
EDUCATION FROM THE QUR'ĀNIC WORLDVIEW

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Definitions

Qur'ānic Worldview: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543–606/1148–1209) observed in his voluminous exegesis *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (“Keys of the Unseen”) that the Qur'ān has three axial themes: the Unicity of Allah Most High (*tawḥīd*), Messengership and Prophethood (*risāla, nubuwwa*), and Resurrection (*ma'ād*) (*Tafsīr, sub Q 2:21–22*). All other themes emerge from these and can be subsumed under them. All three are constantly present throughout the Qur'ān and are specifically mentioned in numerous verses.

The absolute Oneness of Allah Most High is the central theme of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112), which enjoins the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, to proclaim: *Say: He, Allah, is One. Allah, the Eternally Self-Sufficient (al-Ṣamad). He begets not, nor is begotten. And none is like Him.* The sura expounds, in condensed form and chiefly by negation, Divine Unicity; it “refutes in its four verses all [forms of] disbelief (*kufīr*) and fancies (*ahwā'*),” Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) noted. “It is named Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (“the Sura of Sincerity”) because it sweeps away all impurities foreign to the transcendence (*tanzīh*) of Allah, Exalted is He above all unbefitting Him” (Tustarī, *Tafsīr, sub Q 112*). According to the Qur'ān the Prophets are chosen human beings sent by God to guide humanity; the prophetic cycle started with the first human being, Ādam, upon him peace, and ended with the Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets (*khātam al-nabiyyīn*): *Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets, and Allah has full knowledge of all things* (Q 33:40). Resurrection brings all creation to their final destination.

The “worldview” (a term used as a calque for the German *Weltanschauung*) offered by the Qur'ān is anchored in the belief system which emerges from its three fundamental themes and is succinctly formulated in the five “pillars of Islam” (pronouncing and affirming the *shahāda*, performing the *ṣalāt*, paying *zakāt*, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and performing the Hajj once in a lifetime) and six articles of belief (belief in Allah, His Angels, His Books,

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His Prophets and Messengers, the Day of Judgment, and His Divine Decree).

Furthermore, let us note that the Qur'ān draws its material content from three realms: the natural world, human history, and the human soul (*nafs*). In a broadly construed contemporary classification of knowledge, the first can be said to be the subject of natural sciences, the second that of the human sciences, and the third finds myriad expression in language and the arts.

Education: Education, taken in its general as well as more specific and organized forms, is ultimately a process of learning, as indicated by the etymology of the word (derived from the Latin *educare*, meaning “to bring up, rear, train, raise, support”).

Education from the Qur'ānic Perspective: The process of learning based on the Qur'ānic worldview involves a conscious effort to infuse the Qur'ānic worldview in all areas of learning; it has its own specific pedagogy. It is based on a three-fold classification of knowledge. It reorganizes content based on the Qur'ānic teachings about the natural world as well as the place of human beings in the overall cosmic design. The Qur'ānic worldview does not exist externally; it is gained incrementally through an intentional process which, for most people, often involves “unlearning” what one has absorbed and acquired through years of formal and informal education in secular institutions. At the human level, it is akin to shaping a raw diamond into a gem, or polishing a mirror until it reflects perfectly. In some cases, the heart is transformed through personal life experiences; in other cases, it is a gradual process helped by constant reflection on the message of the Qur'ān. There are also examples of remarkable transformations through encounters with spiritual masters. In the final analysis, it is a Divine gift, a blessing that no one can possess but through the mercy of the Most Merciful.

Historical Context

Before the rise of modernity, the educational system in the Muslim world was able to provide a diverse yet unified worldview to the learners. Its pedagogy treated all branches of knowledge as if they formed a hierarchically arranged continuum, the gradation being based on the nobility of the subject and its benefit to individuals and community. This system of education allowed men like al-Bīrūnī (who specialized in natural sciences) to compose works in areas of natural and human history, and others like al-Ghazālī (who specialized in philosophy, *Kalām*, and spiritual sciences) to make direct connections between the Qur'ān and natural and mathematical sciences (see his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*).

The education system in much of the Muslim world before its encounter with modernity instilled in the learners a process through which they constructed for themselves a “Qur'ānic lens” through which they saw all things. The role played by the teacher in this process was that of a guide who directed the process spiritually as well as intellectually. By necessity, the process required internalization of the message of the Qur'ān and its lived

example—the life of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace. Thus, the teachers themselves had to first undergo this process so that they could aid students (no one can pass on to others what they do not themselves have). All of this changed with the arrival of colonizers in most of the Muslim world and the subsequent emergence of an alien education system, giving rise to the fraught contemporary situation.

