

ISLAMIC PEDAGOGY

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The following interview, revised substantially and reviewed by Nasr, was conducted by Nadeem Memon with Seyyed Hossein Nasr in 2011. Memon is the Program Director of the Islamic Teacher Education Program, a recently-launched online professional development program for Islamic school teachers. The interview addresses themes of pedagogy and tradition, Islamic education and literacy, and the prospects for Muslims revitalizing Islamic knowledge.

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ITEP is a teacher training program which is trying to define an Islamic pedagogy. You have written a lot on the Islamic tradition and what it is. For the sake of our students, give us a short definition of what you mean by “the Islamic tradition” and help us understand how an education system might be based on that tradition.

Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm. The way I use the term “Islamic tradition” is as follows: First, you have the Qur’ānic revelation. Then there is the conveying of the Islamic revelation by the Prophet, *‘alayhī as-ṣalātu wa’l-salām*, and his *Sunna* and *Ḥadīth* and the establishment of the earliest Islamic community. And from those sources issues a whole world, you might say: the world of Islamic civilization. Everything within that civilization is related to those principles which are revealed in the Qur’ān, embodied and taught by the Prophet throughout his life and reflected in his *Ḥadīth* and more generally *Sunna*, transmitted through the saints and scholars following him, and elaborated upon century after century by various Islamic authorities. The whole of this reality is what we call the Islamic tradition. The Islamic tradition for us is like a tree whose roots are in the Divine revelation, the descent of God’s Word, but whose trunk and branches have grown over the centuries. In different climes, through different seasons, the tree has grown in different directions, and sometimes quite slowly. But all of

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, Washington D.C. Email: msirat@gwu.edu

this reality is still evident in the remarkable continuity and inner unity of Islamic civilization and Islamic tradition.

The reason I and others use this term, “Islamic tradition,” whereas the concept would not have been necessary three hundred years ago, is the presence of the modernist onslaught that negates the fundamental tenets of the Islamic worldview. Islamic modernists tried to dilute Islamic tradition by simply adopting what was coming from the West and then putting a little veneer of something Islamic onto it. The initial reaction in the Muslim world against this shallow appraisal of Islam and also modernism itself was either to adopt it wholesale or sentimental sloganeering against it, but not answering or addressing it in a serious manner, logically and critically. That more deliberate response did not come until the second half of the twentieth century. It began with people like myself who had received a deep Islamic education as well as a thorough Western education, who knew what the modern West was like when viewed from the perspective of the Islamic tradition. And so we began to revive the idea of “Islamic tradition,” as a concept pitted against modern worldviews that seek to negate it. “Tradition” does not mean a reality that is dead today and belongs only to the past. On the contrary, it remains alive and over the centuries, as I said using the symbol of the tree, gives forth each “spring” new leaves and flowers.

Tradition is the heart of civilization. Islamic civilization is one of the greatest among the world’s civilizations, and has given rise to Islamic education, art, ethics, family and social structures, laws, philosophy, sciences...you name it! When fully healthy, it was a complete civilization, but it has become weakened today. Some of this civilization has been destroyed and eroded since the eighteenth century, but much of it still survives. All of these intellectual and artistic disciplines and activities carried out within Islamic civilization thrived and reverberated within the Islamic tradition and were based upon its principles. That is, if you were as great a scientist as Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, you were a Muslim thinker; you were not a secularist; your science was based on the Islamic view of cosmic reality. If you were a great painter such as Bihzād, you were a Muslim artist. If you were a great poet, a Mutanabbī, you were a Muslim poet... and so on, and so on. Islam produced an extremely rich intellectual and artistic civilization, in which everything remained related to Islamic principles. Moreover, it was with education that everything had its start. From the very conception of a human being, through all the stages of life—and also on the more formal level, with the creation of the *madrassa* system, its lower levels through the university system that influenced Western educational institutions—education was crucial to Islamic civilization and at the heart of the means to transmit the tradition.

In your writings about Islamic education, you have spoken about recreating an education system based on the Islamic tradition. In this context and for Islamic schools, what would

that look like? How might it be structured, today?

The recreation of this system today is a difficult task, and for two reasons. Two events occurred and unfortunately complemented each other in a negative way. One was that, even 500 years ago, before the West began to impinge upon the Islamic world seriously—let us say from about the ninth and tenth Islamic centuries on—in many, though not all parts of the Islamic world, the traditional education system began to shrink. Its syllabus, its interests, its curricula, and so on became increasingly confined to a system for the training of religious scholars and jurists (*fuqahā*). Other disciplines, such as Islamic medicine, mathematics, and the like, which had at times been taught outside the *madrassas*, simply ceased to be taught formally in many places and were taught only in individual circles. So, already the range of subjects taught within the *madrassas* began to narrow, although the various disciplines no longer taught formally did survive here and there.

Parallel with that occurred the onset of colonialism. The colonial powers insisted upon (and worked very hard to create) their own educational system in various Islamic lands, because they sought to dominate and to rule over Muslim people. As Lord Curzon said for India, they wanted to produce a class of Indians that had brown skin but thought and acted like the colonizers. The colonial powers tried to enact such projects all across India, North Africa, different parts of the Islamic world, and also in the Hindu world and Buddhist world—the entire Eurasian landmass outside the West as well as Africa. Westerners reached into all these regions, some by force, some by cajoling, some with the acceptance of local rulers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who were then made subservient to them. Westerners established educational institutions in the Islamic world that were based on a completely different worldview from that of Islam. This alternate system offered certain advantages, because the West had previously devoted a great deal of energy to the natural sciences, mathematical sciences, engineering, and the like, and therefore also had better medical facilities and better guns. The attention of many Muslim rulers was drawn to Western education in part because of military technology.

