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Education in the  
Light of Tradition

*Studies in Comparative Religion*

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Notions of "education" are embedded in the values and goals of modern society. Human individuals are understood in terms of their social roles, and human goals are defined in terms of ideology. By "ideology," I mean schemes of improving the human situation based on the presuppositions of modern thought as developed during the eighteenth century, that is, the historical period known as the Enlightenment.

The new style of thinking that appeared during the Enlightenment rejected all traditional notions of truth, authority, hierarchy, and human nature. It laid the groundwork for the various systems that have been enacted in modern times in the attempt to shape human society to humanistic ideals—systems such as democracy, socialism, and Marxism, with all their varieties and offshoots. Among the more prominent of these offshoots today are the modern Islamist movements, which are the same as other ideological systems in the attempt to impose an abstract, human-devised system on society.

All ideology begins with certain assumptions about human nature that are not shared by pre-modern thought. Human beings are understood in terms of the findings of modern science, which excludes de facto, if not de jure, any possibility of transcendence, any notion of prophecy and revelation, any serious consideration of everlasting life. Reading the Enlightenment in Islamic terms, we can say that it is a new style of thinking based on the rejection of the three fundamental principles of Islamic thought. These are *tawhid* or divine unity, prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and the Return to God (*ma'ad*). In other words, modern notions of human nature are founded on the rejection of the truths that have always formed the core understanding of Muslims.

I do not mean to imply that these basic Islamic truths are simply Islamic—they are shared by every pre-modern civilization, not least the Christian. In other words, the worldviews of pre-modern civilizations acknowledged *tawhid*, the unity of the Ultimate Reality. They also held that human perfection could not be achieved without the initiative of that Reality, that is, without the help of figures known as prophets, avatars, buddhas, or sages. These pre-modern worldviews also maintained that our mode of existence in this life is simply one stage of human becoming and that each individual human being is responsible, to some degree, for the manner of his or her existence after death.

In short, any discussion of "education" in the context of Islamic teachings has to begin with the fact that notions of education in modern times are based on concepts of human nature grounded in the Enlightenment. These concepts are profoundly incompatible with Islamic notions of human nature. It follows that modern education, which serves the needs of the ideologies of modern states, is profoundly incompatible with Islamic education, which serves the needs of the human soul in its quest to return to God in the best possible manner.

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What makes something "Islamic" is that it be based on the teachings of the Koran and the prophet Muhammad. No Arabic word in the early sources corresponds exactly with our modern notion of education. Certainly, the Koran and the hadith literature are full of exhortations to seek knowledge and to improve oneself by conforming to the norms provided by God and His Prophet. But knowledge and improvement are always understood in terms of a specific goal.

## The Goal of Islamic Education

William C. Chittick

and that goal is to become fully human in this world and to achieve everlasting happiness in the next world. In and of itself, knowledge is not valuable. Otherwise the Prophet would not have prayed, "O God, I seek refuge from a knowledge that has no benefit."

The word "educate" derives from a Latin root that means to lead forth, to pull out. One can argue that the Koran does indeed provide a somewhat parallel notion, a notion that lies at the heart of Muslim prayer. The Fatima, recited several times a day by every practicing Muslim, revolves around the sentence, "Guide us on the Straight Path." The Straight Path is the path that leads to human happiness and wholeness. In other words, the path that leads to "success." Success, however, is defined not in terms of this world, but rather in terms of another much more real and lasting world.

The Fatima is traditionally said to encapsulate the message of the whole Koran. It points clearly to the three principles that are the foundation of the Islamic worldview. Let me suggest how these three notions are embedded.

Generally, *tawhid* is said to be expressed most succinctly in the Koranic formula, "(There is) no god but God." This formula has always been understood to mean that all of existence comes from God, that all of reality is constantly sustained by God, and that all things eventually return to God. Every positive quality experienced in the world and in ourselves can only be a pale reflection of God's qualities. God alone is truly good, God alone is truly beautiful, God alone is truly powerful, God alone is truly independent, and so on down the list of the divine names. In short, *tawhid* means that there is nothing truly real but God.

