

MERIA

MOVING FROM SALAFI TO RATIONALIST EDUCATION

By Lafif Lakhdar*

How Islam is taught to students--especially those preparing to be future important clerics--is an issue drawing increasing scrutiny. This article shows the sharp contrast between the methods used in Tunisia and those employed in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It includes a large portion of the student guide to courses and readings used in the Tunisian Islamic university as well as an exam given therein to demonstrate practical ways of teaching moderate interpretations of Islam.

I have always believed--and written to this effect since 1993--in the modernization and rationalization of education in general, and religious education in particular, as a central mission of the Arab intellectual elite.

Jean Piaget, the great expert on child development and education, once said that during his time, French schools degraded the genius into a talented person and the talented into a trivial one. Along similar lines, we can say that, due to the role played by *salafi* religious education, the Arab-Islamic school--with the sole exception of the modern, rationalist Tunisian school--has followed suit and gone even further. It has degraded the peaceable person into an aggressive one, and the aggressive person into a terrorist.

The question is why the Arab-Islamic elite provides new generations with an education which falls short of enabling them to cope with the era they live in and to confront its challenges. The answer in brief is that because the Arab elite lacked democratic legitimacy--especially one based on political and socio-economic achievements--it sought to adopt Islamism instead of a societal project guided by modernity and rationalism. This did not mean that the elite wanted Islamists to challenge them for power but rather that they wished to use diluted ideas of the same sort in their own interest.

But an educational project aimed at preparing new generations properly must produce citizens equipped for the contemporary age, who think independently of their forefathers and who are good at using logical reasoning instead of leaning on the authority of the text. They should accept, without any complication or feeling of guilt, the rational and human institutions, sciences and values of their age, even those which

contradict with their ancestors' heritage and tradition.

Such a school is as yet non-existent in any part of the Arab World except Tunisia which has managed, especially since 1990, to restructure religious education in a way that breaks away from the *salafi* school. The *salafi* school relies on the authority of the literal religious text in its superficial form, steering clear of any interpretation which takes into account an historical reading of the text. It is only through such an historical reading that Islamic religious discourse may be renovated and Islam may be adapted to modernity, especially since it has become clear that adapting modernity to Islam--the so-called Islamization of modernity--was a trick to evade modernity itself. Open religious rationalism--subjecting the religious text to rational investigation and research--ought to become the core of the aspired religious education in the Arab-Islamic region, since it is absurd to believe the text and deny reality.

The *salafi* school instills in the younger generation a religious fanaticism which entails a phobia toward dissimilarity and a rejection of the other, even to the extent of killing.

In contrast, the rational religious school equips religious education with modern sciences. One of these is the comparative study of religions, including those that are extinct (such as the Babylonian and the Egyptian), which helps to understand the historical development of the three monotheist religions. The sociology of religion teaches the young generations the social functions of religion, and how it was exploited by social and political actors. Psychology teaches these generations that God is similar to the father, which is the origin of the idea of God as offering paternal protection as well as comfort

and solace during hardships. Religion also responds to a basic deep-rooted need in the human psyche: the need for a second life; Sigmund Freud said that the subconscious is dominated by an aspiration for eternity. Linguistics teaches young generations that the religious text is a convergence of texts which interacted throughout history and that each text is prone to interpretation due to its metaphoric character. Students can then think about the sacred text on their own, and interpret it according to people's interests and needs, as well as the requirements of the times.

Philosophy promotes critical thinking--an ingredient sorely missing in our heritage. Students can thus practice creative questioning instead of relying on ready-made answers either imported from outside or deduced from the heritage of their forefathers. Worth mentioning in this context is that the philosophy curriculum now taught in Tunisia during the last two years of secondary education is similar to what is given in French schools. It is also taught at Zaitouna University, a religious faculty, as are all other scientific studies including technical specializations.

Human rights studies guarantee the modernization and rationalization of Islamic consciousness through advocating values of modernity and rationalism. This is necessary to deal with the fact that Islamic consciousness has distanced itself from modernity, on the pretext that it is the domain of Jews and Christians and thus should be disproved even if it is good for Muslims.

If we are to aspire to an open religious rationalism, top priority should be given to introducing three main reforms to Islam in order to transform it from a religion based upon Jihad and martyrdom into one based upon spirituality. For centuries, before the Roman Empire adopted it as its formal religion, Christianity lived on as a spiritual religion--a shelter of comfort and solace to believers in the face of oppression. But when it became the state religion, its spirituality faded and gave way to interference in mundane issues--even though such interference contradicts the message of the gospels. The spirituality of Christianity was only saved through the churches which the state had not dominated, such as the Coptic Church.