The Western university system itself had been deeply influenced by the Islamic university system, but that was in the Middle Ages. The Western university which was once a bastion of Christianity changed in the modern period; today it is a bastion of secularism. Something very important happened along the way. The colonial educational institutions were shaped by both medieval and modern ideas but their content was a driving force for modernism. They were established mostly by missionaries, though sometimes by missionaries of a more secular sort: missionaries of Western humanism and secularism, not Christianity proper. Examples include the American University of Cairo, Roberts College (originally founded in Istanbul as a Protestant college), or the American University in Beirut (also originally a Protestant college, though it,

like similar institutions, maintained its missionary spirit after it became a secular university in propagating “Western values”). Whether they were missionary in the Christian or secular sense, these institutions tried to educate Muslims in their own lands against everything that Islam stood for. In order to take advantage of it for worldly reasons, many Muslims, especially the rich and powerful who ruled over the majority of Muslims in their own society, began to send their children to those Western or Western-inspired schools.

And so you began to have a dual educational system in most Islamic lands: two streams in the same country. The *madrassa* system did not die out altogether, but many were substantially weakened—especially when the colonial British and French forces took over the endowments (*awqāf*) that used to fund them, leaving most Muslim schools with no money to pay their teachers. The devastation of the *madrassa* system in many areas such as Muslim India was ultimately due to colonialism; the same holds true for Algeria and many other places. Some areas of the Muslim world fared better: in places like Iran and Turkey, which were never formally colonized, the *madrassas* continued (but in Turkey of course Atatürk himself dissolved the *madrassa* system once he consolidated his power in the 1920s). So, two educational systems emerged. People belonged to one country, let us say, Egypt; all spoke Arabic, most were Muslims, had similar complexions and the same ethnicities, but of them one went through one educational mill and one the other, this process producing a schism in society.

This schism is still very much present today. In a country like Pakistan or Egypt, eighty to ninety percent of the children of those who govern or dominate society go to Western schools. Either they come to the West to study, or go to Western schools within their own countries. The Islamic world, even the Islamic Republic of Iran despite all its efforts, has not been able to bridge the gap between what some call *hawzah* and the modern university system—where I was myself for many years a professor, dean, and president of a university, in my case the modern institutions in question being Tehran and Aryamehr (now called Sharif) Universities. I have been involved in major educational institutions all my life, trying to shape them differently in the direction of making education more Islamic. This transformation needs the will of the society as a whole, and it needs intellectuals of the first order. In Iran, it is the will of the society to bridge the gap and to create a single educational system, but there does not seem to exist as yet the intellectual power to be able to integrate the Faculty of Engineering or whatever into an institution based on a hierarchy of knowledge that would be Islamic. We need the same number of very intelligent people who now go for engineering, physics, aerodynamics, and so forth to also turn to the traditional religious and intellectual sciences. This bifurcation, foreign to classical Islamic education, was introduced into the Islamic world from the nineteenth century onward and continues today.

It needs to be understood why this situation is so bad for the Islamic world, why we need to integrate Islamic education. Since Islam is a religion based

upon *tawhīd*, upon unity, you simply cannot continue to train students with a compartmentalized mind; it is crippling. Nearly every student in American universities today has a compartmentalized mind, and religion remains intellectually on the margin even in Catholic universities. You open one drawer of the mind for the study of English literature; then you close it. You open the other drawer for chemistry. You close that, and turn to the next subject...as though they had nothing to do with each other! The integration of knowledge has been destroyed. Alfred North Whitehead, the great English philosopher who wrote much on education, once said that if this kind of compartmentalization does not get fixed in the West, it will lead to sclerosis, which is a sign of old age and leads finally to death. A civilization that seeks to continue to grow in a healthy manner has to be one in which its various facets of life and knowledge are interrelated. And this is especially true of Islamic civilization, since Islam is based above all on unity.

That is why I have been a harsh critic of those who say their prayers on Friday, are good Muslims on one level, moral people, but they are also scientific and their minds function almost completely in a non-Islamic mental space. I do not mean “scientific,” but scientific in the sense that their real “God,” intellectually speaking, is modern science. This scientism has swept over the Islamic world, whether we are dealing with the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, or Tunisia—it has been pervasive under every form of government. People think that by advancing the attainment of Western science and technology, they are serving the cause of Islam, which is not necessarily the case (though I accept that through this pursuit societies gain more power and greater economic advantages). I am not saying that Muslims should not study the modern sciences. They must do so; there is no other choice. But if Islam is to survive intellectually what we need to do is to integrate, through our educational system, all forms of knowledge into a single worldview, and not deny the forms of knowledge that exist above the rational and empirical realms. I have been accused at times of being against modern science. But I do have a degree in physics and mathematics from M.I.T. and an advanced degree in science from Harvard, and am a person who is interested in the modern sciences and knows something about them. I am not against the sciences: I am against the exclusivist claim that is made by most practitioners of modern science; I am against what I call the totalitarianism of modern sciences. I believe that Muslims have to learn modern physics, in fact move to the very limit of modern physics, to quantum mechanics and such areas, and then take the next step: to integrate them into an Islamic cosmology, into an Islamic worldview. Otherwise we are living a segmented existence. That does not bode well for us as Muslims. And the heart of this issue is of course education. We have to have an integral and integrated educational system. I may not have answered your question fully but at least I have stated some facts and principles that are needed to answer your question fully.