In the mid-twentieth century, the education system in almost all parts of the Muslim world was split into two categories: (i) a very large state-owned system, a colonial legacy designed to produce graduates with a thoroughly secular worldview and little knowledge of Islam; and (ii) a private, often charity-sponsored, haphazard system of madrasas, producing imams with a cursory and truncated knowledge of Islam, with almost no grounding in the Islamic tradition of learning. The present-day large Muslim minorities in the West were yet to emerge; even in countries where Muslims were present in significant numbers, such as the United Kingdom, France, and some parts of the United States and Canada, they were mostly scattered immigrant communities with certain urban mosques perhaps hosting weekend schools. There was no networking between schools and hardly any Muslim educational institutions independent of mosques.

This scenario changed over the next three decades (1950–1980) through a number of significant events, not least of which was a multi-fold increase in revenue of the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, humiliating defeats in Arab-Israel wars, and a growing public dissatisfaction with both the pro-Soviet (quasi-socialist) and pro-Western orientation of ruling cliques, these being the only “two varieties of politics” at that time in most Muslim countries. The most powerful impetus for change was, however, the emergence of a renewed commitment to Islam in the post-colonial generation. This driving force became visible on political and social planes around the turn of the Islamic century. The positive energy, idealism, and fervor that swept through the Muslim world at that time produced numerous significant events which shaped the contours of the contemporary Muslim world as well as Muslim minorities in the West: the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979); the emergence of the Afghan Jihad after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the enormous impact of a number of quasi-religious political parties and a few politically active religious scholars in some Muslim countries, most notably in Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Egypt. Even the “paper-pusher” Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), established in 1969 as an immediate response to the desecration of al-Aqsa Mosque, gained significance in the general euphoria of that era.

These political events were augmented by several state-sponsored as well as private initiatives aimed at reviving the Islamic tradition of learning. In Iran, the entire state structure was reorganized to establish institutions of

learning on an Islamic pattern; most universities remained secular, but the *hawza ʿilmiyya* gained significance and several initiatives integrated it and secular institutions of the pre-Revolution era. A new and vast publication industry emerged in the Muslim world, producing new editions of classical Islamic works (exegeses, Hadith collections, commentaries, etc.) as well as newly written works on various aspects of Islam; Hijra Council, a semi-autonomous, state-sponsored learned society initiated a massive effort aimed at publishing one hundred great books of Islamic civilization; for the first time in history, Muslims started to translate their classical heritage into Western languages; and the translations of the Qurʾān in Western language by Muslims themselves multiplied.

It was during that euphoric era that the First World Conference on Muslim Education was held at Makka al-Mukarrama (31 March–8 April 1977/12–20 Rabiʿ al-Thānī 1397) with an encompassing theme: “Basis for an Islamic Education System”. It brought together approximately 350 scholars from around the world who jointly observed: “the existing conditions in present-day educational institutions in most Muslim countries do not truly reflect the Islamic ideal, and these institutions do not play their rightful role in the education of the younger generation in Islamic faith, thought and conduct, and there exists at present a regrettable dichotomy in education in the Muslim world; one system namely, religious education being completely divorced from the secular sciences, and secular education being equally divorced from religion, although such compartmentalization was contrary to the true Islamic concept of education and [this] made it impossible for the products of either system to represent Islam as a comprehensive and integrated vision of life.”¹ The work of the Conference was organized in different sub-committees, each charged with the task of formulating the aims and objectives of education in Islam in different disciplines. These sub-committees produced succinct statements reflecting the basic aims and objectives of their subject areas. For instance, the sub-committee on natural sciences (including applied science and technology) declared that the aim of their education was to “motivate the human intellect to ponder on the universe; to understand the nature of things and beings that are comprehensible; to discover Allah’s laws of nature and use them beneficially, and thus enable man to be the vicegerent of Allah on earth.”²

Following this landmark event, five more conferences were held in Pakistan (1980), Bangladesh (1981), Indonesia (1982), Egypt (1987), and South Africa (1996). These conferences did little to change ground realities, but a side result was the establishment of four International Islamic universities,

1. Conference Book published by King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah.

2. King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, published the proceedings of the conference in six volumes in 1979.

one each in Islamabad, Pakistan (1980), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1983), Say, Niger (1986), and Uganda (1988) with campuses in several cities. Except for the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), which received warm endorsement and support also from several OIC countries, all other universities have been established by OIC and continue to receive funding from it.