The Fatima begins with the statement, "Praise belongs to God," which is simply a statement of *tawhid*. It means that there is none praiseworthy but God, for there is nothing truly good but God. In the same way, *tawhid* is also expressed in the statement, "You alone we serve, and from You alone we ask for help." There is no other god but God, so there is no one worthy of service and no one who can provide real help other than God. Notice that this sentence is commonly regarded as setting down an ideal: Muslims *should* serve God alone and ask assistance only from Him. However, if we look carefully, we can see that it is also a statement of fact. The Unity of Reality demands that everyone, Muslim or not, serves God and asks help from Him in the actual course of living out their lives. Given that there is only one true Reality, all things act in keeping with that Reality—all things are the servants of that Reality by definition. When people seek help, they are in fact seeking help from that One Reality, whether or not they are aware of this fact.

This brings us to the second principle of Islamic thought, which the Fatima mentions most explicitly by using the verb "guide." *Tawhid* teaches, "There is no guide but God." As the Koran puts it, addressing the Prophet, "You do not guide whom you like, but God guides whomsoever He wants" (28:56). Nonetheless, the Koran also says to the Prophet, "You guide to a Straight Path" (42:52). This is to say that God guides by sending the prophets, and their function in the universe is precisely to guide people on the Straight Path, which leads to everlasting happiness. The third principle of Islamic thought is the Return to God. It is implied by the very notion of Straight Path, *al-sirat al-mustaqim*. Why is this path important? Because it leads to happiness after death. Its significance is indicated among other things by the fact that the so-called "bridge over hell" on the Day of Resurrection is also called *al-sirat*. Those who are able to cross the Bridge without falling into the Fire are those who received guidance on the Straight Path in this life. Those who fail to cross the Bridge are those who did not follow the Straight Path—instead, as the Fatima says, they were among those who went astray, or those against whom God was angry.

I said that modern education is incompatible with traditional Islamic education. By traditional Islamic education I mean, "guidance on the Straight Path," the path that leads to right activity, right understanding, and right transformation of the soul. As soon as we see that traditional Islamic education focused on achieving human perfection in terms of the norms of God—not the humanistic norms of the Enlightenment—we can easily understand why modern education destroys the bases on which an Islamic education must be built. Let me suggest a few places where the conflict between Islamic and modern education appear, specifically as relating to the fundamental principle of Islamic thought, *tauhid*.

Modern education claims to be based on "science," and it gains its authority by being "scientific." Scientific thinking is characterized by its focus on multiplicity, on the empirical study of the realm that is manifest to the senses, whether the senses gain access to this realm

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The three basic sorts of Islamic knowledge that should ideally be embodied by the ulama are knowledge of right activity, knowledge of the True Reality, and knowledge of spiritual perfection. "Knowledge of right activity" is the domain of the Shariah and jurisprudence. Sufism, and/or philosophy. These scholars explain Koranic teachings related to the reality of God, the nature of the cosmos, and the becoming of the human soul. In other words, this second group of ulama studies metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology. The third realm, "knowledge of spiritual perfection," deals with the manner of inner transformation and conformity with the norms of God, not only in activity and thought, but also in the inner being of the soul. This realm is the specialty of the Sufi teachers.

Everyone needs an educator, someone who can show the path to knowledge and salvation. The educator is precisely the "guide" (*hadi*). In traditional Islamic society, guidance was provided by the ulama. According to a commonly quoted saying (often attributed to the Prophet), "The ulama are the inheritors of the prophets." The ulama are literally "those who have knowledge," and there are different sorts of ulama depending on the sort of knowledge that they have inherited from the prophets. There are three basic realms of knowledge, all of which are encompassed by the Koran and embodied in the Prophet. The ideal inheritor of the Prophet will have actualized all three sorts of knowledge, but most ulama are in fact rather limited in their learning. Certainly, none of the ulama can be as complete a guide as the Prophet himself.

