



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## Learning and Education

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### Introduction

The earliest revelation to the Prophet Muhammad evokes powerful symbols of learning and knowledge: “Read! Your Lord is full of generosity, instructing by the Pen, educating humanity about that which they do not know” (Qur’an 96:3-5). In addition, the Qur’an distinguishes Adam from other created beings by virtue of the capacity gifted to him to “name everything” (2:31). The value placed on knowledge in the Qur’an became the foundation for the development of education in all its different expressions among Muslims. This spirit was further reinforced by the need to remember and preserve the traditions of the Prophet. Among the sayings of the Prophet were statements encouraging education. The acquisition of knowledge thus came to be perceived as part of one’s daily life and as a way of enhancing knowledge of the faith and its practices; faith and learning were seen to be interactive and not isolated from each other.

### Education in the Early Period

The incentive to read and learn the Qur’an provided the early Muslim community with its initial educational settings, in which instruction of the Qur’an, the life of the Prophet and knowledge of the Arabic language, its grammar, structures and forms took place. The mosque and the early Qur’an schools were the first examples of Muslim educational institutions. In addition, those who assumed responsibility for establishing such institutions and implementing regulations promulgated in the Qur’an and by the Prophet felt the need to create meeting places where such matters could be discussed. Informal schools of learning on legal and theological questions came to be developed in mosques and other public places, as well as in private homes. Moreover, during this period Muslims were coming into increased contact with peoples in the areas to which Islam was spreading. Such encounters with other cultures and their more developed traditions of learning served as an added incentive for Muslims to establish a system of learning to fit their needs and to enhance their understanding of their faith and its practice.

A variety of institutional settings developed during the early period of Muslim history, comprising a great deal of diversity in subject matter and function. The most important of these institutions were the *Maktab* or *kuttab*, the *masjid* and *majlis*, *jami’*, and libraries.

*Maktab* or *kuttab* were places where children received instruction in the Qur’an and in other religious subjects, whereas *masjid* and *majlis* were meeting places associated with mosques where adults organised themselves into study groups. The groups varied in the subjects discussed which ranged from the study of the Prophet’s life and sayings, issues pertaining to legal matters, devotional practice and poetry. Many *jami’*, or Friday mosques, eventually became a seat of

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higher learning, as exemplified in the rise of major mosque-centres such as the Kairouan in Morocco. A more comprehensive model developed later, as exemplified by the al-Azhar mosque in Cairo.

As Muslims engaged in learning and writing, a number of libraries began to develop, often attached to the royal court, where collections of books were organised. These largely informal institutions also housed books from other cultural traditions. The most important of these institutions was the *Bayt al Hikma* (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad established by the Abbasid Caliph, al-Ma'mun (reigned 813-833 CE). The *Bayt al Hikma* became an institution where the philosophical and scientific works of the Greeks were translated into Arabic. An observatory for the study of astronomy was also developed. The centre's work and influence represents one of the most remarkable educational efforts to assimilate new learning into Arabic during the medieval period.

### Emerging Models of Learning

While there were Muslims during the early period who felt that it was necessary to focus primarily on Qur'anic and related subjects, many others were influenced to integrate such learning within a broader context. An example of how learning was conceived as a way to increase one's knowledge and to serve as a model for the pursuit of an ideal education can be seen in a parable preserved in a series of well-known and influential writings, known as the *Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa* (*The Writings of the Pure Ones*), whose collective authors were a group of Muslim intellectuals living during the 10th century CE. The parable may be rendered as follows:

It has been related that there was a wise and noble king with children who were very dear to him and whom he venerated greatly. He wished to educate, refine, and train them, in order that they might become competent before reaching his Court; because none, except for those refined by good breeding, trained in the sciences, moulded by good morals, and free from imperfections, is suited for the Court of kings.