*You mentioned *tawhīd* when speaking about this bifurcation, in needing to base Islamic education on principles. If we had to outline a handful of principles that define an Islamic philosophy of education, what would they be?*

I am glad you asked this question, although I have treated it to some extent in responding earlier. I wish in fact that it were asked more often and that more of our thinkers would really devote themselves to answering it. In the 1960s and '70s, a movement began in the Islamic world to try to answer this question on a wider scale. This led to the first Muslim World Congress on Education held in Mecca in 1977, which was organized by the late Seyyed Ali Ashraf of Bangladesh, myself, Dr. Zubair, the president of the University of Jeddah, and Dr. Abdullah Bin Omar Nasseef, with the help of a small group of people who were trying to revitalize Islamic education. That Congress led to the establishment of our many Islamic universities, which, however, are unfortunately still completely imprisoned by this segmentation of knowledge. Even those universities that try to make themselves "Islamic" by including a Faculty of Shari'a are not integrated in the way I mean, because their other faculties teach subjects like any secular university. Dr. Ashraf established the *Journal of Muslim Education* in Cambridge, England. Through efforts like these we tried to articulate the philosophy of Islamic education. But it certainly has not gone far enough. No single person can take on the responsibility of trying to reenergize the whole Islamic intellectual tradition, but we, who call ourselves Muslim thinkers, have to try.

I myself have tried to write about science, philosophy, and Western challenges in over 50 books, and have not devoted the lion's share of my time to discussing the philosophy of Islamic education, but I have written enough to make people aware of how important it is. Let me mention some of the principles on which it is based. Every educational philosophy is based on the subject who is being taught and educated as well as the view of the realities that are to be taught. These are the way that basic questions should be articulated, with the subject of that education in mind. Who is man, men and women, *insān*? What are we here for? What is the ultimate goal of life? These are primary metaphysical and religious questions. For Muslims, from one perspective, the answers to these questions are very simple: the Qur'ān says, *innā li-llāh wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn*, that is, "Verily, we come from God and to God we return." That verse defines who we are, really, and also where we come from and where we are going. We are on a journey here on earth, and we have to return to Him from Whom we have come.

The subject who is being educated is a being who comes from God; who, according to the Qur'ān, is God's vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth; who is given various capabilities and responsibilities by God, on the basis of which the human being gains certain rights. The rights do not come before the responsibilities; they follow from them. Responsibility is related to the word "response," and this

response is described in the Qurʾān in quite a remarkable way. In the Qurʾān, God addresses man (Adam) and his progeny, which includes you and I, and in fact everybody. He asks, “Am I not your Lord?” The Qurʾānic verse makes it plural (*rabbukum*), so it is more than Adam; it is the whole of humanity that is being addressed. Our response (*qālū*, where the verb is again plural) is “yes!” (*balā!*). Our responsibility comes from this response. So thinking about education must begin with this basic framework. Islamic education is concerned with the human agent who said yes to God’s question in pre-eternity. Education must begin with a spiritual understanding of who human beings are, for we are ultimately spiritual beings. We are in this world for a purpose, and we have a responsibility towards the Creator and to His creation, because we responded to His question with yes. It was a question based on our freedom. We could have said “no,” as did the heavens, the earth, the mountains. They did not accept the trust of God (*al-amāna*), but man did; we human beings accept it, and therefore we have responsibilities. The first principle is thus set and concerns our identity, who we are, and our responsibility, in the light of who we are towards God: God’s vicegerents. The responsibility that comes from that reality of the human state should shape all education throughout our lives. We should be educated so that we come to know, before all else, that we are *khalīfat Allāh fil-arḍ* and also God’s servants, *ʿabd Allāh*, obedient to His laws and commanded to know His injunctions and also His Wisdom reflected in His creation. From the very beginning, we have to teach our children these two fundamental Qurʾānic concepts, and they have to go together.

Let me repeat that we are both *khalīfat Allāh* and *ʿabd Allāh*; we are God’s vicegerents and also servants, that is, we have to submit our will to God, in the same way that a servant submits himself to his master: complete submission. Moreover, it was by virtue of that reality that God made us His *khalīfa*. Without servitude to God, vicegerency by itself could be a very dangerous thing, because God is All-Powerful and He has given us all kinds of powers—which is why we are able to destroy the rest of the world if we forget God and our state of servitude to Him. This power that we have could be god-like, and is dangerous if not accompanied by our servitude to God. Sometimes we forget that we are *ʿabd Allāh*. I think that the whole tragedy of modern man is trying to be *khalīfat Allāh* or even claim divinity for ourselves without accepting to be *ʿabd Allāh*. How can we compare ourselves to Allah? *Astaghfir Allāh!* Making ourselves the centre of all things... We have to reassert what I would call a theocentric worldview, where God is instead of us the centre of all things, and to educate human beings accordingly. We owe our existence, our different powers, including the power of logic, discernment, reasoning, our physical powers, and everything else to Him. We are His representatives in this world, and this brings with it responsibility as well as the rights that issue from these responsibilities. I think that this central truth should run throughout the whole of Islamic education. This is the basis for religion, for why we should perform our prayers, fast, all the

arkān, paying the religious tax—and also at the moral level, to be kind, not to lie, to be humble, to be generous, to act with *karāma*, to do all the various things that Islamic ethical texts have taught us. And so Islamic education should always combine ethics with the training of the mind.