As I said earlier, the word "educate" means to lead out. In Latin, *ducere* means to lead and to guide. When Muslims pray to be guided on the Straight Path, they are asking God to lead them out of ignorance, hatred, spite, and all the vicious traits of character that prevent the flowering of wholeness and virtue. These negative character traits are deeply rooted in the human soul. The reason for this is simply that people are not God, and God alone is good and true. As the Koran says, "Man was created weak" (4:28). Adam fell from paradise because of his weakness, which the Koran calls "forgetfulness" (*nisyan*) and "heedlessness" (*ghafala*). Forgetfulness is woven into human existence. To escape from forgetfulness, people must be led out from it—one needs to be "educated." No one can achieve the fullness of human possibility, no one can reach true knowledge, wisdom, virtue, and goodness, by his or her own efforts. Everyone needs an educator, someone who can show the path to knowledge and salvation. The

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directly or by means of instruments. Scientific thinking rejects, implicitly or explicitly, any kind of knowledge that cannot be verified empirically. This sort of approach is useful for gaining control over the environment and people, as is all too obvious in the way that it is used by governments, the military, and industry. Once, however, people claim that scientific knowledge is the only valid and legitimate knowledge, then we are no longer dealing with science, but with "scientism," which is the belief that science alone allows access to truth. Good scientists are usually too sophisticated to believe in scientism, because they understand that scientism is an ideological position that cannot be demonstrated empirically.

Nonetheless, scientism is a powerful component of the modern worldview. Most people believe in the truth claims of science more than they believe in the truth claims of religion. They believe that science deals with knowledge and objective reality, and they think that religion deals simply with the subjective realm of opinions and feelings.

This belief in science is profoundly incompatible with the approach of Islamic learning. In Islamic terms, the only real knowledge, the only absolutely reliable and true knowledge, is *tawhid*, the fact that there is nothing real but the Reality. This has always been recognized as being a truth, a fact, not a belief. It is a "belief" only for simple people who accept it on the basis of authority but do not understand what it means. For any person of sound intelligence ('*aqil salim*'), it is the foundational truth in terms of which all other truths must be understood and all knowledge must be built. Any form of knowledge that ignores *tawhid* is ignorant of the one truth upon which all truth depends.

Everyone knows that Muslim civilization developed a number of scientific disciplines in extremely sophisticated ways—disciplines like mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. These disciplines, however, were always part of a greater vision, and that vision was *tawhid*. The Islamic worldview began by asserting the reality of God, the unity of the ultimately Real, the rootedness of all things in God. This meant that true understanding of things depended upon understanding them in terms of God—the Ultimate Reality. Any knowledge of the world that does not situate the world in terms of its Transcendent Source is in fact ignorance, because it prevents people from seeing things as they truly are.

It is fairly obvious that an intuition of unity drives modern-day scientists in their search for overarching theories of nature and the universe. But there can also be little doubt that the actual theories that rule over contemporary scientific and academic disciplines are manifestations of a principle that we can call *takthir*. *Tawhid* is derived from the word *wahda*, oneness, and it means to assert the oneness of God, to declare the unity of the Ultimate Reality. *Takthir* derives from the word *kathra*, manyness, and it means to assert the manyness of reality. A worldview of *takthir* implicitly or explicitly denies *tawhid*. In place of One Reality, it posits many realities. The net result is the dispersion of human knowledge, the proliferation of scientific and academic disciplines, the multiplicity of human goals, and never-ending disagreement, dissension, disintegration, conflict, and corruption.

*Takthir* is not necessarily a bad thing. Muslim philosophers sometimes employed the word to designate the very act by which the One God creates a world of multiplicity. But, the human task is to escape from *takthir*, to see beyond the multiplicity and dissension that rule over the visible realm. Human beings are called upon to establish *tawhid*, which means to bring about unity, harmony, balance, equilibrium, and peace. They are called to do this, however, in their own lives. No one can bring about harmony, balance, and peace in the world if that person is not already at peace with God.

That *tawhid* must begin with the individual points to one of the basic differences between

own *haqq* and provided guidance as to how to observe these *haqq*s. This is to say that God's the foundation for all the rights of mankind and creation, because God has given everything its specifically in the Straight Path. God's right against us—that we assert His Unity—establishes fruit of doing so will be salvation. The manner of achieving *tahqiq* is laid down by the prophets, appropriate but God. Simultaneously, *tahqiq* means to live in accordance with God's *haqq*. The there is no real *haqq* but the absolute and true *Haqq*—there is nothing truly right, real, and of things and to act accordingly. The first *haqq* that must be recognized is that of God, for I said that the goal of Islamic education is *tahqiq*. *Tahqiq* means to recognize the *haqq*