He deemed it wise that he should erect for them a palace, among the most solid that had ever been built. Then he assigned to each a *majlis* and wrote on its walls every science that he wished to teach them. He portrayed in the *majlis* everything in which he wished them to be instructed. Then he settled them in the palace, seating each one according to the share allotted to him, and entrusted them with servants and slaves of both sexes. He then said to these children: "Observe what I have portrayed before you, read what I have written there for your sake, ponder upon what I have expounded for you, and reflect upon it, so that you may perceive its significance and become outstanding and righteous men of learning. Then, I shall conduct you to my Court, and you will belong among my happy and honoured intimates, forever blessed, as long as I remain and as long as you remain with me."

Among the sciences that he wrote for them in that *majlis*, he represented the form of the celestial spheres on the ceiling explaining how they revolved, the signs of the zodiac in their ascendancy, and likewise the stars and their movements, making clear their signs and rules.



He illustrated on the courtyard of the *majlis* the configuration of the earth, the division of the regions and a map of the mountains, oceans, deserts and rivers. He explained the boundaries of the countries, cities, trade routes, and the kingdom.

In the foremost part of the *majlis*, he wrote the sciences of medicine and the natural sciences, illustrating the plants, animals, and minerals in their species, genus, and particulars, and explained their characteristics, uses and dangers.

On another side he wrote the science of crafts and vocations and explained the mode of ploughing and production. He then portrayed the cities and market-places, explaining the regulations governing buying and selling, profit making and trading. On another side, he inscribed the science of religion and creeds, the laws and the traditions, elucidating the lawful and the unlawful, the penalties and the legal judgments.

Then, on yet another side, he wrote concerning political administration and the organisation of the states, explaining the mode of levying taxes, and also with regard to the secretaries and the administrators of the *Diwan*, explaining the payments to be made to the soldiers and the protecting of the borders by the army and the auxiliaries.

These are six kinds of sciences by which the children of kings are edified. This is a parable struck by wise men; that is to say, the wise king is God, the Most High, and the young children are humanity. The erected castle is the firmament and the perfectly constructed *majlis* is the human form. The illustrated rules of conduct are the wonderful composition of his body, and the inscribed sciences in it are faculties of the soul and its knowledge.

### **Analysis of the Model**

The above story summarises the type of learning available at the time. It serves as a metaphor on the whole meaning and purpose of life and is illustrative of a very comprehensive approach to education. In fact, the section itself is part of a chapter which treats human beings as a microcosm. It is clearly stated that since life is short, and the scope of knowledge of the world too large, individuals must learn to attain a realisation of the whole creation by studying themselves, since persons epitomise the universe. Thus, by relating the microcosm to the macrocosm through rational means, one can proceed from understanding the smaller model to understanding the larger one.

A place of learning is a preparatory ground to enable one to acquire the tools necessary to face life. Likewise, the body is seen as a preparatory place for the soul, in which to acquire all that the soul needs to perfect itself. In the story, the school symbolises the body, and the various subjects relate to the knowledge the soul has to acquire before it can reach the “Court of the King.”

While educational philosophy is based on acquiring self-knowledge, as shown in this model, it is balanced with the recognition that one needs to acquire skills to live in the world. Besides this comprehensiveness, another practical and important aspect of this model is its concept of a suitable environment in which to acquire learning. The provision for a well-built structure and all



the amenities of good living seems to emphasise the need for an enabling environment for learning.

Knowledge is divided into various fields: the first concerns knowledge of the celestial spheres and heavenly bodies; the second is that of the earth and its geographical makeup; and the final comprises all that pertains to the physical, cultural and religious aspects of human life. Education also pertains to this life and its needs. This practical and pragmatic aspect of the Muslim theory of learning is illustrated by including within the sciences those pertaining to agriculture, and economic and political organisation. Thus, skills and the sciences have an immediate practical goal of coordinating the everyday life and needs of an individual and an ultimate goal where he learns to acquire self-knowledge and perfection for the time when he must leave this world.

