

Review Essay

Rethinking Reform in Higher Education, From Islamization to Integration of Knowledge

Ziauddin Sardar and Jeremy Henzell-Thomas
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Introduction

This volume, one of the most important and timely publications of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), represents the latest effort by scholars associated with the organization to formulate an educational program for Muslims. Ziauddin Sardar and Jeremy Henzell-Thomas revise and update the attempts by Ismail Faruqi and fellow founders of IIIT in the 1980s to address the crisis of education faced then by Muslim societies. That is appropriate, for the crisis has not disappeared with the passage of time. If anything, it has become greater and now encompasses Muslims worldwide—not just those in Muslim societies. And, as the authors of this volume note repeatedly, it has captured the attention of educators in the US, UK, and most other European nations.

Now, eschewing the older Islamization of knowledge approach, Sardar and Henzell-Thomas propose the integration of knowledge. They set aside the old paradigm while offering minimal comments about the shortcomings that warrant such a change, perhaps so as to avoid giving rise to unnecessary quarrels. Major attention must be accorded, therefore, what the authors understand integration of knowledge to be and how it might address the needs of their specific audience—Muslim societies. One must wonder, all the same, why the audience is so defined. After all, the crisis of education affects people everywhere, Muslims in Muslim and non-Muslim societies as well as non-Muslims living in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. How do differences in political and economic problems faced by these various

groups affect the educational goals to be achieved and who is affected by them?

Another preliminary objection concerns the way both the earlier IIT reformers and those involved in the new project ignore or neglect the critique of shortcomings in educational approaches launched in the US early in the twentieth century by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, a critique that culminated in the Great Books movement. It, or, more accurately, offshoots of it, have given rise to attempts at general or liberal education in numerous American and European institutions. Especially pertinent for the integration of knowledge project is how these offshoots of the Great Books movement, ostensibly centered on Western writings at the outset, have gradually come to incorporate fundamental texts from the Golden Age of the Arabic and Islamic tradition. Today more than ever, it is essential to promote the cultural phenomena common to all. Only greater awareness of the extent to which we are one people will allow us to counter those who seek to divide us and thereby fuel enmity.

Finally, no attention is accorded here to how the issues identified with the crisis of education are addressed in other faith traditions or to the way members of those traditions attempt to integrate the teachings of revealed texts with ones arising from simple human reasoning. Such a broader focus would have permitted the authors to propose an approach that might resonate with the general malaise expressed by many educators and suggest a way forward that all, not just Muslims, could embrace.

Still, these preliminary objections are just that, preliminary. To assess their merit, it is essential to consider carefully what is actually proposed in the volume under review. It consists of a Foreword setting forth the basic principles of the revised project and four chapters. The first, "Mapping the Terrain," is by Sardar, as is the second, "From Islamization to Integration of Knowledge." Henzell-Thomas is the author of the third and fourth chapters, "The Integration We Seek" and "Towards a Language of Integration."

An Overview of *Rethinking Reform in Higher Education*

In the Foreword, integration of knowledge is characterized as bringing together "Revealed knowledge with human efforts in knowledge production" and meeting the need for "a new paradigm rooted in the Qur'anic worldview and an epistemology based on the doctrine of *tawhīd* (the Oneness of God) and on responsibility to God, one's own soul, humankind, all created beings, and the natural world." That is not consonant with the immediately following claim that it "accords importance to Revealed and human

knowledge, and recognizes the diversity and plurality of our societies, as well as the accelerating pace of new technologies and innovations that are transforming the world” (viii). To the contrary, the paradigm privileges one view at the expense of others and denies the legitimacy of diverse views tolerated in pluralistic societies. Moreover, why is non-revealed knowledge presented as produced rather than discovered? If knowledge is true, then it is one—as no less an authority than Averroes (Ibn Rushd) has posited. If it is not true and not one, what can it be other than opinion?

As problematic as the epistemological grounding of the integration of knowledge paradigm is the implication that ethics derives only from a revealed or Qur’anic world-view. Is the ethical teaching so admirably formulated by pre-Islamic thinkers—Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Cicero, as well as numerous others subsequent to the advent of Islam, but who do not rely upon or are ignorant of the Qur’an’s teaching—to be peremptorily dismissed? If so, how will the revised project achieve “moderation, balance, and effective communication” and avoid “creating divisions,” the very goals it explicitly espouses (ix)?



