

# Education in Islam: The Role of the Mosque

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## EDUCATION IN ISLAM: THE ROLE OF THE MOSQUE

The Quran recurrently 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, for example:

**Then `Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: Can those who know and those who do not know be deemed equal? But only those who are endowed with insight will keep this in mind.'**  
(Quran 39: 9)

**`And He has subjected to you, [as a gift] from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are messages indeed for people who think.'** (Quran 45: 13)

The Quran uses repetition in order to imbed certain key concepts in the consciousness of its readers.<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 repetitions.<sup>2</sup> Prophet (peace be upon him) commanded all Muslims to seek knowledge wherever and whenever they could.

In light of these Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions, Muslim rulers gave considerable support to education and its institutions, insisting that every Muslim child be given access to it. Thus, elementary education became almost universal among Muslims. Wilds says,

**`It was this great liberality which they 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, 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 by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike.<sup>4</sup> And in the great Muslim University of Cordoba, 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 landowners 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> Pedersen says that,

**`In scarcely any other culture 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>

All public institutions, from the mosques and madrassas to the hospitals and observatories, were places of learning. Scholars also addressed gatherings of people in their own homes. Al-Ghazali, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), among many others, after teaching in public schools, retired to their private libraries and studies, but continued to teach `those fortunate enough to be invited.'<sup>8</sup>

This universality, thirst, and impetus for education, not even equalled today,<sup>9</sup> was a distinguishing mark of that period, when Islam was at its zenith, both as a religion and as a civilisation. The role and place of knowledge in that era will be considered (God willing) in subsequent works. The role of the madrasa, another lengthy subject, will also be covered subsequently. Here, focus will be on the organisation of education, its aims, and the ways in which it was imparted, and above all the role of the mosque.

The mosque played a major part in the spread of education in the Muslim World, and the association of the mosque with education remained one of its main characteristics throughout history<sup>10</sup>, and, the school became an indispensable appendage to the mosque.<sup>11</sup> From the earliest days of Islam, the mosque was the centre of the Muslim community, a place for prayer, meditation, religious instruction, political discussion, and a school. And anywhere Islam took hold, mosques were established, and basic religious and educational instruction began. Once established, mosques developed into well-known places of learning, often with hundreds, even thousands, of students, and frequently contained important libraries.<sup>12</sup>

The first school connected to a mosque was set up at Medina in 653, 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 was learning 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 introduced. 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 madrasahs, 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 in which education took place in the mosque was the study circle, better known in the Muslim World as "*Halaqat al-Ilm*", or *Halaqa* for short. A *Halaqa* is literally defined as 'a gathering of people seated in a circle' or 'a 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 *Halaqas* a special section was always reserved for visitors.<sup>18</sup> Although the teachers were in charge of the *Halaqas*, the students were allowed - in fact, encouraged - to challenge and correct the teacher, often in heated exchanges.<sup>19</sup> Disputations, unrestricted, in all fields of knowledge took place on Friday in the study circles held around the mosques,<sup>20</sup> and no holds were barred.<sup>21</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 'afire with intelligence' was taking on all comers in many different fields of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Ibn Battuta recorded that more than five hundred students attended the *Halaqas* of the Umayyad mosque.<sup>23</sup> The Mosque of Amr ibn Al-'Aas in Cairo had more than forty *Halaqas* at one point,<sup>24</sup> while in, the chief mosque of Cairo there were one hundred and twenty.<sup>25</sup> The traveller and geographer Al-Muqaddasi reports that between the two main evening prayers, as he and his friends sat talking in the Mosque of Amr ibn Al-'Aas, he heard a cry, 'Turn your faces to the class!' and he realised he was sitting between two *halaqas*; the mosque was crowded with classes in law, the Quran, literature, philosophy, and ethics.<sup>26</sup>