Another theme that is included in the story is the role of religion in their educational system. In the story, the study of religions, law and traditions is included in the curriculum. These, however, represent organised religion which in the Ikhwan's framework is swallowed up in a wider concept of learning that is termed *hikma* (i.e., wisdom).

The model of learning reflected in the story was characteristic of intellectuals who constituted informal discussion circles, rather than in full-fledged educational institutions. In time, particularly from the 10th century CE onwards, a more organised institutional development, supported by the state, took place in the Muslim world.

### **Al-Azhar**

Conceived and founded initially as the main mosque of a new capital city, Cairo, in 970 CE, al-Azhar became a fully integrated mosque-university during the early period of Shi'i Fatimid Ismaili rule. Its role was enhanced by the various Fatimid caliphs who through a series of gifts and endowments developed it into a major centre of learning. At its height, the curriculum taught at al-Azhar and related institutions in Cairo included the study and interpretation of the Qur'an, law, metaphysics, philosophy, the natural sciences, and poetry and literature. Many teachers and scientists lived at al-Azhar, including the great physicist, Ibn al Haytham. The endowments supported students as well as professors.

The well-known poet, philosopher and traveller Nasir-i Khusraw (died 1088 CE) was very familiar with al-Azhar and the programmes of education developed under the Fatimids in Egypt and other parts of their territory. Reflecting on his own education, he provides a list of the many disciplines in which he was trained and educated: language and linguistics; poetry and literature; astronomy, astrology and the mathematical sciences; politics and commerce; philosophy and metaphysics; and the traditional sciences of the Qur'an, law and Prophetic tradition. Since he acted as a representative and teacher of the Shi'i Ismaili community, his own training was probably more intensive and comprehensive, but the range of subjects indicates the disciplines that were available in Cairo at the time.



In succeeding centuries, when Fatimid rule was replaced by various other dynasties which were Sunni in orientation, the function of al-Azhar changed and it became a prestigious centre for the study of religious sciences and law. Such an institution came to be known as a *madrasa*.

### **The Madrasa**

With the systematisation of Muslim schools of law, the focus of legal scholarship and transmission shifted to another institution which evolved in an organised form by the 11th century CE called the *madrasa*. Devoted primarily to the study of law, but including other subjects integral to the development of religious sciences, the *madrasa* incorporated the instructional role of early informal education such as in the mosque and study circles, becoming a major institution of learning in Sunni Islam. It received state support, had endowed professorships and residential facilities for teachers and students.

An early example of such an institution was the Nizamiyya *madrasa* established by the powerful *vizier* (chief minister) of the Saljuq ruler, Nizam al-Mulk (died 1092 CE), in Baghdad in 1067 CE. He founded it to create a strong Sunni institution to balance the influence of al-Azhar in Cairo. Like al-Azhar, it too was established through an endowment. Such endowments, known in Islam as *waqf*, represented the philanthropic spirit in the Islamic tradition expressed through institutional means, which provided the impetus for encouraging and developing education by the state as well as by individuals and families. Nizam al-Mulk went on to establish similar institutions in other parts of the Muslim world that were under Saljuq rule at the time, creating a network of centres of learning patronised by the rulers and guaranteeing the financial means and support for scholars to pursue their legal and theological studies. In all of the major cities of the Muslim world in the medieval period, the *madrasa* became the primary centre for religious and legal education.

The scholarship generated in the *madrasa* had great significance for the development of thought among Sunni Muslims. One of the towering intellectual figures associated with the Nizamiyya *madrasa* was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE). He became a professor of law noted both for his scholarship and teaching. For a time, he took an extended leave, pursuing other interests, primarily the private pursuit of a mystical and spiritual life. On his return, his role became even more significant as he integrated the results of his personal quest to broaden perspectives among Muslims about the role of reason and spirituality in the practice and understanding of their faith.