As for the Roman Catholic Church, it abandoned Christian

spirituality and allied itself with the state, plunging into all its Machiavellian and military practices, even resorting to hiring warriors to launch wars on its behalf, and the atrocious Inquisitions. The Church retrieved its spirituality only when modernity separated religion and state, and clerics were sent to quiet monasteries to live lives more like those of the apostles.

Islam, for its part, will not become a spiritual religion unless it is separated from the state with its mundane practices, the exact opposite of the ambitions held by contemporary Islamists. Separating the spiritual and temporal aspects of Islam however, can only be realized through two indispensable conditions: reconciling Islam to itself and to the other. The former entails recognizing the humanity of women and their equal status in relation to men. Positive law should substitute for *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which deems women deficient in terms of both religion and reason. When the Saudi Mufti Sheikh Abdelaziz al-Sheikh announced in 2004 that women driving cars were equivalent to adulteresses and, hence, deserved to be punished by stoning, he showed the world the real and astounding image of non-spiritual Islam, the Islam which is hostile to women and validates physical punishments.

Reconciling Islam with the other also implies substituting modern constitutions which recognize full rights for all citizens regardless of religion in place of *fiqh* provisions on *dhimmi* (free non-Muslim subjects living in Muslim countries), who as non-Muslims are considered semi-citizens or even non-citizens. By the same token, such reconciliation involves recognizing international law instead of *fiqh* regulations which divide the world into zones of Islam and those of war or idolatry (dar al-Islam, dar al-harb, dar al-kufr).

HOW CAN THIS GOAL BE REACHED?

A new reading of Islam has to be adopted in school curricula and religious discourse. It should recognise, as its starting point, that the spiritual message of Prophet Muhammad was confined to preaching: "But if they turn their backs, verily unto thee belongeth preaching only" (Surat 3). That the Prophet's message was restricted to preaching is

shown in 13 verses, all of which were in the Koranic chapters revealed at Medina. The concept was expressed in different ways in many verses such as: "Wherefore warn the people; for thou art a warner only" (Surat 88). Thus the spiritual message of the Prophet of Islam was limited to reminding. As for domination or governance, it is the mission of earthly rulers. Verses of spiritual Islam, based upon preaching and reminding, converge with the Biblical verse which was the foundation of separating the temporal and the spiritual in Christianity: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's." But after migrating to Medina, Muhammad became a prophet, an army leader, and a chief of a core of a confederation he called *Umma* (nation), a Hebrew word meaning tribe. Consequently, Muhammad's political and military practices as well as the Koranic verses which codify them are not trans-historical but temporal and limited to the era which produced them. Verses on jihad, war, physical punishment and earthly dealings were temporal and are no longer consistent with Muslims' and non-Muslims' needs and interests or with present-day requirements and values.

That some Koranic verses are invalidated by the Koran itself represents an overt admission that these were temporal verses whose provisions later became outdated. The Prophet's Companions understood such verses. Abu-Bakr abrogated the verse stating: "Alms are to be distributed only unto the poor and the needy, and those who are employed in collecting and distributing the same, and unto those whose hearts are reconciled" (Surat 9). To explain invalidating the verse, Tabari said: "Bribery existed during the Prophet's time, but not after he passed away."

Omar Ibn al-Khattab, Ali Ibn Abitaleb, and Moad Ibn Gabal invalidated verses on spoils: "And know that whenever ye gain any spoil, a fifth part thereof belongeth unto God, and to the apostle, and his kindred" (Surat 8). Similarly, *faqih*s (jurisprudents) abrogated the verses necessitating the existence of written debt-contracts: "When ye bind yourselves one to the other in a debt for a certain time, write it down" (Surat 2). Al-Wenshrisi invalidated verses exempting the Prophet's relatives from receiving alms.

