

[ACADEMICIANS](#) [NEWS](#) [OPINION](#)

## Integration of Knowledge as a Way Forward

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**By Spahic Omer**

Islam is the religion of guidance and truth. It conveys truth to man and teaches him the ways how to grasp, actualise and apply it. Existence and truth are virtually synonymous. Islam thus teaches man how to be true to himself and live life not according to the fluctuating whims and limited capacities of his weak being, but according to the absolute will and infinite knowledge of his Creator and Master.

TOP

In Islam, man is created as an honourable being. He is accorded the meritorious title of Almighty Allah's vicegerent, or trustee, on

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

earth. In order to succeed in his challenging tasks, attaining in the process his Creator's pleasure and happiness in both worlds, man is asked, among other things, to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Such is seen as a key to all goodness.

Man is asked to awaken his consciousness and satiate his inherent cognitive capabilities. This is so because man is born to learn and know, just as he is born to submit to the will of his Creator and worship him. Knowledge is seen as the greatest asset, and ignorance as the ultimate liability and hindrance. While knowledge is a twin brother of guidance and truth, ignorance, on the other hand, is a twin brother of falsehood, misguidance and scepticism.

Owing to that, the first revelation to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was to read (*iqra'*!). However, the reading was conditioned by "in the name of your Lord Who created" (*al-'Alaq*, 1). Hence, the culture of reading is to be tripartite. It is to encompass the reading as a universal and endless pursuit, to be in the name of and for the sake of Almighty Allah, and to incorporate the prerequisites of both the heavens and the earth (matter and spirit, body and soul).

Although the Prophet (pbuh) was an unlettered man, he was asked to read because this was not like any of the established forms of reading. It was much more profound. It was about reading, comprehending and applying the revealed knowledge, together with the discovering, reading, comprehending and applying the conventional knowledge attained from the physical realm of existence. Not only were the five senses and their observations and experimentations (empiricism), and reason (rationalism), to be utilized for the purpose, but also the heart and soul.

The new reading paradigm furthermore was about reading and implementing the signs (*ayat*) of the revelation, along with the signs (*ayat*) of the creation. It was about integrating and combining the revealed book (*al-Qur'an al-tadwini*) and the ontological or created "book" (*al-Qur'an al-takwini*).

This new and revolutionary type of reading and knowledge-acquiring engages the whole being. It involves in equal measure

[TOP](#)

one's physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. It comprises finding, comprehending, embracing, implementing and living truth.

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ∨[LIFESTYLE](#) ∨[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ∨[MULTIMEDIA](#) ∨[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

Established epistemological concepts and methods are just a part of this wide-ranging procedure.

This new reading – which could be termed a culture of *iqra'* (read!) – means reading the revealed Word, the universe, life, nature, society, history and self. It means approaching all physical and metaphysical aspects of life with equal zeal and identical objectives. It means discovering and knowing truth, which is deposited and manifested as much in the smallest and least significant as in the grandest and most consequential.

It is on account of this that the learned men and women are the heirs of prophets; that as long as a person is on the path of seeking knowledge, he or she is on a path to Paradise (*Jannah*) and Allah will always make his or her task easy; and that the superiority of the learned men and women over the devout (but ignorant) worshippers is like that of the full moon over the rest of the stars (i.e., in brightness) – as explained by the Prophet (pbuh).

It goes without saying that Islam, life and knowledge are inextricable. Their combination constitutes the core of the notion of *tawhid* (Allah's Oneness) and its manifold implications for life and thought.

Unlike in the West and its liberal materialistic civilisation where science is employed as a vehicle for seeking truth and looking for answers to the most fundamental ontological questions, In Islam, conversely, science is used to elucidate, substantiate and espouse the revealed and all-pervading truth. In the former scenario, science, while on the face of it fascinating, assuring and enthusing, quickly turns disappointing, anticlimactic and even deluding. However, in the second scenario, Islamic science is truly fulfilling and intellectually, ethically and spiritually enriching an undertaking.

In passing, science without revelation is fine as far as it goes. It can only lead to the threshold of truth, never to truth itself. It can only sense that something remarkable and mindboggling is going on, but can never answer what exactly is going on, why and how. That is the

[TOP](#)

objectives.