### **Women's Education**

The Prophet Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a well-established business woman. His subsequent wife, Aisha, became well known for her role as a transmitter of tradition. His daughter, Fatima, and several other women associated with his household were acknowledged for their love of learning. In the foundational period therefore there existed several reference points to encourage the participation and pursuit of women in learning.

In general women's education throughout medieval Muslim history was conditioned by local cultural factors, which put limits and set boundaries on their training and role in society. Prior to



attaining the age of marriage, women remained with the immediate or extended family and received their knowledge of the Qur'an and Islamic practice at home or at an informal Qur'an school, where they were taught mostly by elderly women. After marriage, it was rare for most women to pursue formal education, since their role as wives and mothers and their custody of the household restricted their movements and activities outside the home. However, their influence on their children's education, particularly their daughters, was strong. Women also developed skills such as midwifery, embroidery, weaving, carpet-making, calligraphy and design. Others were recognised for their skills as poets and story-tellers and acted as transmitters of oral tradition and folklore.

Some women belonged to Sufi groups and participated in devotional and social networks that varied in their organisation and educational activities from urban to rural areas. There were women in the court or those brought up in families with a long tradition of learning who were more privileged and received formal education. These women excelled in areas such as the collection and teaching of prophetic tradition and law, poetry and literature.

In historical terms, as with other major civilisations and religions in China, India and Europe that flourished at the same time, the public role of women in education and learning in the medieval Muslim world was marginal. There are, nonetheless, outstanding examples of women who gained fame for their learning, their poetry and their patronage of knowledge.

### **Scientific Learning and Knowledge**

The translation efforts of such centres as the *Bayt ai-Hikma* in Baghdad and the presence of major classical academies and centres of learning in places like Alexandria and Jundishapur, provided Muslims with direct access to the sciences and learning of Greece and the Near East. In addition to centres for the study of specifically theological and legal subjects, many Muslim intellectuals were attracted to scientific inquiry and the techniques of investigative research and discussion. An example of such a group is the *Ikhwan al-Safa* cited earlier, and Muslim philosophers and scientists. The 11th century CE scholar, philosopher and physician, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), provides an excellent example of how such learning was appropriated, further developed, refined and reformulated in the context of Muslim thought.

Ibn Sina was instructed in the religious sciences at an early age and took up the study of philosophy and logic in his teens, eventually mastering Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy and other ancient Greek scholars, to gain as comprehensive a philosophical and scientific education as he could. In his autobiography, he describes his passionate devotion to philosophical study and his obsession with learning every subject available to him in the field. He also developed the skills of a physician and, because of his reputation for healing and curing physical as well as psychological ailments, found himself invited to various courts to be physician to the king. He managed to evade the pitfalls of being at various courts during a time of conflict between various rulers, seeking opportunity whenever it presented itself to write and systematise his work. His most important works in philosophy, medicine and metaphysics reflect the breadth of his knowledge and the spirit of rational inquiry present in Muslim education at the time.



## Twelver Shi'i Centres of Learning

The role of promoting education and learning under the patronage of Shi'i rulers was affected by the downfall of the Shi'i Fatimid dynasty in 1171 CE. The next three centuries marked the steady growth and consolidation of Sunni *madrasa* education in the major centres of medieval Muslim society. Al-Azhar, originally founded by the Fatimid Shi'i Ismaili dynasty, became, under Sunni patronage, a prestigious seat of learning and training of Sunni scholars. Shi'i learning and perspectives, though less influential, were preserved and developed in several different places: in Yemen, where Muste'alvi Ismaili centres survived and Zaydi Shi'i law and sciences were also taught; in parts of Iran and Syria, where the Nizari Ismailis followed the Fatimid tradition; and among Twelver Imami centres in the cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq.

At the beginning of the 16th century CE a new dynasty took power in Iran. The Safavids, as they were called, imposed Twelver Shi'ism as the religion of the territories that they ruled and supported the establishment of *madrasas*. This royal patronage attracted Shi'i scholars to Iran from many parts of the Muslim world and led to the emergence of a revitalised tradition of learning and scholarship of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran.