In most of the larger mosques teaching and studying became fully-fledged professions and the mosque school took on the semblance of an academy or even became a university later on. In this way, important centres of higher education came into being. They became well renowned and attracted great numbers of students and scholars, including the most illustrious names of Muslim scholarship. In Basra in Iraq, Al-Khalil

ibn Ahmad was a lecturer in philosophy at a mosque and one of his students was Sibawaih, who later became one of the greatest Arabic grammarians of all time. The universities of Muslim Spain, particularly those of Granada, Seville and Cordoba, which evolved from mosques, were held in the highest estimation across the world. Among their graduates were Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Sayigh and Ibn Bajja. In the university of Cordoba in the ninth century, four thousand students were enrolled in the department of theology alone, and the total number of students in attendance at the University was almost eleven thousand.

Many of the Muslim centres of learning still exist today, and are considered to be the oldest universities in the world. Among them are Al-Qayrawwan and Al-Zaytuna in Tunisia, Al-Azhar in Egypt, and Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco.

The 'glory' of Al-Qarawiyyin, which was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was its body of scholars, the *ulema*. Among the scholars who studied and taught there were Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Al-Khatib, Al-Bitruji, Ibn Harazim, Ibn Maymoun, and Ibn Wazzan, and possibly even Gerbert of Aurillac (d.1003), who later became Pope Sylvester II, and who introduced Arabic numerals into Europe. Al-Qarawiyyin attracted great numbers of students from all over North Africa, Spain, and the Sahara. In general, they were housed by the successive Moroccan dynasties and the ordinary people of Fez. The scholars of Al-Azhar, which is probably the most famous Islamic university today, included Ibn Al-Haytham, who lived there for a long period; Al-Baghdadi, who taught medicine there in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century; and Ibn Khaldun, who taught there towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, after moving from Al-Qarawiyyin. On the eve of the British occupation of Egypt in 1881, there were 7600 students and 230 professors in Al-Azhar. In the early days of Islam, the mosques taught one or more of the Islamic sciences, but after the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, became increasingly devoted to legal subjects<sup>27</sup> Scientific subjects were also taught, including astronomy, engineering, and medicine at Al-Azhar.<sup>28</sup> The latter was also taught at the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Egypt.<sup>29</sup> 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>30</sup> While at the Qarawiyyin Mosque, there were courses on grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, and astronomy,<sup>31</sup> and possibly history, geography and chemistry.<sup>32</sup> At Qayrawwan and Zaytuna in Tunisia, grammar, mathematics, astronomy and medicine were taught alongside the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>33</sup> In Qayrawwan, Ziad delivered classes in medicine. Ibn Khalfun, Ishak Ibn Imran and Ishak Ibn Sulayman,<sup>34</sup> whose works were subsequently, translated by Constantine The African in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They were taught in Salerno, in the South of Italy, which became the first institute of higher education in Latin Europe.

The mosques gradually took on more functions, in addition to learning. Tracing this evolution, Makdisi states that in the tenth century there was a flourishing of a new type of college, combining the mosque with a khan – an inn to lodge law students from out of town. The great patron of this 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 the construction of 3,000 mosque-khan complexes was credited over the thirty-year period of his governorship.<sup>35</sup> The reason for the mosque-khan complex, was that the student of law had to pursue his studies 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 he assisted his master in teaching. The mosque itself could not be used for lodging, except under special circumstances; the khan thus became the lodging place of the staff and students and was found nearby. The madrassa, 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>36</sup> This follows a tradition long established by the Prophet (pbuh), whose mosque was connected to a building which served as a school and as a hostel for poor students and those from abroad.<sup>37</sup>

