory. The only effect such historical training can have upon the minds of young non-European people is a feeling of inferiority insofar as their own culture, their own historic past and their own future possibilities are concerned. They are systematically trained to disdain their own potential future -unless it be a future surrender to Western ideals.

In order to counteract these negative effects, the responsible leaders of Islamic thought should do their utmost to revise the tuition of history in Muslim institutions. This is a difficult task, no doubt, and it will require a thorough overhaul of our historical training before a new history of the world, as seen through Muslim eyes, is produced. But if the task is difficult, it is none the less possible and, moreover, imperative -otherwise our younger generation will continue to be infused with elements of the Western contempt for Islam; and the result will be a deepening of its inferiority complex. This inferiority complex could no doubt be overcome if the Muslims were prepared to assimilate Western culture *in its entirety* and to banish Islam from their lives. But are they prepared to do that?

We believe, and recent developments in the West reaffirm this belief, that the ethics of Islam, its concepts of social and personal morality, of justice, of liberty, are infinitely higher, infinitely more perfect than the corresponding concepts and ideas within Western civilization. Islam has condemned racial hatred and pointed out the way to human brotherhood and equality; but Western civilization is still unable to look beyond the narrow horizon of racial and national antagonisms. Islamic society has never known classes and class warfare; but the whole of Western history, from the days of ancient Greece and Rome down to our own time, is full of class struggle and social hatred. Again and again it must be repeated that there is only one thing which a Muslim can profitably learn from the West, namely, the exact sciences in their pure and applied forms. But this necessity for a quest of science from Western sources should not induce a Muslim to regard Western civilization as superior to his own -or else he does not understand what Islam stands for. The superiority of one culture or civilization over another does not consist in the possession of a greater amount of scientific

knowledge (although the latter is most desirable), but in its ethical energy, in its greater ability to explain and to coordinate the various aspects of human life. And in this respect Islam surpasses every other culture. We have only to follow its rules in order to achieve the utmost that human beings are capable of achieving. But we cannot and must not *imitate* Western civilization if we wish to preserve and to revive the values of Islam. The harm which the intellectual influence of that civilization causes in the body of Islam is far greater than the material benefit which it could possibly confer.

If, in the past, Muslims were negligent of scientific research, they cannot hope to repair that mistake today by an unquestioning acceptance of all Western learning. The effects of our scientific backwardness and poverty stand no comparison whatever with the deadly effect which a blind following of the Western educational structure must necessarily have on the spiritual potentialities of the Muslim world. If we wish to preserve the reality of Islam as a cultural factor, we must guard against the moral emptiness of Western civilization which is about to pervade not only our personal inclinations but also our entire social fabric. By imitating the manners and the mode of life of the West, the Muslims are being gradually *forced* to adopt the Western moral outlook: for the imitation of outward appearance leads, by degrees, to a corresponding assimilation of the world-view responsible for that appearance.