

# **Education in Islam: The role of the Mosque**

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## EDUCATION IN ISLAM: THE ROLE OF THE MOSQUE

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The Quran, re-currently, urges the faithful to acquire knowledge, knowledge that would bring them closer to God and to His creation. Many verses of the sacred book command this act as follows:

**‘Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: Are those who know not? But only men of understanding will pay heed’ (39: 9)**

**‘And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are signs indeed for those who reflect.’ (45: 13)**

The Quran uses repetition in order to imbed certain key concepts in the consciousness of its listeners.<sup>1</sup> Allah (God) and Rab (the Sustainer) are repeated 2,800 and 950 times respectively in the sacred text; Ilm (knowledge) comes third with 750 mentions.<sup>2</sup>

The Prophet (pbuh) commanded knowledge upon all Muslims, and urged them to seek knowledge as far they could reach, and also to seek it at all times.

Following these commands and traditions, Muslim rulers insisted that every Muslim child acquired learning, and they themselves gave considerable support to institutions, and learning in general. This contributed largely with the commands of Islam to make elementary education almost universal amongst Muslims. ‘It was this great liberality,’ says Wilds ‘which they [the Muslims] displayed in educating their people in the schools which was one of the most potent factors in the brilliant and rapid growth of their civilisation. Education was so universally diffused that it was said to be difficult to find a Muslim who could not read or write.’<sup>3</sup> In Muslim Spain, according to Scott, there was not a village where ‘the blessings of education’ could not be enjoyed by the children of the most indigent peasant, and in Cordoba were eight hundred public schools frequented alike by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and where instruction was imparted by lectures. The Spanish Muslim received knowledge at the same time and under the same conditions as the literary pilgrims from Asia Minor and Egypt, from Germany, France, and Britain.<sup>4</sup> And in the great Muslim university of Cordoba, both Jews and Christians attained to acknowledged distinction as professors.<sup>5</sup> So high was the place of learning that both teachers and pupils were greatly respected by the mass of the population; and the large libraries collected by the wealthy landed and merchants showed that learning—as in the Italian Renaissance (six hundred years later)—was one of the marks of a gentleman.<sup>6</sup> ‘In scarcely any other culture,’ Pedersen holds, has the literary life played such a role as in Islam. Learning (ilm), by which is meant the whole world of the intellect, engaged the interest of Muslims more than anything.... The life that evolved in the mosques spread outward to put its mark upon influential circles everywhere.’<sup>7</sup> Every place, from the mosque to the hospital, the observatory, to the madrassa was a place of learning. Scholars also addressed gatherings of people in their own homes. Al-Ghazali, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sinna, amongst many more, after teaching in public schools, retired to their private libraries and studies, and continued

teaching those fortunate enough to be invited.<sup>18</sup>

This universality, not even equalled today,<sup>9</sup> thirst and impetus for education was proper to those days, when Islam was the banner, and like most achievements only proper to those days, and none others. The role and place taken by knowledge in that era will be considered (God willing) in subsequent works. Here, focus will be on the organisation of education, its aims and methods, above all the role of the Mosque. That of the madrassa, another lengthy subject, will be covered subsequently.

The mosque played a very great part in the spread of education in Islam. For Tibawi, the association of the mosque with education remains one of its main characteristics throughout history.<sup>10</sup> For Scott, the school became an indispensable appendage to the mosque.<sup>11</sup> From the start, the mosque, Wardenburg explains, was the centre of the Islamic community, a place for prayer, meditation, religious instruction, political discussion, and a school. And anywhere Islam took hold, mosques were established, and basic instruction began. Once established, such mosques could develop into well known places of learning, often with hundreds, sometimes with thousands of students, and frequently contained important libraries.<sup>12</sup>

The first school connected with a mosque, was set up at Medina in 653, whilst the first one in Damascus dates from 744, and by 900 nearly every mosque had an elementary school for the education of both boys and girls.<sup>13</sup> Children usually started school at five, one of the first lessons in writing was to learn how to write the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God and simple verses from the Quran.<sup>14</sup> After the rudiments of reading and writing were mastered, the Quran was then studied thoroughly and arithmetic was added. For those who wanted to study further, the larger mosques, where education was more advanced, offered instruction in Arabic grammar and poetry, logic, algebra, biology, history, law, and theology.<sup>15</sup> Although advanced teaching often took place in madrassas, hospitals, observatories, and the homes of scholars, in Spain, teaching took place mostly in the mosques, starting with the Cordoba mosque in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup>