Parallel to these developments in the Muslim world, there was a rapid increase in the number of Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America. Faced with the dilemma of educating their children in a predominantly non-Muslim milieu, the Muslim minorities in the West responded by establishing independent schools. However, most of these schools were “Muslim schools” rather than “Islamic schools”, as they only differed from the public education institutions in that their student population was Muslim. In general, a very large percentage of these schools was established by community leaders, rather than individuals or groups trained in running educational institutions. Furthermore, these schools were not based on alternate philosophies of education, they were governed by individuals with little academic qualification, and teachers working in these schools were mostly uncertified and without training in Islamic philosophy of education.

As these developments were taking place, some Muslim scholars responded to the urgent need of the community by formulating theoretical foundations for education from an Islamic perspective. Their work forms an important step in the emerging efforts to restructure education. The work of three scholars is of direct relevance: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931–), who first used the phrase “Islamization of knowledge” in his 1978 book *Islam and Secularism*;³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933–), who was one of the members of the organizing committee of the 1977 Makka Conference on Education;⁴ and Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi (1921–1986), who highlighted “the malaise of the Umma” and proposed “Islamization” of modern knowledge, without, however, providing any detailed methodology and relying on the central Qur’ānic concept of *Tawhīd* to generally articulate a Work Plan which excluded natural sciences altogether.

Classification of Contemporary Knowledge

As already stated, the pre-modern Islamic classification of knowledge placed all branches of knowledge in a hierarchical structure. The Qur’ān and the sciences of the Qur’ān naturally occupied the highest spot. It should be noted that classical scholars deemed the *principle of all sciences* to be contained in the Qur’ān (as per its self-description as the compendium of knowledge (*cf. Q*)),

3. Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978.

4. Other committee members included the late Seyyed Ali Ashraf, Dr. Zubair, and Dr. Abdullah Bin Omar Nasseef.

not their details (unlike certain contemporary attempts to locate atoms and the Big Bang in the Book).

As an integral component of education from the Qurʾānic worldview, contemporary disciplines need to be reorganized into the above-mentioned three realms from which the Qurʾān draws its material content: sciences dealing with the study of the physical world; the human sciences, including history, sociology, anthropology, and the like; and the realm of the creative expression of what takes place within the human self, including literature, various forms of art, and other modes of expression through human languages and other, more subtle forms of expression.

Once restructured in this fashion, it will become easier to make connections between various disciplines being taught by relating them to the Qurʾānic discourse on the three realms. The subject of natural sciences, for instance, is the physical world, the Qurʾānic outlook upon which is expressly stated in numerous verses and a great deal written about it in recent decades. A short synopsis suffices here: Allah Most High created the physical world with Wisdom (*ḥikma*), Knowledge (*ʿilm*), and Truth (*bil-ḥaqq*, cf. Q 6:73; 10:5; 14:19; 15:85)—meaning there is nothing superfluous or without purpose. One (though not the only) function of the order of creation is its benefit to humanity. The sun and the moon, the stars and the planet, the animals and the birds, the oceans and the rivers, the vast galaxies and constellations as well as the tiniest creature crawling in the middle of an uninhibited desert are all part of God’s creation, each with a very specific role in the overall functioning of the cosmos. And the entire cosmic order has come into existence for a specific duration: the Hour will obliterate all. When the Hour will come, the mountains will fly like carded wool and flow like heaps of sand, all that exists will vanish, and there will remain nothing but the Countenance of the Most High.

The time-bound existence of all things, brought into being by God (the originator of everything that exists) through His creative act, by the command—*Kun* (“Be!”)⁵—physical as well as non-physical worlds, is not only ontologically linked to the Creator; it is also existentially dependent upon God.⁶ The intrinsic nexus between various levels of existence transforms the multiplicity of appearances into a unity. The ultimate foundation of their interrelatedness at the level of cosmic existence is their ontological dependence on God, who is One, sublimely Unique, absolutely Singular; like Him there is nothing (*laysa ka-*

5. Q. 36:81.

6. The Qurʾān speaks of God as being the Sustainer (*Rabb*) and Owner (*Mālik*) of all the Worlds: Q 1:1; 2:131; 5:28; 6:45; 6:162; 7:54, 61, 67, 104, 121; 10:10, 37; 26:16, 23, 47, 77, 98, 109, 127, 145, 164, 180, 192; 27:8, 44; 28:30; 32:2; 37:87, 182; 39:75; 40:64 to 66; 41:9; 43:46; 45:36; 56:80; 59:16; 69:43; 81:29; 83:6.