No answer to that question is offered in Ziauddin Sardar’s “Mapping the Terrain” chapter, which strives to offer a sweeping, worldwide account of proposals for educational reform over the last 30 years. Nor does the chapter focus on education in Muslim countries or in Muslim schools within other countries, on Islamic education, in other words. Many themes are addressed in the account, beginning with the question of what education is for—training or intellectual formation—and the challenge to universities posed by rapid technological change in the last few decades which has culminated in calls for abandoning traditional university structures. Sardar rejects the latter and argues for preserving the political and economic independence of the university while exploring a panoply of new approaches to knowledge acquisition. He attaches special importance to the global complexity that today affects all human endeavors, especially learning, and prompts the growing suspicion that past assumptions about how to approach education may have now become irrelevant.

Difficult as it is to grasp the core argument of this chapter, given the absence of a clear theme, repetitive presentation of multitudinous critiques under several headings, and frequent typographical errors in spelling and grammar that often render the point of sentences obscure, this seems to be Sardar’s basic analysis. After making minor suggestions for adapting some of these critiques to problems of education in “the Muslim world,” he con-

cludes by noting that this “map is not the territory” and, more important, that “the terrain of reform in higher education and shaping of new paradigms is wide open” (65). To the contrary, the more obvious implication is that, far from being “wide open,” the terrain of reform is cluttered with multiple, often contradictory, analyses of the ills plaguing higher education and numerous conflicting proposals about how to resolve them. Consequently, “the terrain of reform in higher education” should more properly be characterized as utterly confused and most, if not all, of the “new paradigms” purporting to trace a path forward as failing to do so.



In the second chapter, “From Islamization to Integration of Knowledge,” Sardar intersperses summaries of discussions about educational reform from participants at IIIT-sponsored meetings in recent years with his own recommendations. This provides an excellent account of the thinking behind the attempt to bring knowledge and its acquisition into conformity with principles of Islam as well as for replacing the Islamization of knowledge paradigm with the new one outlined in this volume. Welcome as recognition of the flaws in the old attempt is, many of the faulty premises guiding it remain in the new. Education is presented as instruction, if not indoctrination (87), rather than, as its root implies, leading out—that is, leading out of ignorance to awareness. Similarly, castigation of Western actions and aspirations is still paramount and void of nuance. To assert that “the structure of ‘modern knowledge,’ and its divisions into various disciplines, is a direct product of the western worldview” (95) is to ignore the development of philosophy and science; the role played in it by thinkers from Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Iran, and beyond; and Ibn Khaldun’s masterful survey of learning at the end of the fourteenth century. More egregious, whatever criticism may justly be leveled at Orientalism, it is by no means a discipline (96).

To be sure, the education systems established by colonial powers were intended to serve colonial purposes. Yet those systems, intentionally or not, also provided means for study of the languages and cultures of colonized peoples and fostered independent thinking among some of them. Moreover, Sardar accords Foucault’s view of the world and learning too much credence. Disciplines arise from scholarly attempts to gain precision about the phenomena studied, and there is constant dialogue among those so engaged about methods to be followed and limits to be respected. This is what shapes disciplines, not some overarching adherence to Western superiority or hegemony.

The attack on disciplines, especially those characterizing the social sciences, is ancillary to the core issue: the materialism of Western thought. Erroneously confused here with secularism, the two must be distinguished. Materialism is what must give way to Islamic consciousness or to another non-materialist perspective (99-102). Lively debate about natural right and natural rights, requirements of justice, limits to be placed upon government, and related ethical or political questions, including civic duties and protections to be accorded citizens is prominent in current secular Western thought and offers precisely that perspective. These are subjects explored in the social sciences as well as in philosophy, history, and literature. Indeed, arguments for and against the notion that man is the measure of all things or that there is no basis for principled action date back to Socrates' critique of Protagoras and recur as a constant theme in the history of thought. As Anwar Ibrahim correctly notes, they figure just as prominently in Islamic thought (108-109). Rather than jettison Western thought and replace it with Islamic, it is much more reasonable to seek the high ground common to both and to build on it in order to combat materialism and moral relativism. These, after all, are the real foes. Such an endeavor would be more part of the "holistic education" aimed at by the new paradigm (126-127) and of the four nodes or pillars Sardar sees as guiding its first phase: the quest for the purpose of education, search for more inclusive and humane alternatives to current educational paradigms, recovery of the Islamic legacy, and attention to the impact current trends may have on generations to come (130-133).

Apparently, the division of labor for this volume resulted in Sardar assuming the task of showing first why educational reform is of such pressing concern now and then of indicating why the earlier attempt by engaged Muslims, particularly those affiliated with IIIT, to present a suitable program of education for Muslim societies falls short of what was needed. The criticisms expressed above notwithstanding, he has acquitted himself well in both instances. Moreover, he has presented an appealing outline of the planning involved in developing the new paradigm and provisions made for constant evaluation of its effectiveness.



