

How to Improve Higher Education

Dr. Muhammad Saleem*

Abstract:

This brief presentation consists of two parts. In part – I attempt has been made to diagnose the ailment and identify the causes that pushed us to the back – benches of human civilization and virtually wiped us out of the intellectual map of the world. In Part – II we have ventured to suggest some remedial measures following which we may be able to leap forward and reclaim our lost glory and respectable place in the comity of nations.

Of late, we ran into one of the most disturbing and distressing report concerning the state of education and research in the Muslim world vis-à-vis the Judao-Christian world. For instance, it was reported that the Jewish population around the world is almost 14 million. With this numerical strength, they have been able to produce thus far 163 Nobel Laureates.¹ The Muslims, on the other hand, are more than one billion in population and have produced only eight Noble prize winners so far². This contrast became further embarrassing when it was read in conjunction with another survey report wherein it was underscored that the Muslims were terribly lagging behind in the field of knowledge and education from the rest of the world both in quantitative and qualitative terms. It was reported that there were nearly 500 universities in the entire Muslim world³ and they too were hardly any better than ordinary colleges as they weren't engaged in any research work or the generation of a new knowledge. While it was stated that Tokyo alone has more than one thousand universities, some of which could be compared with the best universities of the world. While the fact remains that man (or Adam)

* Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saleem, Dean, Faculty of Social Science, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, Peshawar Campus, Pakistan

gained supremacy over the rest of God's creatures by virtue of his conceptual and creative knowledge. And history bears witness that from amongst the descendents of Adam (PBUH) that civilization assumed the leadership of the world that excelled others in the field of knowledge and education. Given the above stated sad situation, we will be well-advised to revisit our dreams concerning the resurgence of the Muslim Ummah.

Now the question is: Can we improve the quality of our higher education and find a respectable place in the comity of nations? Before we come to address this question, it seems appropriate to refer to some other pertinent points that may help us to put things in proper perspective.

To begin with, we would like to emphasize that according to Islam man is the vicegerent of God in this universe. In order to enable him to fulfill his duties, God Almighty has endowed him with the potentiality for knowledge. Now knowledge is of two kinds, that is, i). *Ilm-ul-Asma*; & ii). *Ilm-ul-Hudaya*.

For acquisitional knowledge (or *Ilm-ul-Asma*) God has laid into human constitution, the requisite faculties, such as, eyes, ears, head and heart. Knowledge of phenomenal world (i. e. Scientific Knowledge) is acquired through these faculties.

Second form of knowledge (i.e., *Ilm-ul-Hudaya* or revelational Knowledge) is passed on to humankind by God Almighty thro, the agency of His chosen Prophets (PBUT). This form of knowledge gives us "Guidance", wisdom (*Hikmat*) and values. Islam recommends that knowledge (or power) attained thro, science (or the exploration of the phenomenal world) should be subordinated to *Hudaya* – wisdom and values. For if science (or power) is divorced and detached from wisdom and values, it would be disastrous for human kind.

It is interesting to note that Muslims took quite an impressive start. For instance, our forefathers took “*Hudaya*” (i.e., the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet) quite seriously and implemented its teachings in their individual and collective lives. Teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah transformed their minds and hearts and made them vibrant with the remembrance of God. This initial stage of Tazkiya (Self – purification) was followed by *Taqwa* (piety or righteousness) which has had two dimensions: Self – directed *Taqwa* – i.e. the struggle to prevent oneself from the commission of evil. (ii). And other-directed *Taqwa* (i.e. preventing others from the commission of evil). The ultimate purpose of Islamic teachings is to create a God – conscious individual and a God – conscious society. *By implication the sole objective of education in Islam is to prepare the succeeding generations for the fulfillment of their duties, that is, to establish the sovereignty of God and the Vicegerency of man in this world.*

Even in the realm of phenomenal world (i.e. the field of natural and social sciences) their contributions were quite impressive. The fact is that some of the less prejudiced minds of the west, such as, Roger Bacon, Robert Briffault, Bertrand Russell and many others have acknowledged that science, scientific outlook & particularly the scientific method (Inductive Reasoning) are the main contributions of Muslim civilization to the advancement of human mind. No other civilization could lay claim to this credit.