The Companions and *faqih*s used logical reasons to justify invalidating some Koranic verses and *Hadith* (the Prophet's sayings): Abu-Bakr, to justify invalidating the verse on those whose hearts are reconciled, said: "Islam is strong enough and there is no need for them." Omar Ibn al-Khattab justified abrogating the verse on spoils by the interests of future generations: "If you take Iraq, what will be left for your successors?" *Faqih*s justified invalidating the necessity of written debt-contracts by the "widespread illiteracy in different areas." Al-Wenshrisi considered that "giving alms to the Prophet's relatives was more protective of their dignity than letting them beg in the streets." He said: "Time has dictated the provision of alms to the Prophet's relatives." In the meantime, we can build upon al-Wenshrisi's logic and further say: The passage of time dictates the invalidation of all temporal verses because they are no longer consistent with the needs of the period we live in or the interests of our contemporaries.

The necessity of separating the temporal verses from the spiritual is no longer an issue to be shelved but is becoming increasingly dominant in modern Islamic consciousness. Dr. Muhammad Abdel-Mutalib al-Houni says:

A large number of Islamic codes did not operate in a vacuum but were interrelated with people who had their grievances, cultures, economies and lifestyles. All Koranic verses therefore which enact laws on human dealings are temporal, and should not be endowed with a nature of perpetuity, because they concerned Muslims who lived at that time or in subsequent periods, under similar conditions. At the same time, we must differentiate between crime in the civil sense, the punishment of which should be determined by the people according to the conditions of the time they live in, and in the moral sense, meaning crime of a trans-historical nature. In other words, we should differentiate between crime and sin: the former is dealt with by the people, while the latter is concerned with the conscience, and if it warrants

punishment, it is related to the hereafter. Such a distinction has become necessary today so as to differentiate between life and the hereafter."¹

Adopting this kind of historical reading of Islam in religious education and also teaching students that Jihad should be invalidated are major pre-conditions to transform Islam into a spiritual religion wherein believers do not die for the sake of God. The situation is inverted in Christianity where God dies to redeem His sons. To entrench this new reading in the minds of the younger generations and realize the enlightened education we propose, many verses may be used as a starting point. One example is the verse "Call upon me and I will hear you" (Surat 23). In this verse, God presents Himself to believers as a sympathizer who wastes no time to respond to their calls. Another verse, "He is careful over you and compassionate and merciful towards the believers," (Surat 9) shows God as compassionate and merciful, not requiring believers to die for Him.

Liberating the state from religion has the merit of converting the state into a purely mundane institution which handles citizens from a rational and earthly reference point, away from theological constraints. This entails a modern constitution, law, and education, which all lead to equality between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims. Moreover, liberating the state from religion would transform the latter into a spiritual and Sufi gift, admired even by those who do not follow any religion. Spiritual religion is close to art, which is enjoyed by all exquisite souls. I feel a special pleasure when reading Sufis of all religions, particularly Ibn Arabi, the founder of the "religion of love" which was developed some centuries later by Seurbach in his book, Essence of Christianity.

The religious education prevalent in the Arab world, except for Tunisia, fights the modern reading necessary for Islam today. Consequently, I herewith present models of Islamic education based upon jihad, which antagonizes the other in its broader meaning: the self, women, non-Muslims, life and reason. In contradistinction, I will present a sample of the curriculum taught at the Tunisian Zaitouna University, which I consider a

solid base for teaching the religious rationalism we so badly need.

TEACHING THE WORSHIP OF FOREFATHERS

Let us begin with a text taught to Saudi young people to coach them in the worship of the forefathers. It is from the *Tawheed* (monotheism) curriculum given during the first year of secondary education:

With the passage of time, far-reaching deviations took place with the message of Muhammad. Many traditions disappeared, giving way to heresy. The Companions and their adherents stood firmly against these heresies and suppressed them. The Companions revealed the truth and annulled matters of suspicion. Whenever a heresy emerges, God sends persons to face it, expose its defects and render victorious the Sunni tradition. And whenever one of those who advocate an aberration appears, God sends a great Sunni figure to confront and defame him through annulling his heresy. When the first heretical tendencies appeared at the time of Omar al-Farouk, God sent Omar who corrected the deviation, punished the whole nation, chastised the deviators through burning them with fire, and ordered to whip those who underestimated the two Sheikhs [Abu Bakr and Omar]. When some people rose to deny the predestination, companions such as Ibn-Amr, stood against them and exposed their defects. When Gilan al-Demashqui declared his heresy, followers of prophetic tradition stood against him. When he persisted, Hisham Ibn-Abdel-Malik killed him. In the same way Prince Khalid Ibn-Abdullah al-Qasry sacrificed al-Gaad Ibn-Derham. Wherever heresies arose, Sunni multitudes rose to combat them. When advocates of heretical tendencies mobilized, God sent them Ahmed Ibn-Hanbal, the Sunni Imam and the suppressor of heresies. He defeated them, and thanks to God, they never rose again with the same strength. Ibn-Taymiya,

the Sheikh of Islam, was a fighter who used his knowledge and rhetoric against those of scholastic theology, philosophy, Sufism and other heresiarchs. His legacy and writings still represent a reference to anybody adhering to Sunni principles and a mote in the eyes of each heresiarch.²