Then there is the principle that Islamic education must be concerned with all the various kinds of authentic knowledge and their relation to each other. Islam is based on *lā ilāha illā l-lāh*, there is no divinity but Allah. This is a statement of knowledge, but *principial* knowledge, not—*astaghfir Allāh!*—like saying that this building has twelve floors. That is knowledge of a particular reality, but *lā ilāha illā l-lāh* contains the knowledge of the nature of Reality as such. In Islamic civilization there was always a great celebration of knowledge—we have now fallen into another state, but that has other reasons, some of which I mentioned before. Of all the great civilizations and religions of the world, except perhaps the Jewish, none emphasized so much the importance of knowledge as did the Islamic. It is not accidental that Muslims in the United States are now involved at a high level in medicine, law, and even slowly getting into teaching positions in universities, just like the Jews did earlier when they emigrated from Europe. This is all related to secularized knowledge, of course, but the point is that the importance of knowledge is deeply ingrained in Islamic culture and emphasized in Muslim families.

Knowledge, according to the Islamic point of view, must never be divorced from two truths: the first, that knowledge comes ultimately from God, Who is the final source and subject of knowledge, and also its supreme Object; and the second, that ethics is inseparable from the process of learning and knowing. When we come to know, obviously, there is a subject who knows and an object that is known. In modern epistemology, which is the foundation of all modern education, the knowing subject is restricted to the individual human being, the individual's reason and his senses (even intuition is not cultivated in the modern educational system! A person relying on intuition, on mystical intimations, would probably get kicked out of a classroom). The subject is taken as earthly man, cut from revelation and any transcendent principles, severed from anything beyond his lower self and cut off from the higher powers of the soul. This is to a large extent true even if you go to Sunday school or a Christian school. For several years I went to a Christian secondary school in the United States as a young boy sent from Iran, and while on Sunday you would go to church, on Monday you studied physics like at any other school in the United States; this physics had no relation to what you were taught on Sunday. The subject in modern education is severed from higher reaches of the intellect and higher faculties of the soul, and is divided.

In Islam our *ʿaql* is never supposed to be cut off from the Divine *ʿaql*. It is always the light of *al-ʿaql al-awwal* that shines in our minds—as the Prophet said, *awwal mā khalaqa Allāh al-ʿaql*, the first thing God created was the Intellect. That is why so many modern Muslim thinkers today keep insisting that Islam is

such a rational religion, but without being aware of the limited meaning of “the rational” in modern discourse, and that “reason” in modern parlance is not the same as *al-‘aql* understood Islamically. They argue that that is why people become Muslim, that is, because of the rational elements of Islam, or because Islam is a “rational religion.” Of course they are mistaken—otherwise all the atheist logicians or scientists would be Muslim, all mathematicians would be Muslim. Islam sees reason as something different from the modern understanding. Traditional Islamic thought sees reason as being the ray of the sun of the intellect shining upon the mind, and the ray and the sun are never cut off from each other.

As for the object, today the objects of knowledge as we teach them to our students are primarily objects constituting an order of reality that is independent from the Source of all realities, that is, God. In physics, chemistry, and even sociology, we objectify the world out there as a “thing.” And the knowing subject does not come to know that the known object comes ultimately from God. In reality, however, existence itself comes from God; everything in nature reveals God’s Wisdom. Awareness of this Wisdom seems to have disappeared in the West, and is disappearing even among us in the Islamic world—worst of all among the people who are called fundamentalists, supposedly depending upon the fundamentals of Islam, but who are just like the modernists in refusing to accept the wisdom tradition within Islam.

The first thing that has to be brought back to Islamic education is appreciation of the truth that the very act of knowing is a kind of sacred act. I have a book called *Knowledge and the Sacred* (SUNY, 1989) that deals with this issue extensively at a metaphysical level. We need to remember that ultimately the source of our reason, the faculty that knows, is a light from God, who is *al-‘Alīm* (All-Knowing). If God were not *al-‘Alīm*, we could not know anything. To speak more generally and in more philosophical terms, it must be remembered that life itself is the result of the effusions of the Divine Intellect and Spirit. The great philosopher Avicenna is a very important figure in the field of the philosophy of Islamic education. He systematized various modes of knowledge and emphasized that all things come from and belong to God, the creator of all things. It is important to recall his teachings in the face of the challenges of all these modern God-denying ideologies. If you start accepting atheistic ideologies and paradigms such as the Darwinian theory of evolution, and then just paste some kind of Islamicity onto it, you are condemned to failure from the Islamic point of view. As far as Darwinism is concerned, as it exists in the academy today, it has become a kind of “pseudo-religious orthodoxy”—as though anybody who is against it is considered to be ignorant and “medieval” and so forth. But this position is logically absurd. It is a way to plug the hole in the modern worldview so that one will not be forced to have recourse to Divine Power and Wisdom to understand the miracle of creation. In a sense, in Darwinism, matter is God. The creative power which we, or Christians and Jews or others, have always

believed to have come from God's creative Power, is posited in matter itself.