deliver them from hell and to place them in paradise. right against God to be given everlasting happiness. In other words, it is God's *responsibility* to right is for them to declare his unity, to assert *tawhid*. In other words, *tawhid* is the first human According to a famous hadith, God has a *haqq*—a right—against human beings, and that

rightness. *alayna*, "the right against us") is to act toward everything in keeping with its truth and its everything has a truth and a rightness. It is also to say that the human "responsibility" (*haqq* its own *haqq*, and that people must give to each possessor of a *haqq* its *haqq*. This is to say that *haqq*, that is, with truth, rightness, and appropriateness. The Prophet said that everything has reality, rightness, and appropriateness. But, the Koran tells us that God created everything with real, right, appropriate, worthy. The implication of this divine name is that God alone is truth, The word *tahqiq* derives from the word *haqq*, a Koranic name of God that means true, and verification.

a philosophical bent, the goal of following the Straight Path is *tahqiq*, which means realization could one come to the aid of others. According to many Muslim scholars, especially those with endeavor that demanded working out the implications of *tawhid* for one's own soul. Only then vision of *tawhid* for themselves. Following the Straight Path was looked upon as an individual Traditional Islamic education attempted to provide the means whereby people could achieve a

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or any other discipline rooted in *takfir*. matter how much they may have mastered science and engineering, philosophy and sociology, as he also said. Without the search to understand, people will remain ignorant and forgetful, no Muslim, male or female," said the Prophet. And that search lasts "from the cradle to the grave," own knowledge and his own understanding. "The search for knowledge is incumbent on every help you unless you understand it as well. It is the responsibility of each Muslim to seek his Nonetheless, one cannot simply follow one's teachers. What your teacher understands does not on the Straight Path are first God, then the prophets, then the inheritors of the prophets. task of individuals. The way to achieve it is called the Straight Path. Those who lead people *Tawhid*, in short, is a vision that needs to be achieved by every human being. It is the words, traditional thought says, "Begin with yourself." Modern thought says, "Reform others." invented by ideologues and enforced by bureaucrats—society will be harmonious. In other by imposing a system on society. When everyone conforms to the imposed system—a system God's norms. In contrast, modern thought holds that a harmonious society can be built by fiat, is responsible before God. Without fulfilling one's own responsibilities, one cannot live by traditional thought and modern ideological systems. Islam has always taught that every individual

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truth and the right of something, and to act in keeping with the truth and the right. understanding, *Tahqiq* or realization is precisely understanding for oneself. It is to recognize the No doubt, memorizing the Koran is a great feat and has its reward, but memorization is not the Koranic attribute of Satan). Knowledge of *tauhid* gained by *taqhd* is simply rote learning and to putting it into practice. Otherwise, it is not guidance, but rather misguidance (*idlal*). Any education deserving the name "Islamic" must lead to the understanding of *tauhid* people need prophetic guidance—that is, they need "education."

is innate to every sound intelligence, every human being. But, to understand what it implies, remove the forgetfulness that has obscured people's understanding of *tauhid*. This knowledge know so that they will bring it to mind. The prophets came to awaken the human *firra*, to "reminder" (*dhikr, tadhkira*). To "remind" people means to mention to them what they already which people were created. The prophets came with guidance, and the guidance begins with maintain that *tauhid* pertains to human nature, to what is called the *firra*, the very way in one of them received the message, "There is no god but I, so serve Me" (20:114). Most scholars Notice that the Koran speaks of *tauhid* as the universal message of all the prophets. Every not yet entered one's mind and heart.

one has no understanding and that one's profession of God's unity is based on ignorance. It has because my teacher said I should." Or rather, one can say it, but that would simply prove that *Taqhd*, however, is not appropriate in *tauhid*. One cannot say, "I believe in God's oneness

Prophet, and one needs to take such knowledge from the jurists, the experts in the Shariah. In order to be a good Muslim, one needs to follow the Sunnah and imitate the practices of the from *taqhd*. *Taqhd* means imitation, and it is considered appropriate only in matters of practice. In discussing *tahqiq* as the goal of the Straight Path, Muslim scholars are careful to distinguish it