In addition to the study of traditional religious sciences, students learned grammar, rhetoric and logic, philosophical theory and advanced jurisprudence. The curriculum was fairly uniform in all of the *madrasas* and the advanced students and teachers became part of a flourishing and influential system of learning, representing an institutionalised guild of scholars and religious teachers, referred to as *mullas* or *mujtahids*.

## Sufi Centres of Learning

The traditions of Muslim mysticism and spirituality affected all Muslim groups and institutions in varying degrees. It is not therefore entirely accurate to represent education and learning in their Sufi contexts as something entirely apart from other forms of educational activity in the Muslim world.

Congregational spaces where Sufis gathered to practice acts of devotion, piety and meditation were also centres of training and learning. They are variously known as *ribat*, *khanqa*, *zawiya*, or *jamatkhana*. Their evolution represents an aspect of the institutionalisation of Sufi *tariqas*, the umbrella organisation which defined one's sense of affiliation and identification with a particular group of Sufis. In these various centres, through a hierarchy of teachers and disciples, individuals were educated to learn the Qur'an and its spiritual meaning, to develop an understanding of the Prophet's role as a reference point for cultivating an inner life, and to read the writings of many great poets and writers in the Sufi tradition. Such environments were important centres of educational activity, which combined devotional practice and learning. They were also the most important vehicles for the transmission of Islam through oral learning and education, and balanced the emphasis on classical learning based on Arabic or Persian texts with an encouragement to use vernacular models.

## Pesantren Education in Indonesia



One example of a local indigenous Muslim educational institution is the *pesantren*, a boarding school developed in Southeast Asia as a place of learning. Based in rural areas, and supported by parents and members of the local community, such schools depended on commitment and prestige of local teachers who were willing to establish schools for pupils in the area. The subjects taught in the *pesantren* included Qur'anic studies, law, ethics, logic, history and Sufism. Students who felt that they had developed sufficient learning would return to contribute to their own communities. As contacts between Southeast Asia and other major centres of Muslim learning increased, many students went overseas for further training and specialisation. Often such schools also provided practical training in farming, crafts and trade.

### **Oral Tradition and Learning**

Oral methods of transmission and learning co-existed with the use of the written word from the beginnings of Islam. The Qur'an was taught and transmitted orally, the traditions and sayings of the Prophet were passed on through oral transmission, and oral communication remained one of the most effective methods of passing on the history and memory of individuals, families and dynasties.

In many Muslim cultures, oral tradition continues to play an important role in the preservation and acquisition of knowledge. An illustration of how this process was institutionalised can be found in West Africa. Among Muslim populations there, the responsibility for communication of history and religious tradition often lay with individuals called *griots*. They preserved local history, genealogies, and the social history of their groups and rulers. Such individuals were also accomplished musicians and singers, and the use of music and poetry served as an important vehicle for passing knowledge from generation to generation. Similar oral forms of communication are found all over the Muslim world.

### **The Spread of Muslim Educational Institutions**

The plurality of educational institutions in the medieval and pre-modern Muslim world represented a vast network. From Bukhara to Timbuktu, well-endowed institutions, learned scholars and thousands of students made Muslim societies among the most literate of the time and greatly facilitated communication and transmission across geographical boundaries and cultural differences. A broad spectrum of populations in the various urban centres benefited from these networks, including in a limited way, women and children. They reached their greater number during the period of the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid empires in the Middle East, and under the rule of many other dynasties in Africa and Southeast Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries CE.

Muslim educational institutions profoundly affected the development of learning and education in all the areas to which Islam spread. Moreover, Muslim scholarship and institutional development also influenced in different ways the development of education in Europe through the transmission of philosophy and the various sciences. The cultural and economic exchange





between Europe and the Muslim world also facilitated parallel developments of institutions and practices in the field of education.