The basic format of mosque education was the study circle, better known in Islam as *‘Halaqat al-ilm’* or in brief: Halaqa. Halaqa, spelled Halka in the new edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, is defined as ‘a gathering of people seated in a circle,’ or, ‘gathering of students around a teacher.’<sup>17</sup> Visiting scholars were allowed to sit beside the lecturer as a mark of respect, and in many Halaqat a special section was always reserved for visitors.<sup>18</sup> Al-Bahluli (d.930) a magistrate from a town in Iraq went down to Baghdad, accompanied by his brother, to make a round of such study circles. The two of them came upon one where a scholar ‘aflame with intelligence,’ was taking on all comers in various fields of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Ibn Battuta, recorded that more than five hundred students attended the Halaqat of the Ummayyad mosque.<sup>20</sup> The Mosque of Amr near Cairo had more than forty halaqat at some point,<sup>21</sup> and in the chief mosque of Cairo, there were one hundred and twenty halaqat.<sup>22</sup> The traveller, geographer Al-Muqaddasi, reports that between the two evening prayers, as he and his friends sat talking, he heard a cry ‘Turn your faces to the class’ and he realised he was sitting between two classes; altogether there were 110.<sup>23</sup> During the halaqats, whilst teachers exercised authority, students were still allowed, in fact, encouraged to discuss and even challenge and correct the teacher, often in heated exchanges.<sup>24</sup> Disputations, unrestricted, in all fields of knowledge were known to take place on Friday in the study circles held around the mosques,<sup>25</sup> and ‘no holds were barred.’<sup>26</sup>

Teaching and learning in most large mosques became according to Mackensen, ‘a fully fledged profession,’ and the mosque school took on the semblance of an academy or even a university later on.<sup>27</sup> So important

centres of higher learning, indeed, that many of them still exist today<sup>28</sup> as the oldest universities in the world. Amongst these, Al-Qayrawwan and Al-Zaytuna in Tunisia, Al-Azhar in Egypt, and Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco. As places of renown, they attracted great names of Muslim scholarship, either as students, or teachers, or both. Many among the graduates of the mosques of Muslim Spain were Ibn Roshd, Ibn Al-Sayigh, and Ibn Bajja. In Basra (Iraq) Al-Khallil Ibn Ahmad gave lectures on philosophy at a mosque, and one of his students was Sibawaih who later became one of the most renowned Arabic grammarians of all times.<sup>29</sup> From the beginning of the 12th century until our time, 'the glory' of the Qarawiyyin, it is held, was its body of scholars (ulamas).<sup>30</sup> Among the scholars who studied and taught there were Ibn Khaldoun, Ibn Al-Khatib, Al-Bitruji, Ibn Harazim, Ibn Maymoun, and Ibn Wazzan, and possibly even the future pope Gerbert (d.1003), who later became Pope Sylvester II, and who introduced the Arabic numerals into Europe.<sup>31</sup> Al-Azhar attracted Ibn Al-Haytham who lived in its quarters for a long period, whilst Ibn Khaldoun taught there towards the end of the fourteenth century, and Al-Baghdadi taught medicine at the end of the 12th century.<sup>32</sup>

The renown of such places attracted large numbers of students. In large numbers they flocked to Medina, one of the earliest and more advanced schools, which was connected with its chief mosque.<sup>33</sup> Al Qarawiyyin<sup>34</sup> attracted scores of students from all over Morocco, the rest of North Africa, Andalusia and even the Sahara. Generally they were housed by the successive Moroccan dynasties and the people of Fez.<sup>35</sup> The universities of Granada, Seville and Cordoba were held in the highest estimation by the scholars of Asia, Africa and Europe, and in the ninth century, in the department of theology at Cordoba, alone, four thousand students were enrolled, and the total number in attendance at the University reached almost eleven thousand.<sup>36</sup> And on the eve of the British occupation, in Al-Azhar, were already 7600 students and 230 professors.<sup>37</sup>