It is really unfortunate that the Muslim Ummah couldn't maintain this momentum far too long. For when we were expanding territorially, we were shrinking morally and intellectually. We shifted from caliphate to kingship and that was indeed the turning point of our history. Under oppressive and tyrannical rule, knowledge and education

became the first casualty. And when knowledge was gone, our defense potential suffered a serious set – back so much so that we couldn't preserve our sovereignty and independence. Nor were we able to protect our financial resources or our religio-cultural and moral values. Our oppressive and repressive rulers never took much of keen interest in the promotion of knowledge. In fact, it was left to private philanthropists (and *Auqaf*) and when foreign invaders confiscated these *waqf* properties, our education was further ignored. Only the mosques and *madaris* were kept alive. Naturally their curriculum was extremely narrow and restricted. Virtually it was unable to produce individuals capable of fulfilling their duties of vicegerency in this world.

Here we may refer to one of the most perceptive and penetrating commentary on our system of education. This commentary was offered by Aurangzeb Alimgir, one of the prominent Muslim rulers of India (d. 1707). Aurangzeb addressed his teacher and lamented as:

“What did you teach me? You told me that the land of Franks is a small island where the greatest king had previously been the ruler of Portugal, than the king of Holland, and now the king of England. You told me about the kings of France and Spain that they are like our petty local rulers. Glory is to God! What knowledge of geography and history you displayed! Was it not your duty to instruct me in the characteristics of the nations of the world? The products of these countries, their military power, their methods of warfare, their customs religions, ways of government and political policies. You never considered what academic training is requisite for a prince. All you thought necessary for me were that I become expert in grammar and learn subjects suitable for a judge or a jurist.

You told my father that you had taught me philosophy. It is true that for several years you worried my head about unnecessary and non-sensical questions quite unrelated to the issues of life. When I finished my education, I had no real knowledge of any science or art except that I

could utter certain abstruse technical terms which confuse even the brightest mind and by which claimants of philosophy cover up their ignorance.”⁴

It is a different matter though that when Aurangzeb, the Prince, turned into Aurangzeb - the King, he couldn't do anything remarkable to change the system of education especially for the Muslims of the sub-continent. And by the next century, when the British traders and invaders replaced the Muslim rulers, they introduced their own system of education through the services of Lord Macaulay. This system of education made the Muslims intellectually and morally bankrupt as they were no longer able to produce even the Judges & the Jurists and pushed them further towards the back – benches of human civilization.

Muslims made a heroic struggle for centuries to reclaim their socio-political sovereignty and independence. But unfortunately, in spite of their apparent independence, they have yet to turn to education so that they could prepare the mid – most nation for the intellectual, socio-moral & politico-economical leadership of the world. By and large our rulers have remained indifferent to the preparation of their human resources so that they could play their active and effective role in the governance of the state(s). Once again, the private institutions and Universities have stepped in to fill this vacuum. However, their efforts, though commendable and laudatory in their own right, are still not well-organized and well-coordinated. Let us move on to Part – II and see as to what can we do by way of remedial measures to meet these deficiencies.

Section – II: What can be done?

In the preceding section, we have presented a brief over-view of our existing situation. We have tried to underline as to how we gradually

drifted towards a situation where we couldn't prepare our succeeding generations for the role of vicegerency in this world. Now we come to the second part of our presentation which relates to some of the remedial measures, which if implemented, might help us to come out of this blind alley.

- First thing that we should remember is that give – and – take amongst civilizations is a natural and universal phenomenon and has been there ever since the dawn of human history. Civilizations, it may be emphasized, are not like Leibnizean “windowless monads”. Imperceptibly they interact & influence each other and this is an on-going process. For instance, it may be recalled that at one time the Muslims were offering the intellectual and socio-moral leadership to the world. They ruled, amongst other continents, even part of Europe and nearly the whole of India for centuries. The fact is that the West is deeply indebted to Muslim heritage. Contemporary developments in science and technology are the result of the pioneer efforts made by the Muslims. Now the West, besides the Chinese, the Russians, and the Indians, is playing a leading role in the conquest of nature and we, the Muslims, are constrained to borrow from them. Our submissions are that we shouldn't be averse to it or feel shy about it. Instead, we should assimilate whatever best is available in any of these civilizations. In my view, it is fully in consonance with the spirit of Islam. We need to change our mind-set. However, we should be mindful that in this give-and-take process, we should never abandon our own critical and independent thinking. Slavish submission to others could be counter-productive. On the contrary, we should be

extremely selective and eclectic in this process. The ultimate out-come should never be allowed to run counter to our ideological moorings and aspirations. Cautiously, we should expose our students to the history of science and technology. This exposure can be useful in the sense that it can save them from reinventing the wheel. In this way, our succeeding generations can easily stand on the shoulders of the West and take a big leap forward as the West did vis-à-vis the Muslim civilization. The point being emphasized is that there is no sense in being prisoners to our own ideas. Instead, we should rub our shoulders with others and correct our mistakes.