*mithlihi shay*⁷, Q 42:11). The central Qurʾānic theme of Unicity of God (*lawḥūd*) thus ontologically links various realms of His creation, making the realm of nature more than a collection of physical bodies, hopelessly separated from each other; rather, every created object becomes a sign (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*), pointing to a transcendent reality beyond itself. This transcendence is semantically linked to the verses of the Qurʾān, which are also called *āyāt*, but this elegant nexus between the world of nature and the Word of God is much more than mere semantics; it is an essential feature of the Qurʾānic metaphysics of nature which establishes an inalienable link between various levels of created things by relating them to an All-Encompassing (*al-Muḥīl*) and All-Knowing (*al-ʿAlīm*) God who is above and beyond all human conceptions. His transcendence can only be defined *via negativa*, by erasing from the mind any impurity foreign to the pure divinity (*ulūhiya*). It is through this intense and systematic weeding out of every description, adjective (*ṣifā*), and image (*ṣūra*) suspected of directing our understanding (*maʿrifā*) or imagination (*wahm*) to a created object (*shay*⁷, pl. *ashyā*⁷) other than God that we can arrive at the Qurʾānic conception of the Creator. And it is through such an understanding of God that we can begin to understand how to teach sciences related to the natural world as branches of knowledge which explore processes and objects of the natural world not in isolation from each other nor as autonomous bodies and processes, but as profound mechanisms operating throughout the physical world, following Divine Commands, and maintaining the existence of things in a certain order, all the time cognizant of their ontological dependence on the Creator.

To think of mountains as filled with His remembrance and to look at the bee flying in obedience to His command and guidance is to construe the subject of these sciences in a manner distinctively different than approaching it in a secular manner. The former is like putting a Qurʾānic lens on the eyes of the heart and understanding things as they really are: ennobled, guided, created for a purpose. Thus restored to their primordial and natural status, processes and objects studied through various natural sciences are no longer severed from the metaphysical realm; rather, they are now perceived as signs (*āyāt*) of a transcendent Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), subservient to His Command. There is an irresistible urgency with which the Qurʾān draws our attention to that which lies beyond the physical realities. There is also an ennoblement that accompanies the rhythmic alteration of the day and the night⁷ and the regularities in the movement of the sun, which *traverses its course by the decree of the All-Knowing; and the moon—[for which God] has made stations [to traverse], till it becomes like an old [and withered] stalk of date-palm.*⁸ The Qurʾān asserts that commonly observable natural phenomena, such as the orderly movement of the planets, are due to the design of the Creator. It draws the attention of its

7. Q 2:164.

8. Q 33:38–9.

reciters to the fact that *the sun does not catch up to the moon and the night cannot outstrip the day; [rather] each revolve in their own orbit,*⁹ and asserts that this is not merely the result of certain laws of nature but are “signs” for those who reflect. In fact, the very notion of “Laws of Nature” independent of a Law-Giver is essentially a secular concept because it makes “nature” a law-giver.

Thus seen from the Qur’ānic perspective, sciences which explore various aspects of the natural world actually explore one aspect of the Qur’ānic cosmos. This cosmos is made up of both the physical as well as non-physical beings according to a grand scheme, conceived and executed by the Creator. The ultimate destination of this created cosmos is a secret that God shares with none. However, the Qur’ān insists that humans discover the modalities through which nature works. It draws attention to the regularities, beneficence, and design of various observable natural processes through concrete examples drawn from the world of nature. These processes fall in the domain of various scientific disciplines such as astronomy, physics, mathematics, geology, and botany. When studied in their proper metaphysical context, these also become means to gain knowledge of that which lies beyond them. This Qur’ānic invitation to reflect on the natural processes is repeated with such urgency that the spatiotemporal plane which contains the world of nature seems to form the very background of the Qur’ānic discourse on the metaphysical realities. These intrinsic links facilitate reclassifying contemporary knowledge on a pattern that would create a grid on which to locate various subjects and disciplines and interlock them so that one can teach mathematics, physics, chemistry, as well as sociology and history from the same over-arching epistemic framework.

Human sciences are likewise part of the same grid. History, all history, is a narration of creation, existence, and the moral response to revelation at the human plane. Human volition, limited as it is, forms an important component of the teaching methodology: God has created the humans and the jinn with a certain limited autonomy, and it is this freedom that makes them accountable (*mukallaf*): they have been granted the ability to choose between Truth and falsehood, between following or defying the Divine Commands and moral and ethical imperatives, but their choices have consequences. In addition to and beyond the details of battles and narrations of lives of kings and descriptive or analytic accounts of systems of governance, which normally form the bulk of curricula as if human history is merely a record of the dynamic and interactive mutual interactions of various nations, it is the collective response of people to the Divine invitation to live in accordance with His commands, following His laws. Thus seen from the Qur’ānic worldview, sciences which systematically study human response to Divine imperatives, need to be placed within the matrix of the Qur’ānic schema and subjects like history, sociology, and social

9. Q 33:40.

studies require a major reorientation of their content matter, approaches to that content and methodologies of teaching.