## The relationship between mosques and schools (educational institutions)

When the Prophet (pbuh) created his mosque in Madinah as a catalyst for the cultural and civilisational development of the Muslim nascent community, the mosque functioned as a community development centre. One of its most prominent functions revolved around it serving as a learning centre where every member of the community participated.

In fact, the Prophet's mosque was the first and most impactful learning institution in Islam. Whether an institution of learning is good, and how much, is measured by the impact its alumni generate on society and life in general. Fancy names of academic programmes and their syllabi, artificial designations, manipulated rating processes, plus some subjective criteria and methods of assessment, are inadequate and mislead more often than not. People end up living in the cocoons of their own academic arrogance, ignorance and self-deception.

In the case of the Prophet's mosque, its earliest alumni, the Prophet's companions (*sahabah*), were so excellent and noble that they forever changed the course of human history, making the world a better place. Much of the goodness enjoyed today not only by Muslims, but also humankind at large, is due to their and their immediate successors' genius and selflessness.

Learning as a means for achieving sets of high ontological goals became integral to the recognisable identity of Islamic culture and civilisation. It became embedded in the Muslim psyche and total being. For centuries, Muslims were the greatest torchbearers of human civilisation, enlightenment and progress.

Since at first mosques as community centres were the only institutions, learning fared high on the list of their priorities. So much so that certain mosques were identifiable with schools (colleges or *madrassahs*), and when schools became independent

[TOP](#)

In order to accommodate the requirements of continuous systematic learning – and other social activities – the majority of mosques across the Muslim world were of a hypostyle type, featuring vast open courtyards that were surrounded firstly by arcades, and later by arcades as well as iwans. In this fashion, it was easy for mosques to accommodate and facilitate scores of diverse activities. For instance, the Prophet's mosque during the Prophet's time functioned as: 1) a centre for religious activities; 2) a learning centre; 3) the seat of the Prophet's government; 4) a welfare and charity centre; 5) a detention and rehabilitation centre; 6) a place for medical treatment and nursing; and 7) a place for some leisure activities.

Later when schools became independent institutions, they physically remained close to mosques and their multifunctional complexes. Their layouts and architectural morphology were similar to those of mosques. It was often hard to distinguish between the two. Their respective appearances and roles were as good as identical. Some mosques were called schools (*madrasahs*), and some schools mosques. People are still confused as to the actual identities of some such institutions. Similarly, it is an endless and inconclusive debate as to when exactly the independent educational institutions in Islam started to emerge.

### Three examples

For example, the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, is the oldest existing, continually operating higher educational institution in the world according to UNESCO and Guinness World Records. It was founded by Fatima al-Fihri in 859. **For well over twelve hundred years it has been one of the leading spiritual and educational centres of the Muslim World.**

**However**, the university was founded firstly as a mosque. The foundation of the mosque was to provide, in addition to a space for worship, a learning centre for the local community. Like any mosque, al-Qarawiyyin soon developed into a place for religious

[TOP](#)

The mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo, the second oldest continuously run university in the world, after al-Qarawiyyin, was also initially a mosque-school, subsequently becoming one of the most influential universities in the world. The same goes to the al-Zaytuna University in Tunis.

These three outstanding examples were no different from the majority of principal mosques across the Muslim world. However, they were better taken care of than the others, were better managed and functioned better, and were yet more fortunate than many others insofar as the prevalent local and international social, political and economic circumstances are concerned. That ensured their continuity, longevity, overall operation and appeal.

Besides, the three universities never stopped functioning as mosques. Before the modern times when they became incorporated into their countries' modern state university systems, their being educational institutions rarely eclipsed their being mosques. For instance, it is still said about al-Zaytuna mosque (University) that it is the oldest mosque in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. "The mosque is known to host one of the first and greatest universities in the history of Islam. Many Muslim scholars were graduated from the al-Zaytuna for over a thousand years".