Our educational system must be able to preserve a sense of wonder in nature in the beauty of creation, while seeking to understand how things work and admitting also the possibility of exceptional ruptures in the laws of nature through Divine Will resulting in miracles. Why is this leaf of a tree green? Why does it become yellow tomorrow morning and pink the next day? Many of the 'hows' can be explained but all of these 'whys' cannot be answered through recourse only to material causes (although these causes also exist and can be known by us). A sense of wonder has to be preserved even in the sciences that we teach. Otherwise we are left with nothing but an infantile attempt to mimic Western science and somehow "catch up" with it. We must look at the world of nature on our own terms. Our religious tradition encourages us to study it without losing the sense of wonder and awe in God's wisdom that is reflected on the face of every leaf in the forest and every creature that swims in the seas.

And our religious tradition encourages us never to divorce knowledge from ethics. Of course, knowledge at the theoretical and abstract level is not concerned with ethics—when you describe two and two yielding four, that is not an ethical issue. It is the application of that knowledge that immediately brings us into the ethical domain; it is the realization of knowledge when it comes to religious and metaphysical issues that is related to ethics. Of course, gaining authentic knowledge, irrespective of its application, is an embellishment for the soul; it leads to certain perfections in the soul, to what is classically called *istikmāl al-nafs*. As far as authentic knowledge is concerned, attaining it is an end and a virtue in itself. That is why the Prophet said, "Seek knowledge, even if it be in China," and did not allude to the practical benefits of that knowledge.

One of the big mistakes we make in the Islamic world today is refusing to tackle the secularization of knowledge in modern science. As Muslims, we must always be aware of the sacred quality of knowledge and be ethical in our use of science and technology. Moreover, through ethics we purify our souls and become able to gain access to higher forms of knowledge in a realized and not only theoretical manner.

As I just said, there are two halves to this question of the relationship between the subject and the object, or the process of intellection itself. The first is concerned with teaching students that knowledge itself is actually sacralized even as we look at and gain knowledge of our relation to the world, matter, life forms, substances, things, and so forth and not only religious matters. That is half of it. The other half is to teach students from the earliest moment the importance of ethical considerations. Ethical education is very important in the Islamic context. The *madrassas* in the old days used to emphasize it, but now it has become weakened a great deal. You might go to al-Azhar University or to Qom, but today even in these religious centers ethics is not necessarily incorporated into the process of teaching in the same way as it was in days of old. It is not just a matter of studying a philosophical ethical text, but of putting the

principles of ethics into practice.

And that is where the next principle comes in, the principle of setting an ethical example. In traditional Islamic education, what is most important is one's example, not one's words. In the old days, students lived with their teacher. A teacher was expected to have an ethical character and could not hide his ethical frailties easily—he could not teach a class and then leave the students behind. Students learned things from their teachers that were not only a matter of grammar, logic, or astronomy, but also ethics that were transmitted through individual example. Here of course the Sufi tradition, which for centuries (especially after the Mongol invasion) greatly influenced the ethics of Islamic societies and education, played a central role. One of the repeated criticisms the Sufis had concerned those who were only learned theoretically, but who did not practice what they had learned and preached.

So these have been some of the principles that I have tried to articulate over the course of my writing and teaching about the Islamic philosophy of education. I have had the great privilege in my life of having studied both with the foremost Western scholars of various disciplines, including Islamic studies, and with some of the greatest traditional teachers in Iran. There were a number of major Islamic philosophers in Iran with whom I studied various Islamic subjects, especially philosophy and Sufism. The way they spoke, the way they acted, the way they lived all had a tremendous effect on the students, who could imbibe the way they lived Islam—so that you experienced throughout the course an ambiance of learning which included more than just classroom transmission of theoretical knowledge.

Another principle, which really goes back to a saying of the Prophet, is “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.” One of the lessons of this *ḥadīth* is an imperative to undergo continuous education. This is certainly not a new idea for the Islamic world. In the old days, many people went to the *madrassas* to study until they died. There were *waqfs* (endowments), there were scholarships, means to support them in this life-long endeavor. They lived full and humble lives. They might not have been wealthy but they continued studying, learning, devoting themselves to seeking knowledge. Others would come back to the *madrassa* for a time after earning a living in one profession or another. And there were other institutions of learning as well—for example, those in the guilds. People in the bazaars and merchants oftentimes would go to *madrassas* and come back to their work.

It is remarkable how even the architecture of the traditional Islamic city made this possibility easy to realize, by locating the mosque in the center of the city. The *madrassa* was almost always next to the mosque, or sometimes inside it. Next to that structure was the bazaar, the economic heart of the city, which was devoted to craftsmanship and the making of objects as well as selling them. There were industrial sections in some caravanserais as well! And the living quarters were not that far away, located usually in alleys nearby. You can

still see this kind of urban space in certain Islamic cities such as Isfahan and Fez, though of course that is changing now. But life was remarkably integrated and architecture itself was based on the integration of various spaces. Even in my own lifetime, for example, I knew of merchants in the bazaar of Isfahan who would take an hour off in the afternoon from their shop and go to the *madrassa* nearby to study Arabic poetry, Islamic law, or something else. They would come and go; the educational system was open to them. This was a remarkable achievement—many people did not just graduate, as is the habit now everywhere, and never bother with education again.

