What is Liberal Education For?

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Mahan Mirza

Dean of Faculty, Zaytuna College

Liberal Education at a Muslim College: Between Authority and Audacity

With special attention to conversations among the faculty of America's first Muslim undergraduate liberal arts college – Zaytuna College – this paper argues that the tension between religious authority and a spirit of free inquiry can be balanced by embracing a classical definition of the "liberal arts" as "tools to free the mind." The paper revolves around the challenge of grounding students within the creedal, legal, and mystical teachings of Sunni Islam, with all its diversity, in the context of a western liberal arts program. On the one hand, a curriculum that aims to meet such a challenge must first perform the function of *transmission* of sacred knowledge as it has crystallized within a particular school of thought in Muslim intellectual history. The transmission process should affirm truth claims that are embedded in a tradition of faith and practice that is normative. On the other hand, given that the setting of a liberal classroom is potentially shared by students who have inherited rival truth claims, or have none at all, the curriculum should also allow for a balancing of conviction and authority with respect for and openness to diverse or even antagonistic perspectives. Liberal education assumes a spirit of open and free, if not audacious, inquiry that can be anathema to absolute truth claims affirmed on the basis of religious authority. A reconciliation is possible by embracing the

qualitative tools of logic, grammar, and rhetoric that lie at the heart of both theological reasoning and disciplined free inquiry.[1]

If we bracket the issue of origins for a moment, then every individual is heir to customs, norms, webs of ideas, and social structures – in other words, heir to some tradition.[2] How could the enterprise of education begin anywhere but there through the process of cultural initiation, habituation, and formal transmission? It is undoubtedly for this reason that one of the icons of the modern Great Books movement, Robert Maynard Hutchins, noted that "no man was educated unless he was acquainted with the masterpieces of his tradition."[3] In science, this fact has come to be identified with the term "paradigm," within the parameters of which "normal science" operates. In the realm of human culture, perhaps a good equivalent word for paradigm is "tradition." It represents that which has been deemed valuable for transmission and continuity, about which there is fundamental agreement, distilled from the many trials and errors of the past, by "authorities" who are its harbingers and teachers. As in the case of normal science, the legitimacy of tradition is directly proportional to its explanatory power, realized only insofar as a community freely gives assent to it – it being the complex of ideas, scholars, and

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[1] This first paragraph was part of the original abstract submitted for the conference. The following remainder of the abstract is not part of the final paper: "Appealing to John Walbridge's *God and Logic in Islam*, Mark van Doren's *Liberal Education*, Brittanica's *Great Books Series* edited by Hutchins and Adler, and an edited volume on *The Classical Foundations of Muslim Education*, the paper highlights the imperative of integrating Muslim intellectual history with Western intellectual history and of ultimately seeing them not as distinct but rather as interconnected and interdependent. The paper also serves as an invitation to share in the dream of an eventual consortium among text-based programs of liberal studies that are secular (e.g. St. John's) and religious (e.g. Thomas Aquinas and Zaytuna) for providing instructors and students structured avenues for mutual enrichment, and for providing ambitious citizens access to shared institutional resources for lifelong learning."

[2] Alasdair Macintyre's definition of tradition is helpful: "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined" in conversation with ongoing debates that lie both within that tradition but also in traditions that are extraneous to it. (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 12). Hodgson also speaks to the idea of high culture that is discursive and of the so-called literate (one could say "scholarly") class as representative of intellectual traditions of civilizations (see his *Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1).

[3] In "The Great Conversation," which is Vol. 1 of the Great Books series by Brittanica (1952 and 1990).

institutions that receive, process, and transmit tradition from generation to generation; the keyword here being *process*.

Now, in the case of science, a paradigm shifts through the accumulation of a sufficient number of anomalies that the prevailing framework simply cannot appropriate or explain. The cognitive process that precisely guides the jump from one paradigm or theoretical configuration with less explanatory power to another with more explanatory power remains a mystery.[4] What is key, however, is the awareness of a meta-theoretical framework that permits the shift – which is inevitably traumatic from a socio-historical perspective – in the first place. To analogize: tradition becomes dead if it views in the process of transmission an activity that is absolute and final, willfully ignoring anomalies as they pile up *ad infinitum*. However, if a tradition carries within it tools for both its own validation as well as critique, or more crucially, is able to recognize and appropriate new tools in discourses taking place external to it, then every generation is responsible not merely to receive tradition, but also to reevaluate it through a process of assessment that leads either to its wholesale embrace, partial modification, or total rejection.[5] In this manner, the transmission of knowledge becomes the beginning, not the end, of an intellectual project that in turn influences and shapes culture, society, and polity. This spirit has been captured eloquently by the man of letters, Mark van Doren, in his essay on *Liberal Education*. To quote at length:

> Tradition is most dangerous and most troublesome when it is forgotten. It brings strength, as well as takes it. It gives life, as well as threatens it. It is life fighting to maintain itself in time. For there is the curious fact that tradition is never so healthy as when it is being fought. We deny its authority, but in doing so, we use its clearest terms; and end, if we are original, in enriching it so that it may have strength for future wars. It is orthodoxy at its best, thriving on heresies, which it digests into nobler

[4] This is in obvious reference to Thomas Kuhn's seminal *Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*
[5] Recalling Professor Frank Griffel, who in one of our graduate seminar at Yale on Ghazali grabbed my ear as he emphasized that "every generation has to re-hear its giants." I thought he was quoting a major philosopher but when I contacted him recently for the reference, he said he probably just read it in some newspaper op-ed. I also don't think the professor actually grabbed my ear, but the effect of his statement was jarring enough that it is so etched in my memory.

> problems. We return to tradition not for answers, but for questions, and some of those we find are capable, like live wires, of shocking us into a condition of dizziness or extreme heat. It is dangerous, and it is to be feared. But it fears us as well. The hope of education is to reconcile the two strengths.[6]

It is in this manner that a living tradition finds its home in a modern Western liberal arts college. It transmits not merely past truths, but also ways to evaluate that truth afresh in new intellectual contexts and in fresh political circumstances. This notion of "evaluation" ought to be as true for science as it is for religious traditions. In terms of "progress," the reason that we see these two – science and religion – differently is because of the drastic ways in which our conception of the universe around us has been revised over the past few centuries due to the advance of science. Science is concerned with material reality, with respect to which we all stand in tangible relation. Religion, on the other hand, concerns itself with timeless truths that are less pliable and more abstract. Nonetheless, with the gradual or rapid accumulation of collective human experience and revisions in how we reflect on the nature of reality, it is the task of every generation to re-examine and re-evaluate these alleged "timeless" wisdoms and truths. If a tradition is no longer capable of such an engagement with contemporary ideas, it will eventually cease to be relevant, or it will end up being destructive instead of being a vibrant force for positive change.

Taking things at face value, there are myriad reasons for the apparent failure of Muslim tradition to keep up with the times; among them are causes social and political, meaningful engagement with which lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, if the assumption is correct – that Muslim tradition by and large has so far failed to meet the challenges of modernity – then a few pressing questions present themselves. One: why is it that many Muslims still peg their hopes in that tradition for guidance in their everyday lives today? Two: if the tradition has failed, what gives us hope that it could still be of any use in a project to help shape a better

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[6] *Liberal Education*, pp. 119-120.

future for our planet? In a nutshell: why invest in a liberal arts college that takes that very tradition as its point of origin? It is my contention here that the so-called failure of Muslim tradition is not due to any deficiency in that tradition to meet contemporary intellectual or spiritual challenges. Rather, what has been lacking is the right institutional, political, and cultural setting for the tradition to operate and to safely go about the business of not only "transmission" but also of that bolder next step of "assessment and revision."

In 2011, John Walbridge published a book on *God and Logic in Islam*, with the audacious subtitle: "Caliphate of Reason." "This book is an argument for a single proposition," thunders Walbridge, "that Islamic intellectual life has been characterized by reason in the service of a non-rational revealed code of conduct."[7] He later counsels, "This book is a reminder to my Muslim friends and readers that the core intellectual tradition of Islam is deeply rational."[8] I, for one, welcome such a reminder. Franz Rosenthal, one of the greatest Arabists of the twentieth century, already highlighted this very thesis in his monograph entitled *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*. He constructs: "Civilizations tend to revolve around meaningful concepts of an abstract nature which more than anything else give them their distinctive character." Identifying *ʿilm* or "knowledge" as the concept that is the hallmark of Muslim civilization, Rosenthal affirms, "there has been no other concept that has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as *ʿilm*."[9]

Permeating virtually every avenue of human inquiry, Muslim scholastics were, among other things, obsessed with concepts, letters, words, meanings, and significations, given that the entire fabric of human existence was woven and made sensible through the words of Revelation. As such, grammarians, logicians,

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[7] Walbridge, p. 3.
[8] Walbridge, p. 4.
[9] Rosenthal, p. 2.

theologians, jurists, and mystics – not to mention scientists and philosophers – endeavored to exhaust the possibilities of meaning that could inhere in words in a world defined primarily by Aristotelian realism, but one that also entertained healthy challenges to it. The system of education in premodern Muslim madrasas could, in that sense, be equated with what we consider to be liberal arts proper, in that they systematically trained students in grammar, logic, and rhetoric.[10] In that sense, what we call Muslim tradition today already went through a process of transmission, assessment, and revision, when it came into contact with the Hellenistic intellectual milieu in the first few centuries of Islam. In the words of the intellectual historian Dimitri Gutas and successor of Rosenthal: "The Graeco-Arabic translation movement of Baghdad constitutes a truly epoch-making stage, by any standard, in the course of human history. It is equal in significance to, and belongs to the same narrative as, I would claim, that of Perlicles' Athens, the Italian Renaissance, or the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it deserves to be recognized and embedded in our historical consciousness."[11]

