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The Need to Secularize Islamic Education in Yemen

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I studied in Islamic schools in Yemen. I memorized a book of more than 600 pages, the Qur'an. I spent countless hours training my voice and memory to perfect my pronunciation of Qur'anic verses. Did I learn skills conducive to my success in the modern world from my Qur'anic schooling? No. If I put similar effort into studying critical thinking skills and bolstering my reading and writing abilities, I would have maximized my potential of functioning in the contemporary, modern world.

Unlike the Western civilization where the church was separated from the state, the Islamic civilization has yet to separate the mosque from the state and secularize its education. As Tibi put it, "There is a connection between rote learning of the Qur'an text, uncompromising dogmatic scripturalism, and the worldview that emerges from this unquestioning belief in the authority of the text as applied to reality" (2009, p. 50).

According to Tibi, practical learning and rational knowledge are the same for humanity: "It is true that each civilization has its own concept of knowledge, but it is equally true that throughout

the history of mankind there have been all kinds of cultural borrowings of knowledge in the process of cross-cultural fertilization” (2009, p. 69). He suggests that the issue of Qur’anic schools is not how they should be measured. Instead, they are predicated on a pedagogical philosophy concerned with divine reality rather than with secular matters. They are based on rote memorization, which does not equip students with 21st-century skills.

Knowledge based on rationality is indispensable for global citizens. Islamized education puts students in Yemen at a disadvantage in the global market. They struggle to be employed, both locally and globally. When I was applying for graduate school and corporate jobs, my professors advised me to disguise the fact that I memorized the Qur’an; they said that would not strengthen my candidacy. Admission committees and job employers want candidates who have skills and strong experiences conducive to generating economic values — not candidates who have memorized the Qur’an.

Islamized and Qur’anic schools are immutable (Tibi, 2001), which means that the system has to change from within. While Yemeni public schools teach robust religious curricula, the students need to learn literacy and numeracy skills, both of which are not adequately addressed by the existing curricula. Quite simply, rote memorization should be replaced with a curriculum that instills critical thinking skills in students. Further, when discussing the topic of Islamic education, the struggle between two historical schools of thought — the rational philosophers (primacy of reason) and orthodox scholars (primacy of revelation) — should not be evaded but rather addressed. The two schools have been in a fierce war between the 8th and 12th centuries. In the eve of the European renaissance, European scholars learned from the rational Muslim philosophers, not from the orthodox. Therefore, when Tibi calls for the secularization of Islamized education, he is not introducing something Western nor foreign. Instead, he is proposing a curriculum that has a flourishing precedent in the Islamic civilization (Tibi, 2001, p. 188).

To guard against misinterpretation, I must conclude with a caveat: Please note that the problem is neither with Islam nor Qur’an as a source of spirituality. Instead, the rote pedagogy by which Islam and the Qur’an are taught in Yemen is arguably ineffective. It fails to develop the critical skills to pursue general knowledge and to understand the message of Islam and Qur’an. It is within these cautionary remarks that my critique should be understood.

When I started my secular education in U.S. higher education institutions, my Islamic knowledge was not relevant: I could not build on what I have learned in Islamic schools. If I received robust secular education — similar to what Tibi is advocating — I would have a smoother college experience. I would have followed a helpful track of development that will enable me to achieve

my objectives in the modern world. With my Islamic education almost irrelevant to my secular one, I have to build foundational skills in a new language and a new culture, from zero. That is why I call myself a “[zero-generation student](#).”

Author’s Bio

Abdulrahman finished two courses of education, traditional and secular. He received significant traditional Arabic curricula in Yemen. In 2016, he immigrated to the United States to pursue his higher education. In 2020, he achieved a double B.A. in Psychology and Religion from the University of Miami. In 2021, he attained a M.S.Ed. in International Educational Development from the University of Pennsylvania.

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