- Our main contention is that collective wisdom and concerted efforts are required for the realization of our common and collective goals. In my view, *clarity of vision* and *sincerity of commitment* can help us to realize our objectives. Joint efforts can shorten our distance and help us to overcome our deficiencies. As of now we are working in isolated enclaves. Through mutual dialogues and discussions we can reform and revitalize ourselves and direct our efforts to the right direction. Let us now turn to some of the specific steps that might be undertaken for the transformation and improvement of higher education.
- First of all we should pay attention to physical infra-structure. Attempt should be made to establish spacious university campuses with decent furnishing and furniture. Physical environment does have an impact on our mind and thinking. Main attention, however, should be paid to libraries and laboratories. Particularly in private sector these are the most

neglected units. Our libraries are usually stocked by out-of-date books and journals and these too are mostly kept under lock and key. This situation is drastically changed because of the introduction of digital libraries. But these facilities are still not accessible to the students & scholars. The same goes for the laboratories. We should try to update these facilities and make them open to the students and scholars. These are indispensable pre-requisites for conducting any meaningful advanced teaching and research.

- Of late teaching and learning have ceased to be a joyful exercise. The students don't get involved mainly because they presume that their merit is no longer relevant to their quest for jobs. Teachers don't take active interests because their salaries are not adequate to meet their basic needs. This is true mainly of universities in private sector. Owners of private universities are primarily concerned about their own profit margin. They don't offer reasonable incentives to the young teachers who are virtually the lynchpin of these institutions. Usually they are overworked and exploited. So often they keep their eyes and ears open and look for better opportunities. And as and when they find a better job they quit the university. Our private universities can arrest this unwholesome trend by offering compatible salary packages and caring for other tangible and intangible factors of job satisfaction. It may be suggested that if the profit margins are slightly reduced and salary brackets are slightly enhanced and made compatible with the best institutions around we might witness a marked improvement in our universities. Probably this

is the only way to sustain and retain our best minds otherwise they will move on like seasonal birds.

- In our opinion, Higher Education Commission's initiative to seek reverse migration of scholars working in foreign lands is not yielding the desired results. What we should do is to hire the services of well-reputed scholars from within and outside the country without permanently dislodging them from their workplace. Preference should be given to hiring their services for a semester or two. Our youth should be urged to take full advantage of the presence of these visiting scholars, learn maximum from them and then go for further improvement on their own.
- If we could somehow mobilize OIC and persuade it to collect funds for the promotion of higher education in the Muslim World we can overcome our main deficiencies in the shortest possible time. These funds should be used for the improvement of our libraries and laboratories and also for the payment of salaries of the visiting scholars. Besides, we should urge the Federal Govt. that funds collected by way of Iqra surcharge should be strictly used for the development of higher education. Federal Govt. may also be solicited to allocate at least 4% of GDP for the improvement of education in Pakistan. It may be highlighted that the real defense of a country lies in its colleges and universities. It may not be inappropriate and imprudent to solicit for 2% cut in defense budget and allocate the same for the improvement and transformation of higher education in the country. Gravity of the situation demands that we must devote

ourselves to education on a war-footing otherwise we won't be able to effect much of a change in the grim & grave situation.

- Monthly lecture series on the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) should be organized. Best scholars from all-over the country should be invited for these lectures. In our opinion, early return to these sources is the only way to transform our minds and hearts and renew our moral fabric. These sources alone could help us to initiate *Tazkiya* – purification of our minds and hearts from animal passions – which may lead to *Taqwa*; and eventually to *Ihsan*. The overriding objective of Islamic teachings, as it has already been emphasized, is to produce God-conscious individuals and God-conscious society. To remarry us to God and His Prophet (PBUH) is the only shortcut to repair our socio-moral fabric. It can also help us to overcome the menace of sects & sectarianism in our country.