The three examples are permanent epitomes of a trend. The trend could be best described in terms of unity of mission and purpose, intellectual dynamism and farsightedness, and integration of form and substance, and means and objectives. Simply put, the trend stands for Islam's perception of knowledge and education and how the two should be elevated to the level of becoming the methods for changing the world and empowering truth and its infinite ways.

Thus, in Arabic, the word for a settlement's principal mosque is *jami'*, and for university *jami'ah*. The two words are basically the same, except that the latter has *ta' marbutah* which gives original words a feminine meaning. The words *jami'* and *jami'ah* are derived from the root word *jama'*, which means "to assemble, congregate and unify". Indeed, both mosques (*jami'*) and universities (*jami'ah*) in

TOP

their own ways gather, congregate and unify people for a purpose.  
However, when they themselves get harmonised and united, then

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

the notions of congregation, grouping and unification take on the imports of alliance and partnership of the highest order. It is then that exemplary societies are created. It is not a surprise, therefore, that society is called *mujtama'*, which is also a derivative of the same root word, *jama'*.

In Islam, it follows, mosques are also schools (educational institutions), in the sense that they provide all the needed support and facilities for the purpose; and schools (educational institutions) are also mosques, in the sense that they continue advocating and disseminating the same philosophy, goals and values as those of mosques, albeit on a different plane and with different means and methods.

Undeniably, this is the noblest act of educational, as well as spiritual, integration. It is part of what could be called institutional ideological harmony, as opposed to institutional ideological dichotomy. This institutional integration translates itself into comprehensive integration of curricula, policies, philosophies, values, worldviews and teaching methods.

### The consequences of disintegration

It is only when such ubiquitous and profound integration is undermined that the total fabric of Islamic culture and civilization is undermined, too, proportionately to the former. It is only when mosques – as inclusive concepts and tangible realities, and everything else their material and spiritual presence entails – lose their inherent position, status and role, that Muslim society loses orientation and starts degenerating. Furthermore, it is only when educational institutions become independent from mosques' existential disposition, stimulus, guidance and support, and begin to chart their own independent courses, which will be at loggerheads with the former and its protagonists, that the mentioned degeneration is expedited and rendered omnipresent.

Under these conditions, mosques become unappealing, ineffective and barren, while education and knowledge, and their institutions,

[TOP](#)



are turned into agents of alienation, division and misguidance. They become as destructive as ignorance.

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

This explains why some educational institutions, though great and widely acknowledged, failed to win full support from all segments of society, especially some leaders from the mainstream religious thought. Their patrons yet stood at the centre of the widening rift between the political and religious leaderships in the state.

A case in point is the Abbasid House of Wisdom (*bayt al-hikmah*) which refers to a major public academy and intellectual centre in Baghdad. It also included a large private library belonging to the Abbasid Caliphs. The House of Wisdom was at once a cause and main feature of what many people call the Islamic Golden Age.

While debates are ongoing about the exact nature, identity and scope of this intellectual institution, it is worth mentioning that some of its leading patrons and protagonists, like Abbasid Caliphs Harun al-Rashid, al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiq, failed to secure total and unreserved backing from the pillars of orthodoxy, chiefly from Imams Malik b. Anas and Ahmad b. Hanbal. The two camps were seldom on the same wavelength.

The House of Wisdom was perceived as a platform and channel for the political leadership to nurture and articulate their sometimes highly controversial views and policies, which they then attempted to impose on the rest of society, regarding them as official doctrines. The most conspicuous of those was Caliph al-Ma'mun's constant wavering between Sunni orthodoxy, Shi'ism and Mu'tazilism. The whole thing morphed into a *mihnah* (religious persecution or inquisition) that targeted the mainstream traditionalists led by Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal.

The conflicts were becoming increasingly institutionalised, in the sense that they were becoming entrenched and were progressively taking place at the level of institutions and institutional affiliations. While Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal was revered by the majority of people and fellow scholars as a reformer and one of the most illustrious and influential scholars in the history of Islamic scholarship, he at the same time had to spend years in the Abbasid dungeons unjustly imprisoned, humiliated and beaten. His "crimes"

[TOP](#)



The gist of those developments is this incident. Once Caliph Harun al-Rashid requested that Imam Malik b. Anas come to his provisional residence in Madinah and give him private lessons. Imam Malik responded: “Knowledge does not come to you, you come to knowledge”. In other words, Imam Malik asked the Caliph to come to the Prophet’s mosque in its capacity as a learning hub, where all true knowledge was acquired and shared. There was no substitute for it.