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it can only be discovered within oneself. washing. In former times, people were much more aware that understanding cannot be taught, believe in "compulsory education," which is really compulsory indoctrination, or rather, brain-places where modern notions of education conflict with traditional notions. Nowadays people the authoritarian nature of the regimes that they do manage to establish. This is one of many religion into an ideological system, and then they try to impose it on society. This helps explain to force anyone to follow it. All modern Islamist movements ignore this basic truth. They turn moral command, it is a statement of fact. "The religion" is the Straight Path, and it is impossible says, *la ibrāha fi l-din*, there is no compulsion, no coercion, in the religion. This again is not a No one can be forced to search for truth, and no one can be forced to understand it. The Koran they may have to others, but people have the responsibility of searching for that knowledge. 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, 53:38). The ulama have the responsibility of offering whatever knowledge or herself, and each person will be held responsible for his or her own efforts. The Koran stresses the Straight Path for you. Each individual is called upon to engage in the Straight Path by himself. If there is one basic insight of the Muslim tradition after *tauhid*, it is that no one can follow right against us is the foundation for all our human responsibilities.

*Education in the Light of Tradition: Studies in Comparative Religion*

It is characteristic of modern times that any discussion of "education" revolves around the needs of states and societies. These needs are defined in terms of the multiple gods that rule over the worldview of *takhrir*. These gods are well known to everyone, because they determine the orientation of modern societies and are constantly discussed by politicians and ideologues. People assume that these gods are good gods, and that if they worship the gods by devoting effort to achieving what they promise, they will be happy. Worship of these gods is part of the modern ethos and is taken for granted, just as *tauhid* was part of the pre-modern ethos and was taken for granted.

In many contexts today it is dangerous to speak against the gods of *takhrir*, because the worshippers of these gods are fanatics who possess a great deal of social and political power. Nonetheless, we should be realistic and acknowledge the names of the ruling gods of our times. No list could be exhaustive, because there are so many gods. But these names are representative: freedom, democracy, science, medicine, technology, progress, development, equality, education.

The worship of the god "education" is held in the highest esteem. All the other gods encourage us to attend at the temples of this god, for education trains people to reject the ancient gods and to abandon the principles of traditional thought—that is, *tauhid*, prophecy, and the Return. Education in this sense is everywhere a primary concern of politicians and states. States must provide education, they must train people in the worldview of *takhrir* and accustom them to worship at the temples of the many gods. The least responsibility of Muslims in this situation should be to acknowledge that modern education is destructive of the goals of *tauhid*. Without acknowledging the dead ends of ideology and the worthless promises of paradise made by politicians, there will be no hope for people to follow the Straight Path.

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To conclude my brief remarks, let me quote from one of the greatest "educators" of Islamic history, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi. In one of his prose works he explains the goal of education in terms of the human obligation to carry the Trust bestowed by God. This Trust, mentioned in the Koranic verse that he quotes, cannot be carried without following the Straight Path.

There is one thing in the world that you must never forget. If you forget everything else, but not this one thing, then you will have no fear. But if you carry out, remember, and do not forget all things, but you forget this one thing, then you will have done nothing at all.

Suppose a king sends you to a village for an appointed task. You go, and you perform a hundred other tasks. However, you do not perform the task for which you went. So, it is just as if you did nothing.

Human beings have come into this world for a task, and that is their goal. If they do not perform it, they will have done nothing. "We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and the human being carried it. Surely he is a wrongdoer, ignorant" [Koran 33:72]. "We offered the Trust to the heavens, but they did not accept". . . The heavens, earth, and mountains do all these things, but there is one task that they do not do. This one task is done by man alone. . . . When they do that task, "wrongdoing" and "ignorance" will be negated from them.



If you say, "Even though I don't do that task, I do so many other tasks!"—you were not created for those other tasks.

It is just as if you took a priceless sword of Indian steel, like those found in the treasures of kings, and you made it into a cleaver for rotten meat. You say, "I don't let this sword stand idle. I carry out so many useful deeds with it!" Or, you take a golden bowl and cook turnips in it. Yet, for a single grain of that gold you could buy a hundred pots. Or, you make a jewel-encrusted dagger into a nail for a broken gourd. You say, "I am making good use of it. I hang a gourd on it. I am not letting this blade stand idle." What intelligence is there in using a dagger worth a hundred dinars in this way?

God has given you tremendous worth. He says, "Surely God has bought from the believers their souls and their property so that they may have paradise" [9:111]. . . . Don't sell yourself cheaply—you have a very high price!