It has been shown that traditional systems of education in the Muslim world were mostly "liberal" in character until, ironically, their dismantling in favor of "modern" educational projects introduced by the West. This shift is understandable because the West was not interested in producing enlightened and free thinkers, but rather individuals who would be "useful" – meaning "unfree" or "slaves" in the Aristotelian sense – for the furtherance of a colonial project. Towards the end of his book, Walbridge refers to a certain Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, principal of the Government College, Lahore, who published a study entitled *History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab to the Year 1882*, where he observed that "there had been seven educational systems functioning in the Punjab before British rule"…Islamic

[10] This is the main argument in John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Medhi Nakosteen, *History of the Islamic Origins of Western Education*; Bayard Dodge, *Muslim Education in Medieval Times*; and edited volume on *Classical Foundations of Islamic Education.*

[11] *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, p. 8.

using Arabic and Persian, Hindu and Sikh, using Sanskrit and classical Punjabi, and other vernacular systems… "He [i.e. Leitner] argued that each was a traditional literary educational system, precisely analogous to the curriculum of Latin and Greek classics that formed the basis of most European education at the time."[12] British educational reforms in India to further a colonialist agenda produced a generation that was not connected to its past, lost in the present, and unable to imagine or shape its future.[13]

I think that, as Dorothy Sayers reminds us in *The Lost Tools of Learning*, in order to go forward, we need to go back.[14] In Karachi, Habib University, for example, which just opened up its doors in 2014, has realized that the answer to the problems that confront Pakistan and the region lie not in building more educational institutions that churn out technocrats and bureaucrats, but in a program of liberal education that prepares individuals for what they call "thoughtful self-cultivation."[15] The key point of this paper is that such a "liberal" turn is not one that is away from Muslim tradition, but rather, towards it.

In conclusion: A liberal arts education is typically associated with creativity, innovation, reason, and discovery. Traditional Islamic education, on the other hand, is associated with memorization, trustworthy authorities, and the transmission of knowledge. In fact, the word "innovation" is anathema to traditional Muslim sensitivities. One hadith (saying of the Prophet) that is quoted in almost every Friday congregational prayer includes the warning: "the worst things are newly

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[12] Walbridge, pp. 157-160.
[13] M. Qasim Zaman shows how ulama can still be vibrant through the madrasa system, so it is plausible that healthy reform will continue to come from centers of traditional learning that have survived the onslaught of colonialism. See *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Muslim Thought.*
[14] Cf. Dorothy Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning."
[15] Habib University, http://habib.edu.pk/.

invented matters [in religion], and every newly invented matter is an innovation, and every innovation is misguidance, and all misguidance is in the fire."[16]

So what would it mean to put the two together – creativity, innovation, reason, and discovery, with memorization, authority, and transmission – into a Muslim liberal arts curriculum? This tension between religious authority and a spirit of free inquiry can be balanced by embracing a classical definition of the "liberal arts" as "tools to free the mind," to "learn how to learn," for "lifelong learning." This paper has argued that authority is not something to be shunned or disregarded. On the contrary, every framework for inquiry is accompanied by uncritical assumptions that are accepted initially at face value. These merely have to be accepted and appropriated, instead of ignored and wished away. What legitimizes them is a community in which one's formation and learning takes place.

What makes the learning meaningful over time is if it provides the critical tools that allow the very authority that initiates the process to eventually be challenged and, if necessary, transcended if necessary. However, as the focus remains on tools and continuity, then there is a constant that always accompanies the change – what changes remains the same as what it has changed into – in a sort of timeless embrace of what lies at the heart of being human: the use of our rational faculties to understand the universe, its cause/creator, our place in it, and who we are, in conversation with the best answers to these questions that have been offered in the past. The process and method of rational inquiry in Muslim tradition in pursuit of answers to these great questions is ultimately shared by other faiths, and also by secular modernity. So long as the rational possibility of the existence of revealed truths remains open, it is a legitimate exercise of human reason to investigate its claims. Catholics, Muslims, and others, will come to both common and divergent understandings of truth when the tools of systematic reasoning and

[16] Reported by numerous authorities.

argumentation are applied to make sense of their respective scriptures, and secularists will also arrive at their own conclusions when they choose to bracket God altogether. Along the way, mediated by shared principles of reason and our experience of living in the world, the various conversation partners may occasionally find ways to come together, as we have here in these few days at the Santa Fe campus of St. John's College, in a mutually enriching exchange where we all get to know one another and our respective traditions, and thereby, hopefully, even ourselves just a little better.[17]

And what can be more human a venture than that?

[17] I am thinking of Qur'an 49:13 and 59:19.