One illustration of the scope of learning in medieval times is reflected in the work of Ibn Khaldun (died 1406 CE), probably one of the most important figures in Muslim intellectual life in the 14th century CE. He lived, studied and taught in the Maghreb, in Spain and in Cairo, and had a truly cosmopolitan background and outlook. He wrote an encyclopaedic work of history which was prefaced by a *Muqaddima*, a meditative prologue on the significance and nature of history. In this preface, he undertook a survey of all fields of learning. In addition, he attempted a comprehensive analysis of the significance and inter-relationship of the various disciplines. But much more so, he critically analysed historical events and developments to establish the underlying causes and effects of social change. Ibn Khaldun's encyclopaedic grasp of knowledge enabled him to develop for his own time an assessment of the value of learning and its application to the problems affecting his own society, a model that may have great relevance for Muslims today.

### **The Impact of Development in Education on the Muslim World**

Probably the most important change affecting Muslim education in the 19th and 20th centuries CE resulted from the contact, conflict and interaction with external influences, primarily Europe. The period of internal self-sustained development over centuries was interrupted by European expansion, economic dominance and military superiority. The colonisation of major regions of the Muslim world in Asia and Africa altered dramatically the structure of educational institutions in these areas and brought them into contact with the dual systems of European education, secular and church-related. The encounter generated ambiguity as well as opportunity. The new horizons of learning often presented themselves in alienating forms, through missionaries intent on conversion of peoples to Christianity or through official government policies by colonial powers that often took a patronising attitude to local institutions and forms of education.

This sense of ambiguity and alienation is perhaps best captured in a fictional representation of the situation in a novel by the highly regarded West African Muslim intellectual Hamidou Kane (died 1962 CE). The novel, written in French, is called *L'Aventure Ambigüe* (*Ambiguous Adventure*). At its centre is Samba Diallobe, future leader of his people who grows to adulthood in a traditional African Muslim world, increasingly altered by the influence of the French colonial presence. He is pulled in two directions, towards France to acquire education to best assure the future of his people or to stay home and strive to preserve a tradition that his people feel is under increasing threat and erosion. Samba's Qur'an teacher and mentor fears the consequences of Western education. He perceives it as lacking in spiritual and moral value and senses that its primary ethos is technological and secular. In his view, traditional Muslim education encompassed the whole of the person, enabling all aspects of one's development to be nurtured. He fears that Western education is linear, adding together knowledge in fragmented fashion, but not relating persons, the cosmos and God to each other. However, there are others who challenge this view and argue that the emphasis on rationality in the new approach to education would not only enable people to recognise their present condition but to transcend it and free themselves from colonial rule. This somewhat simplified dichotomy summarises the



broad set of responses that arose among Muslims, faced with the impact of new educational institutions and conceptions of knowledge.

Where choices were made to adopt or adapt Western forms of education, the existing systems were dichotomised and institutions whose primary function had been to transmit religious knowledge and learning became isolated from newly created institutions, adopting a primary custodial role as preservers of traditional learning and religious identity.

In the novel, *Ambiguous Adventure*, the hero chooses to go to France, is drawn into the world of new learning and thought, but is eventually alienated by it and returns to his spiritual and traditional roots, perhaps in the hope that some reconciliation can be negotiated between differing systems. What is recognised in the novel is that the traditional world cannot exist as a self-enclosed entity any more. Even in its most idealised representation, education in the Muslim world was always diverse and pluralistic. It would henceforth continue to be so, though the lines of demarcation and the goals of various institutions would not be as integrated as they once might have been. Thus, in the contemporary Muslim world, one finds a spectrum of institutions and modes of learning serving many different constituencies.