Just as the teaching of science from the Qur'ānic worldview requires a fundamental shift in how the natural world is understood, in a similar manner the teaching of languages and arts from the Qur'ānic worldview needs an epistemic correction. The material content of these subjects comes from human expressions given to powerful events taking place in the inner recesses of one's soul (*nafs*). The most important level from where these expressions emerge is the spiritual realm, meaning thereby the realm where one feels the combined impact of what the heart feels, what the intellect (*'aql*) thinks, and what one experiences on the psychological and emotional planes of existence. Any expression of these events—whether through poetry, drama, novel, short stories, visual arts, certain forms of music, or other modes of expression of inner joy and pain, love and compassion—is ultimately linked to the gift granted by the Creator to human beings to meaningfully share with others these events of their private lives. *He created Man and taught him bayān* (Q 55:3-4). *Bayān* (derived from the root *b-y-n*) literally means “the space in between two things”; that is, what separates two things so that they become clear and distinct. “*Al-bayān* is to make something clear, it is more specific than speech” (Rāghib, *Mufradāt*). Al-Tustarī explains it as knowledge of the Lawful and Unlawful (*ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*), as well as “speech” (*kalām*), which “pertains to the spiritual self (*nafs al-rūh*), the understanding by the intellect (*fahm al-'aql*), the discernment of the heart (*faḥn al-qalam*), the natural institution (*dhihn al-khulq*), and the knowledge of the natural self (*'ilm nafs al-ṭab'*), which God taught to Ādam, upon him peace, and made clear to him (*bayyana*) to him” (*Tafsīr*).

There is a hierarchy of modes of expression available to man to express the inner events of the soul. Taken as a whole, this inner world, where we witness the passing of time as if it were droplets of water falling down, is the invisible common stage shared by all humanity, though events on this stage take place in the privacy of our hearts and their formal modes are specific to civilizations. For instance, drama, which traces its origin in Greek civilization, is historically absent from Islamic civilization, where poetry is the supreme form of expression. But once brought into the matrix of the Qur'ānic worldview, one can even teach Shakespeare from the perspective of sacred art. This is particularly true of his plays written after the turn of the century, which are qualitatively different from the twenty-two plays he had written by the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁰

In more general form, the inner events of the human soul are expressed through literary works. Literature is born in the human heart in conflict

10. See Martin Lings' insightful preface to his *The Sacred Art of Shakespeare: To Take Upon Us the Mystery of Things* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1998).

with itself. Committed to spoken or written word, it assumes a serial form, progressing by means of letters spoken in air or inscribed—all of which constantly remain under threat of dissolution, forgetting, or physical and destruction by earthquakes, fires and undiscerning hands. What survives of the literary heritage of a people serves as one source of inspiration for successive generations of writers. Thus literature acts as a bridge between succeeding generations and ensures continuity of literary traditions by linking the present with the past. At a higher level, this ability of literature to forge a link between human beings living centuries apart, in different climes and circumstances, also transcends geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, providing humanity a common ground for sharing diverse human experiences and aspirations.

At yet another level, literature allows human beings to make use of the unique gift of articulation of their hopes and desires, joys and sorrows, feelings and thoughts—all of which we actually experience alone, in the solitary confines of a small cosmos, a universe more dazzling than the one constructed with brilliant stars and constellations. This universe is born within a perishable human body; it goes through periods of infancy, youth, and old age before passing on to another life at the moment when it is released from its narrow and ephemeral confines of flesh and bones. At this level, literature becomes a means to reach out to the vast human family of which the writer is an integral part. It serves as an invisible force capable of lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and compassion, pride and honor, pity and sacrifice inherent in the human spirit.

Islamic tradition offers its own forms of literature, poetry, and arts. It has its own sources of inspiration and its own regional diversity. In certain areas of the Muslim world, one finds a rich blend of Mesopotamian journey epic and Mediterranean epic tradition—the former an un-Virgilian tradition going back to the oldest religious epics where the ultimate aim is to find the hidden source of Grace to which the hero can submit his will and, on the other hand, the incessant quest of the Mediterranean epic tradition to build a lasting monument of man's profound sense of loss through sequential recall and reconstruction of the tragic vision.

In a global setting, one can perceive teaching literature from a perspective that combines the dramatic encounter of the two world-traditions, offering learners a rich blend of genres and geographical settings that include vast sand deserts of north Africa, steppes of Central Asia, snow-covered plains of western Canada and majestic snow-capped mountains of the Himalayan range where the ice from prehistoric times has yet to melt.