In the House of Wisdom – and other similarly controversial educational institutions – philosophy (Aristotelianism) was excessively pursued. In it, some of the extreme views, in particular in the sphere of metaphysics as a leading philosophical branch, were disseminated. Some such views were so dangerous that they bordered on outright *bid’ah* (religious innovation) and even *kufir* (non-belief).

Imam al-Ghazali’s experiences also epitomize the problem at hand. He was a distinguished professor at one of the leading educational institutions of the day, Nizamiyyah School in Baghdad. However, he soon underwent a spiritual crisis. As a result, he abandoned his lucrative academic career, left Baghdad and, having made necessary arrangements for his family, disposed of his wealth and adopted an ascetic lifestyle. He abstained from teaching at state-sponsored institutions. Rather, he taught in mosques, private schools and Sufi monasteries. Al-Ghazali believed that the Islamic spiritual tradition and authentic scholarship were on the decline and that the spiritual sciences taught by the first generation of Muslims had been forgotten. The newly emerging educational institutions were instrumental in kindling as well as perpetuating the predicament.

Later, however, al-Ghazali, as a changed man, broke his vow and returned to teaching at the state-sponsored Nizamiyyah School in Nishapur, where he himself had been a student. “To his followers he justified this step with the great amount of theological confusion among the general public and pressure from authorities at the Seljuq court”.

[TOP](#)

fully recovered in the Muslim circles. No wonder that there are many unfavourable views by well-known Muslim scholars concerning philosophy. Imam al-Shaafai'i is reported to have said that the people did not become ignorant and begin to differ until they abandoned Arabic terminology and adopted the terminology of Aristotle. Many jurists regarded forbidden studying philosophy. Today's widespread reverence for Muslim philosophy and philosophers is largely owing to the roles of the West and Western scholarship.

It stands to reason that what is traditionally called the Islamic Golden Age (an era dated from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, commencing with Caliph Harun al-Rashid and the inauguration of the House of Wisdom) is a flawed thing and far from being accurate. An age cannot be golden if it featured an unbridgeable gap between the political and mainstream religious leaderships, which furthermore were continuously at odds with each other. Nor can an age be called golden if its society, due to the incessant political upheavals, suffered a series of spiritual and intellectual disorders, some of which were able to shake the foundations of the leading national institutions.

Without a doubt, the Islamic Golden Age is the Prophet's age and the age of his immediate successors (*sahabah*). What is generally perceived today as the Islamic Golden Age is a Western bequest and appellation. They arrived at such conclusion having studied the Muslim history through the lens of their own materialistic worldview and one-dimensional civilisational criteria and standards, focusing mainly on worldly sciences, economic development and cultural works.

### Muslims' scenario today

Today when Muslims stand at the crossroads of their cultural and civilisational consciousness and performance, the subject of integration of knowledge and its sciences becomes overriding. Yet, it perhaps denotes the most important issue that must be addressed and resolved.

[TOP](#)

Muslims should learn from history, both when they ruled and when they were ruled, that the only way forward is authentic knowledge

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

and an effective mode of integrated education. Ever since the yoke of colonialism loosened and Muslims started controlling their own cultural and civilisational fate, they tried and experimented with basically every available model of development. However, nothing really worked. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is in its full swing and most Muslim societies are still struggling with the basic requirements of bona fide independence, sovereignty and progress.

Certainly, there is nothing better and more productive for Muslims than their Islam and models derived from its heavenly worldview, principles and values. There is no better educational system than the one based on divine truth, which aims to make students, apart from being knowledgeable and experts in their respective fields, also better men and women, enabling them to function properly and prove themselves worthwhile in all contexts and environments they may find themselves in. Doomed is a system which makes students merely superficial, greedy and selfish professionals, alienated from truth and its ways, and from their very selves; and doomed is a society where such individuals live and operate.

