

# What is Wrong with Our Education System?

**By Khalid Baig**

Quick question: Who discovered America? The almost guaranteed answer: Why, Columbus, of course. The bright student may even know the famous story that Columbus thought he had reached India and therefore called the people he found Indians.

If providing sound knowledge and developing critical thinking capabilities are any goals of an education system, the answer highlights the miserable failure of the education system prevalent in the Muslim world today on both counts. For no one asks the obvious: How can anyone be credited with discovering a land that was already heavily populated? Columbus was the first European to discover America, not the first man. Hundreds of thousands of other men and women had reached there before him and had been living for centuries. The assertion about Columbus reveals a Euro-centric mindset but the bias goes undetected and unquestioned.

This is not the only questionable fact that our schools and colleges, and textbooks and teachers have been dispensing. In every field of study, they have been passing on "facts", ideas, values, assumptions, perspectives, explanations, "truths", and principles that are questionable, secular and anti-Islamic. All while sincerely believing that they are providing a great service by promoting education.

Education is a wonderful thing. But what are we really teaching?

In science, we are teaching our students to look at the universe from the viewpoint of a person who does not know God. "And how many Signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn their faces away from them." [Yusuf, 12:105]. A proper study of science would make one appreciate both the Power, Majesty, and Grandeur of Allah's creations and the humbleness and limitations of human knowledge and abilities. Today our science education, in its best form, gives exactly the opposite message. It also fails to enable students to separate scientist's opinions from their facts. Let's ask: In the wide Muslim world is there any, Islamic school teaching science whose graduates can challenge Darwin's Theory of Evolution on scientific grounds? As we teach science, are we teaching our children to put science in its proper place, to know its limitations? Can they competently question the "technological imperative"?

A medical doctor would not be considered competent if he did not know the limitations of the medicines and procedures he used. An engineer would be considered unqualified if he did not know the limitations of his tools. Why then our teaching of science does not include a discussion of its limitations? Because for the secular mindset science is the ultimate tool, the supreme arbiter of Truth and Falsehood. Without even realizing it, we have accepted the proposition and our science education reflects that assumption.

The problem is not limited to science and technology. The best of our MBAs have learned that the goal of a business is to maximize profits, the goal of marketing is to create demand, and the proper way of making business decision is through cost-benefit analysis. All of these are as solid in their eyes and as questionable in reality as the assertion about Columbus. The best of our journalism graduates do not have a different model for journalism than the one presented by the West. They do not have their own definition of the news, their purpose for gathering it or their own moral standards that must regulate its dissemination. In economics we have been teaching

that human beings are utility-maximizing animals governed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In our teaching of history, we see random events without a moral calculus driving them. We do not see Allah's laws that govern the rise and fall of nations. In psychology or sociology, medicine or engineering, civics or geography, it is the same story. In fact, our schools and colleges have been the main agency for secularization of Islamic societies. They have been effectively teaching that Islam is irrelevant to understanding this world or to solving its problems. Many of their graduates develop misunderstandings and doubts about their faith. But even when they are strong practicing Muslims, they have not been trained and educated to detect and challenge the secular dogmas that have been integrated into their curriculums.

This great tragedy is of a recent origin and a historical perspective may be helpful. For centuries our societies, culture, and education system were free of the secular/religious dichotomy. Our schools taught all subjects of importance using a *naturally unified* approach. As long as Muslims were the leaders in all the sciences (until the fifteenth century C.E) subjects like medicine, astronomy, and chemistry had not developed their secular biases.

The dichotomy started in the West during its "Renaissance" as it threw away its religious dogmas--which had become a burden--and found a speedy path to material progress using a-religious or secular approaches. The industrial revolution gave it momentum. Colonialism brought secular ideology and the religion of secular humanism to the Muslim lands.

At this time, Muslims were at a low point on several fronts. They had surrendered intellectual leadership to the West and had failed to keep pace with scientific developments there. They found themselves in a no-win situation. If they accepted and taught the Western sciences, they would also be teaching anti-Islamic dogmas. If they stayed isolated, they would be left behind in science and material progress.

In response, Muslims developed two approaches. Our Darul-ulooms preserved Islamic knowledge and values by hermetically sealing themselves against western influences. It is due to this effort that Islamic knowledge is alive and well today. (Where they were lax in this matter --- as in some Arab countries--- the result was a compromise in their Islamic character without any advantage in the quality of education.) However, they are not equipped to provide leadership in most other areas of the society. This role has gone to the graduates of the Western-style schools and colleges. Unfortunately, these schools and their curriculum nurture secular ways of looking at this world and solving its problems. The tensions created by the two diametrically opposed systems can be seen today in every Muslim country.

This dichotomy must end. We cannot move forward without revamping our education. We cannot fully establish Islam in our societies without producing educated citizens and leaders needed for an Islamic society. The time is now to develop Integrated Islamic curriculums and remove secular biases from all of our education. Merely establishing more schools is not the answer. Developing educational institutions that can teach *every* subject in the wholesome Islamic context is. It is a monumental task. But without it we'll continue to spread ignorance in the name of education.