### **Education in the 19th Century**

One model of response to colonial rule and European influence was the establishment of primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities based on Western models. While the colonial governments set up their own school systems to train people, many Muslims responded by returning, or further developing traditional institutions with community support. In countries such as Turkey, the rulers created academies for the military and the court administration to provide training similar to those of European nations. Some established institutions like al-Azhar in Cairo, the Qarawiyyin in Morocco, the Mustansiriya in Baghdad, the Sulaymaniya in Istanbul, and the Fayziyeh in Iran, reinforced their traditional curriculum. New centres such as Deoband in India were created to consolidate religious education. One negative consequence of this development was the evolution of a dual system, whereby the secularised Western models became isolated from developments at other institutions. The governments and rulers who sponsored such institutions simply bypassed the traditional institutions and their teachers, diminishing their role and impact in society. Where modern institutions of higher learning were created, such as Aligarh in India, they became influential but not universal. Attempts were made by enlightened scholars such as Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut (died 1963 CE), rector of al-Azhar, to bring about reforms based on the earlier efforts of Muhammad Abduh. However, the changing pattern of state control over such centres of learning made it increasingly difficult for them to play a role in combating the disjunction resulting from the dual systems that were already in place in many Muslim countries.

### **Education in the Contemporary Muslim World**

Two sets of statistical data are relevant to an understanding of the state of education in the Muslim world today. The first is demographic and the second institutional. The fastest growing segment of the Muslim population in the world today is of school-going age. In order to



accommodate this growth, the number of institutions for elementary and secondary education has grown rapidly. From Uzbekistan in Central Asia to Bangladesh, thousands of schools have been built by the respective states in the last twenty five years to accommodate this growth. The same is true for university education. The number of state and private universities range from seventy in Indonesia to over thirty in Iran. Every country with a major Muslim population has at least one university. The tremendous growth in population was paralleled by an increase in centralised control over schooling at all levels.

In the past twenty five years, a number of developing countries enriched by oil or mineral wealth economies have built schools and universities. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Brunei boast several universities endowed with all the advantages of information technology and the latest advances in equipment. On the other hand poorer countries have found themselves struggling to sustain the institutions already in existence and foundering from shortage of resources and increased demand.

Some new academic institutions have been created which have self-consciously adopted the rubric “Islamic”. Their purpose is to create institutions that will reflect an intellectual profile that emphasises the centrality of Muslim subject matter. Some of these institutions have been formed as a result of efforts by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), established in 1973 through the combined resources of Muslim nations. Whether this pattern will further segregate educational modes and institutions remains to be seen.

More recently, a number of private initiatives have also led to the establishment of private schools, universities and academies. Some of these are highly specialised, seeking to create institutions that will serve the needs of the greatest number through professional training suited to the needs of developing countries. An example is the creation in Pakistan of the Aga Khan University, whose first initiative was a medical and nursing school of an international calibre to train physicians, nurses and health-care professionals to meet the medical needs of urban and rural areas through an innovative programme of training and a primary health-care system. Similar institutions are being created through other private initiatives to meet local needs by networking with international agencies but retaining local control and autonomy.

The Grameen Bank initiative in Bangladesh, though aimed at improving housing conditions and women’s employment, has developed support institutions such as schools to enable development in rural communities. Similar programmes can be found in many Muslim countries of Africa and Asia, and increasingly in Europe and North America.

Major problems remain, particularly in the realm of education for women and young children, who are often deprived of their basic educational needs. While such difficulties are part of the historical legacy of centuries-old traditional systems and of the heritage of some colonial practices, there is a major transformation evident across the Muslim world. Communication across communities, cultures and peoples, increasing access to the global media and the recognition that education is indeed the key to improving the quality of life of society and of future generations, has fostered a commitment to lifelong learning and an acceptance that learning has to do with understanding more than what is known in one’s own tradition and



history. Perhaps like the 9th century CE Muslim philosopher, al-Kindi, this quest for the future will be influenced by his enlightened approach:

We should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth and to assimilate it from whatever source it comes to us, even if it be brought to us by former generations and foreign peoples. For those who seek the truth, there is nothing of higher value than truth itself; it does not diminish nor leave those who reach for it, but honours and ennobles them. [cited by S.H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 11]

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