This traditional Islamic system is in many ways the antithesis of our modern educational system. At many of our modern universities in the Islamic world, many of the professors are really in a state of mental sclerosis—of course not all the universities are like that, but I have had much experience concerning this predicament in Iran, where I have had to run major institutions, and also in some other Islamic countries such as Pakistan. These institutions are staffed by people who might have studied at the Sorbonne, or some such institution, and are brilliant, young students of physics—but who have not opened a new book since coming home. In traditional Islamic education there is always a return to the educational process. Ideally life itself is one long educational experience—and the teachers also continue to learn and study. I remember that one of my great teachers in Iran was studying the text of the *Asfār* of Mullā Ṣadrā when he was on his deathbed and I went to visit him.

Another point which is very important has to do more with the socio-economic aspect of education. It is debatable whether the traditional Islamic system can be put into practice in the modern world or not, but at least one should mention the principle. In Islamic civilization, education was always free. The exorbitant amount of money that you have to pay to go to college in America, which is higher than in Canada or Europe, is something which would have been unthinkable in Islamic civilization. In fact, it was the other way around. Society had amassed its resources financially and dispensed these resources in such a way that seekers of knowledge were recognized to be giving something of themselves that benefited men and women, and society could thank them for it by supporting them so that they did not have to pay for their education—including even medical education at great hospitals, such as those of Damascus and Baghdad. The Caliphal state or other states that succeeded it, as well as *awqāf* designated for education, paid for it. I know that this is not practical in today's nation-state system, the way the economy functions, but a more authentic Islamic approach would be to have a kind of open educational system in which financial matters would not be such an impediment as to prevent whole classes of people from participating in education. This matter is essential from the Islamic point of view.

It is important to realize that of all the classical civilizations of the world before modern times, Hindu, Chinese, Western, and Islamic, Islam was the one

in which there was the greatest fluidity of movement within society, a movement that was based on education and scholarly attainment. India of course had the caste system. In the medieval West, if you were a peasant, then you were bonded to the land for life—unless you became a priest. Ultimately the pope stood above emperors and kings, a fact that in itself is quite interesting. In Islam also mobility came in most cases through religion, or was at least related to it, but this mobility came most of all through knowledge and skills. There was more social fluidity and movement in traditional Islamic society than in the medieval West. If I just became the mulla of the village, I might not get very far. But the door was open, for instance, for anyone who was gifted in gaining knowledge to become a great *‘ālim* respected by kings, or to ascend and become a *wazīr*, an advisor to the caliph or sultan, or something like that. There are many examples of that kind in Islamic history. This is something very precious. Certain scholars in the West have accused Islam of having “a thousand families” that constitute the elite class in society. That was true, from the point of view of agriculture and some industries in days of old, but not for society as a whole and certainly not in the case of education. By and large, when you had a gifted young student, an exceptional student, even in regional Qur’ānic schools in some village, a door to the *madrassa* would remain open to him. If he did well there, the doors of the higher *madrassa* were also open. Even in our days, despite all of the changes that have taken place, many of the major leaders—in Iran, Egypt, or places like that—have very interesting family histories in that they come from humble backgrounds but rose in society through education alone. In Iran, which is my home country, if you go down the list of the prime ministers since the nineteenth century, just as an example, about half belong to a famous family or tribe. The other half, you have never heard of their families. They all arose or ascended through their own efforts and the fact that they had an aptitude for education.

Finally, though I have so many other things to say, I want to end with this point: As I said, Islam is a religion based on *tawhīd*. The method for reaching the ultimate goal of life is to be virtuous and also to integrate different levels of knowledge, as described above. We have been given many different faculties by God. These include first of all the mind, what we now call the “mind,” though it is technically a modern invention and is not a major category in traditional Islamic thought. In itself, what we now call the mind has different faculties and different dimensions. We further have emotions, we have intuitions, we have artistic/aesthetic sensibilities, we are embodied. And all of these elements have to be trained and integrated through the process of education.

And so the Islamic education system caters to the needs of all of these dimensions of our being, including the body: *dhawq* for the arts, beauty; correctly filling the wells of the emotions, not letting them die or being indifferent to them; our moral sense; our mental faculties, and everything else; and above all, of course, our faith and need for God, for religion, which should permeate

the whole of education. This effort at the integration of the philosophy of education that your project is seeking to accomplish is extremely important. The situation that we have nowadays in much of the Islamic world is unfortunate: on one side of a divide, the *ʿulamāʾ* in or from *madrassas*, people who wear long robes and teach religion; on the other side, those who are knowledgeable in non-religious subjects and who even dress differently. Today these two classes of knowers or *ʿulamāʾ* live in the same country but intellectually for the most part in two different and unrelated worlds. In the old days, in Islamic civilization, there was only one educational system and it included man's whole being. Even physical exercise was part and parcel of the educational system. Avicenna speaks of it, the importance of physical exercise. So in the integral Islamic educational system all levels of human reality are taken into account. We go all the way from physical exercise to contemplation of God, and everything in between. This is an educational system which does not compartmentalize but tries to interrelate everything in light of man's goal and end which is the return to God.