In the early Islamic era, the mosque was used for the teaching of one or more of the Islamic sciences and literary arts, but after the mid ninth century, more and more came to be devoted to the legal sciences.<sup>38</sup> Scientific subjects were also delivered, and included astronomy and engineering at Al-Azhar,<sup>39</sup> medicine also at Al-Azhar and the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Egypt.<sup>40</sup> At the Qarawiyyin, there were courses on grammar, rhetoric, logic, elements of mathematics and astronomy,<sup>41</sup> and possibly history, geography and elements of chemistry.<sup>42</sup> At Qayrawwan and Zaytuna in Tunisia, alongside the Quran and jurisprudence were taught grammar, mathematics, astronomy and medicine.<sup>43</sup> At Qayrawwan, in particular, classes in medicine were delivered by Ziad. B. Khalfun, Ishak B. Imran and Ishak B. Sulayman,<sup>44</sup> whose works were subsequently translated by Constantine The African in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They were taught in the first faculty of medicine in Europe: Salerno, in the South of Italy, which became the first institution of high learning in Latin Europe. At the Mosque of Amr, the Muslim traveller-geographer Al-Muqaddasi (from Al-Quds) reports that between the two evening prayers, the mosque was crowded with classes in law, the Quran, literature and wisdom (philosophy or ethics).<sup>45</sup> Whilst in Iraq, pharmacology, engineering, astronomy and other subjects were taught in the mosques of Baghdad, and students came from Syria, Persia and India to learn these sciences.<sup>46</sup>

The mosques gradually took on wider functions on top of learning. Tracing this evolution, George Makdisi states that in the tenth century there was a flourishing of a new type of college, combining the masjid with a khan or inn to lodge law students from out of town. The great patron of this second stage in the development of the college was Badr ibn Hasanawaih (d. 1014/1015), governor of several provinces under the Buyids, and to whose name 3,000 masjid-khan complexes were credited over the thirty-year period of

his governorship.<sup>47</sup> The reason for the masjid-khan complex, Georges Makdisi explains, was that the student of law had to pursue over a long period, usually four years for undergraduate studies alone, and an indeterminate period for graduate studies, often as many as twenty years, during which the graduate disciple assisted the master in teaching. The masjid could not be used for lodging, except under special circumstances, the inn or khan thus became the lodging place of the staff and students and was founded in proximity to the masjid. The madrasa, which will be considered at a further stage, was, according to Makdisi, the final stage in the development of the Muslim college, combining the teaching function of the masjid with the lodging function of the khan.<sup>48</sup> This follows a tradition long established by the Prophet's (pbuh) whose mosque was connected to a building which served as a school and as a hostel for poor students and out of towners.<sup>49</sup>

Assistance for students in the various mosques was substantial. At the Qarawiyyin, for instance, students were not only exempt from paying fees but were also given monetary allowances periodically.<sup>50</sup> Bayard Dodge states that, there, the students lived in residential quadrangles, which contained two and three story buildings of varying sizes, accommodating between sixty and a hundred and fifty students, who all received a minimal assistance for food and accommodation.<sup>51</sup> The number of students at Al-Azhar was always high, Al-Maqrizi mentioning 750 foreign students from as distant lands as the Maghreb and Persia at one time residing in the mosque,<sup>52</sup> in addition to students from all parts of Egypt. Bayard Dodge states that those students who did not have homes in Cairo, each was assigned to a residential unit, which was endowed to care for him. Generally, the unit gave the resident students free bread, which supplemented food given to them by their families, whilst better off students could afford to live in lodgings near the mosque. Every large unit also included a library, kitchen and lavatory, and some space for furniture.<sup>53</sup> On his visit to Damascus, the traveller, Ibn Jubair reported the high number and varied facilities for foreign students and visitors at the Umayyad Mosque,<sup>54</sup> prompting him to declare that 'Anyone in the West who seeks success, let him come to this city (Damascus) to study, because assistance here is abundant. The chief thing is that the student here is relieved of all worry about food and lodging, which is a great help.'<sup>55</sup>