Assistance for students in the mosques was substantial. In Qarawiyyin, for instance, students were not only exempt from paying fees but were also given monetary allowances periodically.<sup>38</sup> Dodge states that, the students lived in residential quadrangles, which contained two and three story buildings of varying sizes, each accommodating 60-150 students, who all received a minimal assistance for food and accommodation.<sup>39</sup> The number of students at Al-Azhar was always high, Al-Maqrizi mentioning 750 foreign students from lands as distant as Morocco and Persia residing in the mosque at one time,<sup>40</sup> in addition to students from all over Egypt. Those students who did not have homes in Cairo were assigned to a residential unit, which was endowed to care for them. Generally, the units gave their residents free bread, which supplemented food given to them by their families, while better off students could afford to live in lodgings near the mosque. Every unit also included a library, a kitchen, a lavatory, and some space for furniture.<sup>41</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>42</sup> prompting him to declare that 'Anyone in the West who seeks success, let him come to this city to study, because assistance here is abundant. The main thing is that the student here is relieved of all worry about food and lodging, which is a great help.'<sup>43</sup>

The rulers played a major part in the endowment of mosques for educational purposes. At the Qarawiyyin Mosque, there were three separate libraries, the most prestigious of which was the Abu Inan Library,<sup>44</sup> founded by the Merinid Sultan, Al-Mutawakkil Abu Inan. An avid reader and collector, the Sultan deposited books on subjects such as included religion, science, intellect, and language in his new library, and also appointed a librarian to take charge of its affairs.<sup>45</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>46</sup> The Ottoman Sultan subsequently expelled the Spaniards, and restored and expanded the Zaytuna mosque, its libraries and madrasa, and made it again a centre of high Islamic culture.<sup>47</sup> In Cairo, in 1365, the Mameluke prince, Yalbagha Al-Umari, ordered that each student at the mosque of Ibn Tulun be given forty dirhams (the basic monetary unit of that time) and one irdab of wheat every month.<sup>48</sup> The Mamelukes also paid the salaries and stipends of large numbers of teachers and students.<sup>49</sup> This trend was particularly encouraged by Sultan Husam Al-Din Lajin, who restored the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in the Qatay district of Cairo, paying salaries to professors and stipends to students, and asking his physician Sharaf Al-Din Muhammad Ibn Al-Hawafir to deliver lectures on medicine there.<sup>50</sup>

The following tale will enlighten us greatly on education and life in general, in the golden age of Islam.<sup>51</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, although none of them wanted to face such disgrace. So they cast a lot, and the one who lost went into a corner of the mosque where they lived and asked God to release him from his plight. 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 seen by others 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.

The Muslim system of education influenced Europe and later the rest of the world in many respects, such as its universality, and its methods of teaching and granting diplomas. Georges Makdisi illustrates this influence well, showing that aspects of university education such as the doctoral thesis and its defence, the peer review of scholarly work based on the consensus of peers, and - most importantly - the concept of academic freedom for professors and students, were all acquired by Europe from the Muslim World. The open scholarly discussions in the mosques were surely the main source of these influences in times when scientific intolerance ruled elsewhere, and free scholarly thought was often punished with burning at the stake. Academic influence also came in the form of the many books written by Islamic scholars which became the core texts of education in the first European universities (Montpellier, Bologna, Paris, Oxford etc.), which all were founded between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There were many other ways in which the Muslims influenced education in Europe, which are too long and too detailed to go into here. Please refer to the excellent works on this subject by Makdisi and Ribera<sup>52</sup> found in the bibliography.

Finally, to answer those who blame the decline of Muslim civilization on Islam rather than on the occupation and devastation of its centres of learning such as Cordoba, Baghdad, and Seville by the Europeans and the Mongols, we conclude that from its earliest days Islam went hand in hand with scholarship and knowledge. As well as, the verses of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which urged people to learn and seek knowledge, the mosque, the concrete symbol of Islam, was the most important centre of learning in the Muslim World. Indeed, in most Muslim countries, the word *Jamaa* at once both mosque and school. In Arabic, the word for university *Jami'a*, is derived from *Jami*, mosque. No similar derivation exists in any other language or culture; and there is no better illustration of the association between Islam and education than this.

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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <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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