Jeremy Henzell-Thomas contributes to this presentation of the project by offering a fuller account of the new paradigm in the volume's third chapter, "The Integration We Seek." The insights he provides about the proposed integrative education emphasize its promise for resolving the crises of education outlined in Sardar's two chapters. It is self-consciously an explorato-

ry approach that examines how the rich Islamic perspective fits with, and adds to, the Western. Appreciation of that deeper relationship suggests that what must be altered is the current understanding of the way these two fit together, not one or the other of them.

The chapter, divided into four sections, moves from analysis of tensions fostered by superficial attacks upon Islam and contemporary Muslim movements to strategies for overcoming the narrow parochialism that often prompts them. Not given sufficient attention here is the push-back in the Western press and academia against these attacks. Huntington's theme of a "clash of civilizations" has been widely criticized, and Niall Ferguson's claims about historical trends have been revealed as biased prejudices. To be sure, defenders of the one or the other—as well as of Fu'ad Ajami, Bernard Lewis, and several others—are still to be found. So, too, are the tired clichés used in polemics against their detractors. They are, all the same, a beleaguered group whose speech commands almost no attention outside their own limited circle of like-minded fellows.

Henzell-Thomas notes appropriately the tension between nostalgia for old ways even as their current irrelevance is acknowledged, for it evokes the disconnect between practical and theoretical education. Familiarity with old ways and customs is useful, as is knowing how to read and write. The Indian elder Henzell-Thomas describes in an anecdote calls to mind Ibn Ṭufayl's tale, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*. Ḥayy was as able to sustain himself in raw nature as the Indian elder. He had, in addition, inferred the workings of the natural order and acquired an inkling of the spiritual. In this respect, he represents the integration of practical and theoretical knowledge that Ibn Ṭufayl considered the hallmark of the teaching set forth by Plato, Aristotle, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Alghazali. What Ḥayy failed to grasp was the art of persuading others to accept his opinions—to know is not sufficient; one must also be able to impart knowledge to others, to put knowledge into practice. Once this shortcoming of Ḥayy is noted, the question of how others successfully deliver their message, the art or skill they use in that endeavor, comes to the fore. That, too, is integral to education.

Ḥayy lacked rhetorical acumen; he did not know how to speak to others on the basis of their opinions. Rhetoric, properly understood, is merely a persuasive tool. It is less rigorous than dialectic because it starts from the unexamined opinions cherished by the majority of the listeners. Dialectic is not, contrary to Henzell-Thomas's account, merely a debater's tool. It is, rather, the attempt by individuals of more or less equal intellectual strength to examine the plausibility of their more refined opinions—which may, all

the same, be erroneous. Plato's Socrates is not always the best exemplar of the art, and the attentive reader must be willing to challenge his opinions as well as the ones he contests, just as he or she must examine the speeches of characters in Shakespeare's plays—no one character is the spokesperson for Plato or Shakespeare. The unity Henzell-Thomas urges us to seek is, indeed, present in these different kinds of literature, but it is not immediately obvious.

We are at an impasse today, for most Western thinkers consider attention to non-Western thought a waste and dismiss such efforts as multi-cultural gestures. For them, culture began with Western thinkers and is best represented by the history of the debate carried on through time among them. That is myopic and simply wrong. Even if the pre-eminence of Plato and Aristotle is granted, the importance of thinkers from other cultures who have developed their thought and preserved it for us must be acknowledged. So, too, must the contributions of those who raise powerful objections to that teaching. And it is quite possible that yet other thinkers still not familiar to us may guide us in our quest for understanding and happiness. Above all, like the thinkers to whom we turn in the Golden Age of Arabic and Islamic culture, we must address the challenge of revealed knowledge. Discerning what it is and how to evaluate its claims are part of the understanding we seek and of the teaching we would like to pass on.

Henzell-Thomas wisely argues against trying to 'Islamize' all activities—that is, to put them all under some yet-to-be-defined notion of revealed guidance. To do so is no more helpful than casting them all under a Western rubric. As he notes so aptly, admonitions against the former abound in the Qur'an. Resistance to value relativism and the crass pursuit of materialism takes on many forms, at least in the US. Here, one finds scholarly journals devoted to the quest for natural right and natural law, books deploring the shallow character of American education (e.g., Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*), and independent scholarly institutes studying university education and its ills—all independent of religious affiliation. That is not to deny the existence of a crisis, but merely to insist that attacks upon the search for the good, noble, and true are and have been resisted in higher education generally.