For Muslims to succeed they need to revive the culture of *iqra'*. They need to revive the notions of holistic knowledge and education as vehicles of absolute and transcendent truth. The concepts of integration, rather than separation, inclusiveness, rather than contraction, harmony, rather than dichotomy, cooperation, rather than conflict, comprehensive excellence, rather than mediocrity, and dynamism, rather than lethargy, are the main thrusts that need to be subtly interwoven into the fabric of Islamic education. While doing so, sporadically learning from others and other systems in the East and the West should never be frowned upon. It yet should be welcomed, as wisdom is the lost property of a believer; wherever he finds it, he takes it – as expounded by the Prophet (pbuh).

It is grossly inappropriate that the worldview, teachings and values of Islam are taught in Islamic departments and syllabi, but elsewhere it is business as usual, whereby alien-to-Islam ideologies and value systems are directly or indirectly applied and promoted. It is equally inappropriate that in the latter, Islamic precepts and

[TOP](#)

solutions are indeed consulted, but only as secondary, inferior, outmoded and symbolic options. Imposed foreign irreconcilable

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

paradigms remain nevertheless favoured and in force. Islam must not be a footnote in Muslims' educational obsessions and systems.

As part of this revivalist drive, mosques need to start functioning again as real community development centres, re-examining their educational significance and functions, and their relationships with other national institutions and bodies, principally with such as are education-oriented. In the same vein, educational institutions should also revisit their own missions and characters, rendering themselves as “mosques”, in the sense that in them only Almighty Allah will be glorified and the interests of His revealed truth will be only served.

It is high time that the thinking, according to which Islam is only for the purely religious sciences, purely religious institutions and establishments, and purely religious people, be rescinded once and for all. It is really astonishing why after all the events and episodes of the past century, Muslims still cannot come to terms with the fallacy and absurdity of such a philosophy. The philosophy was served as a poisonous chalice by the colonial masters and their numerous collaborators for their well-known agendas and programs. At present, such thinking is an unmistakable sign of intellectual and spiritual backwardness.

These approaches only increase the confusion of especially Muslim youth. They become torn between their Islamic traditions and identity, and what is served to them through the phenomenon of educational dualism, some people even contracting “multiple personality disorder” or “dissociative identity disorder”. In the end, something's got to give, and unfortunately, in many cases, it is Islam and its influence on people's spiritual, intellectual and psychological wellbeing that are compromised.

Indeed, integration of knowledge begets the harmony, peace, coherence and consistency of being. Whereas separation of knowledge and fallings-out between its diverse segments ultimately beget the disharmony, inconsistency, contradiction and despondency of being.

[TOP](#)

One wonders why in most parts of the Muslim world there still cannot be place, nor opportunity, to integrate in the realm of

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#) ▾[LIFESTYLE](#) ▾[LOCAL](#)[OPINION](#) ▾[MULTIMEDIA](#) ▾[CONTACT](#)[A](#)

humanities Islam's paramount principles of man, life, society, humankind, gender issues, history, geography, environment, law, politics, aesthetics and ethics; why in social sciences there is no room for integrating Islam's overriding values and doctrines concerning human and social development, human behaviour and wellbeing, economics, psychology, health, sustainable development, justice, equality, linguistics, society, culture and epistemology; why in the diverse fields of science there is no place for incorporating Islam's perhaps most fundamental tenets and teachings in connection with life and death, universe, earth, ecology, biology, matter, astronomy, mathematics and ethics.

There is no aspect of human physical, psychological and spiritual existence that Islam did not address, one way or another. A complete paradigm has been revealed by the Omniscient Creator and Sustainer of man, life and universe. Using it as a developmental blueprint is incumbent upon all Muslims. Doing so guarantees Muslims a total fulfilment and happiness, for such is a natural and so, required course of action. However, for Muslims to turn a blind eye to such an epistemological abundance, embracing some man-made partial, unfulfilling and outright faulty alternatives instead, it surely takes a world of hard-core ignorance, arrogance and insolence. \*\*\*

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[TOP](#)