The rulers played a major part in the endowment of mosques for education purposes. At the Qarawiyyin were three separate libraries, the most prestigious of which being the Abu Inan Library,<sup>56</sup> founded by the Merinid Sultan, Al-Mutawakkil Abu Inan. An avid reader and collector, the Sultan deposited in his newly founded library books on various subjects that included religion, science, intellect and language, and he also appointed a librarian to take charge of the affairs of the library.<sup>57</sup> In Tunisia, when the Spaniards occupied Tunis between 1534 and 1574, they ransacked its mosques and libraries, and removed many of the precious books and manuscripts.<sup>58</sup> The Ottoman subsequently expelled the Spaniards, and restored and expanded the Zaytuna mosque, its libraries and madrasa, and made it again a high centre of Islamic culture.<sup>59</sup> In Cairo, in 1365, the Mamluke prince, Yalbagha Al-Umari, ordered that each student at the mosque of Ibn Tulun be given forty dirhams and one irdab of wheat every month.<sup>60</sup> The Mamlukes also paid the salaries and stipends to large numbers of teachers and students.<sup>61</sup> This trend was particularly encouraged by Sultan Husam Al-Din Lajin, who restored the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in the Qatayi district of Cairo, paying salaries for professors and stipends for students, and having the royal physician Sharaf Al-Din Muhammad Ibn Al-Hawafir deliver in it lectures on medicine.<sup>62</sup>

The following tale enlightens us greatly on education and Muslim life of then.<sup>63</sup> When Ibn Tulun ruled Egypt, some students attended the class of a professor who dictated daily such a small portion of tradition that their money ran out before the class was finished, and they had to sell everything they had to buy

food. After starving for three days, they resorted to begging. None of them wanted to face such disgrace, though. So they cast the lot, and the one who lost went into a corner of the mosque where they lived and asked God to be released from this shame. Just then a messenger came from Ibn Tulun with money for he had been warned in a dream to help them; there was also a message that he would visit them in person the next day. To avoid this honour, which might have been thought as a desire for personal glory, the students fled from Cairo that night. Ibn Tulun bought the whole of that ward and endowed the mosque with it for the benefit of students and strangers residing in it.

In more than one respect Islam influenced Europe and subsequently the rest of the world with its system of education, including universality and its methods of teaching and granting diplomas. Georges Makdisi shows this adequately,<sup>64</sup> and raises some crucial points in this respect. Amongst others, Islam influenced the West and the course of university scholarship in terms of academic freedom of professors and students, in the doctoral thesis and its defence, and in the peer review of scholarly work based on the consensus of peers.<sup>65</sup> The open scholarly discussions in the mosques surely accounted for much of that in times when scientific intolerance ruled elsewhere, and any free scholarly thought was punished with burning at the stake. The influence also came in the form of the many translated books of Islamic scholars which formed the core of European education in their first universities (Montpellier, Bologna, Paris, Oxford...), which all were founded in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. The influence can also be seen in other respects, too long, and too detailed to go into here, and which both Makdisi and Ribera<sup>66</sup> explain very adequately and in intricate detail.

As a conclusion, and to answer those "scholars", who blame the decline of Muslim civilization on Islam rather than on the occupation and devastation of its centres of learning (Cordoba, Baghdad, Seville, etc,) by Crusaders and Mongols, this essay has shown that Islam and knowledge went together, closely, and from the very early stages. Other than the urge of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) which prompted people to learn, the concrete symbol of Islam, the Mosque, was the centre of learning. And, indeed, until now, in most parts of the Islamic world, the word Jamaa means at once both mosque and school, even when they are separate buildings, most often distant from each other. Finally, 'Jamia', the word for university in Arabic derives from Jami, mosque. No similar derivation exists in any other language or culture; no better association between Islam and higher learning than this.

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- <sup>6</sup> F.B. Artz: *The mind, The Mind of the Middle Ages*; Third edition revised; The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.151.
- <sup>7</sup> J.Pedersen: *The Arabic Book*, Tr. Geoffrey French, Princeton University Press; Princeton, New Jersey, 1984, P. 37.

- <sup>8</sup> M. Nakosteen: *History of Islamic origins of Western Education, 800-1350*; University of Colorado Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1964, P.48.
- <sup>9</sup> In Western universities, these days, a foreign student has to pay considerable fees to receive training; and some branches of teaching (social sciences, and history in particular) are forbidden to foreigners from the 'wrong' parts of the world, and especially those holding 'wrong' views.
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