This is where the question of present day obstacles comes in. Most of the present generation would not be able to even conceive of this integrated vision of education, especially since it has not even considered it. If, in the nineteenth century, our *ʿulamāʾ*, when first confronted with the onslaught of Western thought, had decided to confront this challenge rather than either cursing it or turning away into their cocoons, perhaps we would be in a different situation now. But as it is, it is our task for the next decades to recreate the unified Islamic system. Yes, it will take time to revive our authentic educational philosophy and to build a system based on it. If we were still living within an integral traditional Islamic civilization, this issue would not be a problem because great minds would already have accomplished this task for us and institutions based on the Islamic educational philosophy would be functioning throughout *dār al-Islām*. But today this task falls to us. In addition to facing modern science, modern technology, modern means of production, we have modern sports, modern forms of art, modern lifestyles, etc. Most of these modern things are very distracting from an Islamic point of view. You cannot integrate rock and roll into an Islamic educational system: it is based on an aspect of the soul from which the energy and inspiration for creating such a music comes, an aspect very different from where, say, *Qawwālī* or something like that originates.

We are faced not only with integrating or rejecting all these different elements within our own civilization and educational systems, but also doing so when we have no other choice but to respond to this continuous alien invasion of our culture. We need to engage these elements that are already out there, that compromise our civilization. Our children have to learn them. Everybody has to learn something about Western thought, Western science, Western technology, Western medicine, and so on, as well as to confront popular Western culture which is everywhere. We have to try to study, analyze, criticize and when possible integrate them into our educational system, based on the principles

outlined above. We have to teach the young how to evaluate, transform or reject all that is bombarding them from left or right. This is a task for first-rate minds, in the same way that Islamic physicians integrated Galenic and Hippocratic medicine into the Islamic worldview to develop Islamic medicine. I have been engaged in a humble way in this effort for half a century and have trained many fine scholars with knowledge of Western matters, as well as the roots and branches of the Islamic tradition. This effort must remain something to which we must devote our time, though it will take a great deal of energy. If you have a fifteen-year-old Muslim boy sitting in a chemistry class, he will have to be taught about atoms, ions, molecules, valences, and so forth. But there are different ways to teach the subject: that is the point. He could be taught in such a way so as to counter and reject rather than accept blindly the statement of the famous founder of modern chemistry, Antoine Lavoisier, "Matter can be neither created nor destroyed." In fact, even though later science has annulled this thesis, in our chemistry classes it continues to be taught. There is a way to teach science and technology that reveals the limitations of their theoretical foundations and in which learning them will not require the rejection of the Islamic worldview.

It is easier to present Islamic principles in fields other than the natural sciences, such as sociology and psychology, where we can formulate Islamic teachings for which there are many rich resources rather than relying only on Karl Marx, Max Weber, or this or that secularist sociologist or economist. There are some today who are trying to develop Islamic economics. I am aware of fifty, sixty people working on this issue in the Islamic world, but few reject the worldview upon which Western economics is based. This task requires accepting Islamic cosmology and developing Islamic social theory, rather than just accepting and repeating a materialistic view of nature and social theories as they have been imported from the United States, and then on this basis seek to create a system without usury. History, for example, is a fairly easy subject: rather than teaching a Eurocentric view of history, we must learn to teach history from the point of view of Islamic civilization. The West has the right to teach history from its own point of view, of course. Each civilization may do that: China the same. Islam is, however, a bit different in that it is a religion that spread all across the world and has a global dimension to it that should be emphasized. This history should not be at all Western-oriented, even if it is being taught to those living in the West: an Islamocentric view that emphasizes its global dimension is necessary.

Literature is another field that is easier to integrate than physics and chemistry. Islamic civilization has produced some of the greatest literatures of the world. In the old days, where the mother tongue of people was Arabic, they developed their own literary criticism and other disciplines related to Arabic literature. Persian of course was for centuries the lingua-franca of Asia; so every learned Muslim even in India knew Rumi and Ḥāfīz like his own father's name.

But he did not know Malay. So you had in Islamic civilization different language zones, in each of which great literatures and linguistic sciences pertaining to them were developed, but those literatures and literary sciences shared a common metaphysical worldview and ethos. And each of these languages produced great masterpieces. A work like *Kalīla wa Dimna* was translated from Sanskrit into Pahlavi, then into Arabic, from Arabic back into Persian, and then into Turkish and other Islamic languages. The task before us is different from simply studying our own literature. The young Muslim student today has to be aware of the diversity of the literatures of the Islamic peoples, not only Urdu if he happens to come from a Pakistani family. The great literatures are mostly in Arabic and Persian, but also in Turkish, Swahili, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, and so on. If I had time, I would develop a program to do this—to create text books and recordings and so on that present Islamic literature as a whole and to present the history of various Islamic literatures on the basis of the Islamic understanding of history and historiography rather than on Western models, which we see today. Literature is a very good way of teaching about Islam, about ethics, about the Islamic religion itself, and also training the mind and the imagination in general. I have not spoken in this interview about imagination, as it might appear to be somewhat complicated to explain in its traditional sense, but it is also a major faculty that we have been given. And no civilization can survive without transforming the imagination of those who belong to it. These modern games that my own grandchildren play all the time, with these terrible electronic gadgets, most of them atrophy the imagination as well as the mind. Literature, poetry, now cinema if it is well made, other visual materials can bring out the grandeur of Islamic civilization through its marvelous art, music, architecture, etc. Education should be such that the imaginative faculty of Muslim students is as impregnated by Islamic images as his mind should be with Islamic ideas.