What brings all of these reflections together, the theme upon which Henzell-Thomas concludes this chapter, is for education and teaching to be holistic. For him, this means engaging the heart as well as the mind (156-157). To illustrate the point, he directs the reader to Rūmī and his appeal to the imaginative as well as the rational faculty. The point is sound and

finds resonance in many quarters today. After undue emphasis on training in science and mathematics, there is growing awareness that the sensitivity to others and their plight aroused by the study of literary, poetical, and spiritual texts is a necessary part of education. In university settings, the approach must be in the spirit of inquiry, not instruction, as Eva Brann indicates in her contribution to the Zaytuna College journal, *Renovatio*.¹



Henzell-Thomas's art of gentle persuasion is equally evident in the fourth and final chapter, "Towards a Language of Integration," where his rich and appealingly suggestive exploration of how language choices aid or hinder thinking intimate the role they might play in developing and advancing the integration of knowledge paradigm. He begins with the tower of Babel story familiar to all to emphasize how it is understood in Islam as contrasted to Judaism and Christianity. For Muslims, humans are dispersed and have different languages not as a result of divine punishment for having arrogantly sought to build a tower that would reach to God, but due to God's desire that humans discover their commonality, diverse tongues and hues notwithstanding (167-170).² To the extent that integration of knowledge helps humans overcome such differences, it advances that goal. To illustrate the point, Henzell-Thomas explores numerous ways in which obstacles to human unity and interaction may be overcome. Important as is each one, three must seize our attention here: the middle way and its link with Aristotle's golden mean, the nuances of secularism, and the meanings of excellence.

In daily conduct, humans usually strive to avoid extremes. However much the courageous warrior who resists the onslaught of the enemy with little heed for his own preservation is praised and admired, one must pause to consider the conditions under which such fearlessness is appropriate. The standard here, as when the proper course of action with respect to simple pleasure is examined, must be the noble or beautiful—what Aristotle denotes in Greek as *kalos*. While Henzell-Thomas proposes *husn* as the Arabic equivalent of this standard, the preference accorded the term *jamil* by Alfarabi and Averroes seems more accurate. Whichever Arabic term is used, the point is clear: the goal is to draw close in action to what is fine, becoming, or attractive. To guide oneself by self-interest, broadly or narrowly defined, is not to aim at what is best for human beings.

For Henzell-Thomas, secularism is one of at least six problematic terms arising in popular discourse, others being multiculturalism, pluralism, tolerance, integration, and radical. Enough has been said about these others to

warrant passing over them now in order to focus on secularism. It is all-important insofar as it aims at thwarting the expression of faith-commitment, at least in the public sphere. The reason is that public manifestations of faith have heretofore threatened individual liberty. Since the latter is now considered sacrosanct in almost all Western polities, the former is no longer permitted. The ban in no way calls religious faith into question. Best understood, it merely accords public expression of religious faith no political sanction. “Best understood,” because actual practices often elude the rule. Today, given the awareness citizens in most Western polities have that not all citizens embrace the formerly dominant faith and that their liberty must also be respected, there is greater emphasis on respecting the tenets of secularism in all fora. That is a definite problem, but it is a problem involving justice and freedom for all, nothing more. It is not devotion to secularism that prompts A.J. Ayer to reject “knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense,”³ but materialism. His understanding of philosophy as analytic and dependent upon empirical science derives ultimately from Hume, but has other antecedents more immediate to his time. That is the point to grasp. Today, just as earlier, the battle to be waged is one against the attack on understanding and action posed by materialism—an attack that goes back to Hobbes, if not Machiavelli.

Henzell-Thomas’s essay on excellence or virtue, which he proposes as a model for the glossary of key terms to be drawn up by fellow members of the integration of knowledge project, is outstanding. He is correct to trace the term back to its Greek antecedent and to consider how it is understood in Arabic. That the Arabic term most often used by key figures in the Golden Age of the Arabic-Islamic tradition is *faḍīla*, not *iḥsān*, is worth noting and its consequences certainly ought to be explored—but not here. Missing in Arabic, but not in Latin, is the exclusively male sense of either term. In Greek, *aretē* evokes the god of war, Ares; and in Latin, as Henzell-Thomas notes, *virtus* calls up the notion of man—an especially manly man, an *hombre* or a *Mensch*, if one may speak in this way. These associations or origins are worth noting because of what they omit, the feminine. The Qur’an reminds us time and again that human beings have been created as a pair, man and woman. In our quest for guidelines by which to conduct ourselves, the excellences specific to women must not be overlooked.

Conclusion

In sum, this is a very important volume. It obliges the reader to reconsider what education is for, whom it may benefit, and how it may best be effected.