Study of comparative religions could also be made an integral part of these lecture series. We should not forget that as of now we are confronting a religio-cultural invasion/crusade of the West while we are terribly ill-prepared to face these onslaughts. Professional ethics and ethics in general could also be made a central part of these lecture series. It may be emphasized that fanaticism and militancy can be softened out by a proper introduction to the letter and spirit of the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. For instance, Quran recommends that we should shelve aside religious disputes by saying: “for you your religion and for me my religion”. Islam it may be underlined is a pluralist religion and it can accommodate all other faiths. Our

main thesis is that our curricula should be broadened & revised. Attempt should be made to include all known (even knowable) disciplines in our curricula. Purpose is to prepare our future generations for the fulfillment of their duties as the vicegerents of God. As a mid-most nation, we are expected to offer socio-moral & intellectual leadership to the world. If we ourselves are lost in the wilderness from where we will offer this guidance?

- Above all, it may be emphasized that if the organizational leadership enjoys hypnotic clarity of vision and is totally committed to its policies, it can breathe a new spirit in the entire system of education. If we could somehow meet on regular basis and coordinate our services for a common cause, it might prove highly useful. Exchange of views especially the exchange of scholars (on short and long- term basis) might help us a lot. It might be advisable to develop an Evaluation and Publicity Wing of our universities which may highlight the positive aspects (of our universities) and help overcome any of our short – comings.
- We should try to establish a National Institute of Education and Research. Well – reputed scholars should be involved in this Institute. Their job should be to monitor the latest developments in knowledge (i.e. the books, research journals, articles, etc.) published in various disciplines. They should scan them carefully and recommend relevant literature for introduction and studies in our universities. In this way, we can make our students fully conversant with the advancements of knowledge in their respective fields. We should remember that from a *critique of knowledge* there is only a short step to the *creation/generation of*

new knowledge. We should just give them the proper orientation. They can do the rest.

Summary

In conclusion it may be observed that Our Thesis is quite straightforward and simple, that is:

- Man is the vicegerent of God and has been endowed with revelational knowledge (as a source of wisdom and values) and the potential for acquisitional knowledge (or scientific knowledge) for the fulfillment of his duties of vicegerency in this world.
- From these premises it necessarily follows that our existing generations are obliged to educate and train their succeeding generations in a manner that they may fulfill their responsibilities to the best of their abilities.
- Also it follows that, that community will assume the role of leadership of the world that excels others in the field of knowledge. Knowledge alone is sufficient for the leadership of the world. If it is coupled and conjoined with moral excellence, it can produce God-fearing individuals and a just socio-moral order or a state in this world.
- From the above bare bald-picture we can draw the conclusion that a responsible state or society should prepare the future generations for shouldering these responsibilities. Education, in other words, deserves their top-priority considerations. We should produce the best minds in various walks of life and they should

offer the intellectual and socio-moral guidance, initially to our own community, and ultimately to the rest of humanity.

- It is obvious that given the socio-political and financial constraints no single university can fulfill all these requirements, although it could be the ideal. The second best option we may suggest is that we should somehow coordinate our services and share the responsibility. We should ask different universities to specialize in different disciplines. We can, in this manner, cater to our national demands with relative ease and comfort. Collective wisdom and collective efforts can help us to meet this challenge. Instead of competition and conflict leading to duplication, cooperation is the best course open to us. Let us pray to God Almighty to enable us to live up to the expectations of all concerned stakeholders!

Well, my submissions may look like a dream or a day – dream. Let me add, without being apologetic, that so often our dreams do determine our destiny. There is no harm in entertaining high ambitions, high ideals, & high goals. May God grant us the requisite wisdom to realize them!

End Notes:

¹ Jewish Nobel Prize Winners. Available at:
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/nobels.html> , retrieved on
November 6, 2008

² Muslim Nobel Prize winners. Available at:
<http://www.islamichistorymonth.com/education/nobel.php>, retrieved on
November 6, 2008

³ Dr. Farrukh Saleem, *Why are Muslims so Powerless?* Available at:
<http://www.studying-islam.org/articletext.aspx?id=1054>, retrieved on November
6, 2008

⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity Transformation of an Intellectual
Tradition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1982