We do not only have a body and a mind but also the power of imagination. And literature and art, of course, are very important in training this faculty. We have to pay special attention to the arts and to the world of Islamic art as a whole. We also have to start reading and evaluating world literature from the point of view of the Islamic worldview. Yes, we have to study in addition to Islamic literature Dante, Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, James Joyce, Victor Hugo,, and other great Western writers; but we also have to study Chinese, Japanese and Indian writers as well as other non-Muslim and non-Western ones. We should not be paying attention only to the West and ourselves. Muslims have contributed to the literatures of so many different languages, from Bengali to Chinese to Yoruba. It is important that we cultivate this awareness. This would give a sense of pride in the positive sense, of rootedness, to our students. The students will not feel as though they come from a civilization that has no culture, no thought, is restricted to eating curry and praying on Fridays. The way to achieve all of this is only through education.

One of your most influential published passages about education declares that in classical Islamic education, a teacher is not only a mu‘allim but also a murabbī. To close, can you give our educators a sense of what that means in terms of the responsibility of the teacher?

This in a sense is everything. The ideal situation would be that no one would be accepted as a teacher unless he or she possessed an ethical character and were sure of his or her vocation, in the deep spiritual sense that is a God-given aptitude. We must find people who have studied well and who are teachers because they want to teach, not because they had no other choice. We have to train them—by having qualified teachers of teachers. There are several very important conditions that must be fulfilled in order to accomplish this process. First, if you are going to have an Islamic school, the teachers, of course, should be primarily Muslim—not only nominally, but persons who seek to live as much as they can by emulating the virtues of the Prophet, *‘alayhī aṣ-ṣalāt wa’-s-salām*, the spiritual teachings of the Qur’ān, and Islam in general. Second, the teachers must be models for the students in several ways: in uprightness, correctness, truthfulness, not being deceitful. Uprightness includes all of this: it is a very good English word. Especially the question of truthfulness, of trying to get the students to realize this quality in different aspects of their lives, is essential.

Third, the teacher must have a sense of compassion and generosity: the person who is by nature angry does not make a good teacher. He might be a great scientist or a scholar, but not a good teacher. Not every good scholar is a good teacher. Not every great scientist is fit to be a teacher of physics. Einstein was not a good teacher of physics for young students; he was very good for advanced people, who would sit down and discuss difficult issues of physics with him. But to form a student you need a person who has the art for that task, and one of the required characteristics is love and compassion for the student as well as the subject that he or she teaches, for the profession itself. The Prophet said that the ink of the pen of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr—what a remarkable saying. How exalted this calling is! The person who wants to be a teacher must realize that he or she is dealing with the soul of one of God’s creatures. In traditional Islamic civilization this truth was recognized and the teacher was held in much higher esteem than what we find in modern society today. A tremendous sense of responsibility is necessary, and, as said, also always love and compassion in addition to knowledge, rectitude, and truthfulness.

Fourth, there has to be a sense of objectivity which comes with truthfulness. On the part of the students, they must try not to bring everything back to the level of simple repetition but for each to absorb what he or she is taught and make it a part of his or her being. On the part of the teacher himself or herself, he or she must see the needs of each student, and must be objective vis-à-vis his or her particular interest, inclinations, and aptitudes.

I also believe that teachers in a situation like we are in, here in North

America, should undergo serious training to gain greater knowledge of Islamic civilization, of Islamic thought and intellectual tradition, of the Islamic sciences, literatures, and so on. Fortunately there already exists a certain amount of literature in English on these disciplines. In any case these are all conditions that have to be met and in a sense realized in people who are going to become teachers and who in turn are going to train students. The idea of being a *murabbī* in addition to being a *mu'allim* is essential, because the student oftentimes learns more from his teacher than from his parents, even as far as non-academic matters are concerned. I have had this experience in my own life. I am a father and a grandfather, and in both the case of my children and now my grandchildren, it is amazing to see how impressionable young children are vis-à-vis their teachers as well as elders. I have been teaching at the university level for over fifty years, first at Harvard, then at Tehran University, then Temple, and now George Washington University. God knows how many people I have taught. The impressionability is always there; it is not only there at the age of ten. Students become less impressionable as they grow older, when they are more or less already formed, but all the way through the college level there is this element of impressionability that is at once intellectual, ethical, and spiritual. Therefore, there is a great deal of responsibility in what one says and how one acts. Of course the student, whether young or somewhat older, gauges the sincerity of the teacher easily. If the teacher does not believe in what he is saying, then the student will not believe it either. I am not talking about facts, or simple transmission of theories and ideas. I am talking about the things that matter in life. And here is where the question of being a *murabbī* comes in. A child or young student who realizes that the teacher is sincere and principled and is interested in him or her will open up. A teacher who does not have the qualities of sincerity, compassion, and honesty will not have the power of transmitting successfully something that is existentially important to the student. And so of course every educational system must begin not with the student but with the training of the teacher as both *mu'allim* and *murabbī*.

And God knows best.