Precisely for that reason, it seems appropriate to say a little here about the larger context surrounding these issues. The premise guiding these observations is that—differences arising from language and customs, thoughts and beliefs, notwithstanding—we are all similar and must build on what unites us to overcome present estrangement and hostility.

Criticism of the path to, and substance of, education has been a constant theme in the history of human thought and has thrived in secular as well as non-secular societies. Socrates faulted Anaxagoras for undue emphasis on nature and substituted a focus on human things. Aristotle advanced his opinions by showing the flaws in the thinking of his predecessors and contemporaries. Alfarabi faulted the grammarians for their narrow approach to language. Alghazali castigated both Alfarabi and Avicenna because of what he took to be the implications of their teachings about revelation. And Averroes chastised Alghazali for the errors in those attacks as well as for misleading the Muslim community about fundamentals. In sum, successors taking their predecessors to task and suggesting a new path marks the history of thought. Learning, the search for knowledge, rather than its production, requires assessment of what has heretofore been accepted and thus its critique as well as revision. Errors may occur at any point, which is why past teachings must constantly be revisited. Awareness of those errors often prompts a call for a new educational paradigm, instances of which are to be found in our common cultural heritage: Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Alfarabi's *Selected Aphorisms* and *Summary of Plato's Laws*, Averroes's *Decisive Treatise*, and Rousseau's *Émile*, to mention just a few. Greater attention to the way these issues have been debated over time and to their universal character would permit the *Rethinking Reform* volume to address a broader audience.

It is disconcerting that no attention is paid here to the two educational paradigms that now hold sway. The European presupposes that students will receive solid training in the fundamentals of learning—mathematics, grammar, logic, reading, and natural science—at the secondary school level, then pursue rigorous study of the humanities, sciences (theoretical or applied), or law at universities or other institutions of advanced learning. Because training at the secondary level is less rigorous in the American paradigm, university studies are an amalgam of sorts between the last two years of the European secondary school or college and the first, general or introductory, year of university. Deeper investigation of different humanistic or scientific disciplines or professional training in medicine, law, and

business is undertaken in graduate school. (To be sure, since the student revolts of 1968, the European paradigm has undergone extensive changes; above all, more attention is now accorded the general education so emblematic of the American.) Of importance for the specific emphasis of the *Rethinking Reform* volume is that universities in the Muslim world tend to be modeled upon the European paradigm, even though most of their teachers and researchers have been trained in American colleges and universities. There is, consequently, an important disconnect that needs to be addressed.

More must be said. Since the Middle Ages, the paradigm for liberal education is the one then pursued in Europe by universities subordinate to the Roman Catholic tradition. Students began by studying three subjects: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Subsequently, they pursued four additional subjects: arithmetic (number in itself), geometry (number in space), music or harmonics (number in time), and astronomy or cosmology (number in space and time). Though not shaped or defined by religion in any way (theology and canon law being taught as separate disciplines), this curriculum is still followed in many Roman Catholic educational institutions and imitated, more or less faithfully, in several other educational institutions. Today, it is best represented by the Great Books program of St. John's College in Annapolis, MD and Santa Fe, NM in the United States. It was also part of the inspiration for the Great Books program founded by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins popular for so many years at Columbia University and the University of Chicago.

It is an approach to learning that could easily be adapted for education in Muslim societies, for it goes back to the way Aristotle presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* a comprehensive account of what constitutes a rational and moral individual and civically oriented human life and explained in other writings how to pursue learning in an organized, effective manner. Central to Aristotle's ethical and civic teaching is the premise that all thoughtful action aims at achieving what is good. The task, then, is to discern what is good and how to achieve it. Alfarabi makes that teaching evident in his *Kitāb al-tanbīh 'alā sabīl al-sa'āda* (Book of Directing to the Path to Happiness) and presents an enticing summary of how to become discerning in *Kitāb al-alfāz al-musta'mala fī al-manṭiq* (Book of the Utterances Employed in Logic). Still, this is clearly not the occasion to urge the merits of such an approach or extol Alfarabi's acumen. My point is, rather, that attaining clarity about the goal of education must guide the pursuit of

the educational reform proposed here. Once that has been achieved, the means will follow readily.

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Endnotes

1. Eva Brann, "Other People's Truths: Reading Sacred Scripture in Secular Settings," *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* (Spring 2018), "The Art of Being Human"; <http://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/other-peoples-truths>. See also Todd Breyfogle, *On Creativity, Liberty, Love and the Beauty of the Law* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).
2. See Genesis 11:1-9 with Qur'an 5:48, 30:22, and 49:13.
3. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.), chap. 1, 33.