This worship of ancestors has been strongly present in the collective Islamic sub-conscience, and it prevented the acceptance and comprehension of the sciences, and especially the humanities, as well as the values of modernity. Moreover, the text instructs pupils to reject the right of disagreement. Muslims other than *salafis* are treated as heresiarchs or deviators; thus enemies. A student therefore becomes ripe for the execution of all sorts of symbolic and bloody violence; he can burn others with fire as Omar allegedly did, and behead those who disagree with him as Khalid beheaded the faqih al-Gaad Ibn Derham (a ruler of Damascus under the Umayyads, known for adopting ideas of Mu'tazela, which was a movement proposing the interpretation of faith through rational thought). This shows how education could lead to an incitement for terror.

Another text which mirrors the *salafi* perspective, based upon accusations of infidelity and heresy, reads: "Celebrating the Prophet's birth implies the imitation of Christians. Thus ignorant Muslims, clergies and mobs gather to celebrate in a way which is not devoid of polytheist and repulsive practices."³

In the same context, Saudi curricula mobilize students to deem those Muslims who depart from the *salafi* principle infidels. These curricula teach that, "Arab nationalism is an idea related to atheism and *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic state of ignorance), and aims at fighting Islam and getting rid of its codes and teachings."⁴ According to another text, "Nationalist thought overlooks religion and regards it as a stumbling block in the way of nationalism."⁵ And a third: "Adhering to parties and to nationalism--which is an aspect of racism--is a sign of *riddah* [apostasy from Islam]."⁶

Other secondary school texts agree with this perspective. One says, "Beyond doubt, the idea of nationalism is a setback towards *jahiliya*." Another

explains, "After being politically and culturally invaded by Europe, the Muslim World became subject to these fanaticisms based upon race and nationalism, but people should know that these loyalties represent a punishment inflicted by God on those who turn away from his *Sharia* (Islamic code) and disavow his religion."⁷

In the context of teaching young generations to reject the achievements of modernity as signs of infidelity, Saudi curricula say: "Muslims should not listen to the press, radio, or television, since these are immoral institutions detached from faith."⁸

"If a journalist writes that development plans terminate poverty and that progress of medicine puts an end to malady, he is a *mushrik* (polytheist)."

"Taking part in activities such as 'tree week' or 'traffic week' is a mimicking of infidels; students who follow this practice are sinful and disobedient."⁹

"A Muslim who travels to the countries of infidels to learn, trade or cure, should live with them while harbouring feelings of hatred towards them."¹⁰

In Egypt, the curricula of the al-Azhar university make no less effort to inject into the Islamic consciousness legends of the Middle Ages that malign women, non-Muslims, reason and life.

Dr Khalid Montasser says:

If we look into the curriculum of al-Azhar secondary education, we will find a level of intellectual backwardness that the graduate later carries even as he attempts to respond to the latest developments in our time. The books of *fiqh* that al-Azhar students have to study were written centuries ago. Both al-Raod al-Morabaa fi Sharh Zad al-Mostanqaa which explains the doctrine of Ahmed Ibn-Hanbal, and al-Iqnaa fi Hal Alfadh Abi Shogaa on the doctrine of Shafei, were written four centuries ago, and al-Ekhtabar li-Taaleel al-Mokhtar was written more than five centuries ago to explain the doctrine of Abu-Hanifa. The most recent book is the one on the doctrine of Malek al-Moqarar Mena al-Sharh al-Saghir was written two centuries ago.

It is natural that these books, written so long ago, should bear some weird and archaic terms and ideas. Enlightened Muslims have called for modernizing religious education. Among the most important studies to this effect is one by Alaa-Qaoud in his book on reforming religious sciences, as well as studies by Ahmed Sobhi Mansour, Selim al-Awa, Tareq al-Beshri, and the Sheikh of al-Azhar.

Spotlighting a few points of the al-Azhar curricula may help us realize how dangerous a role they can play in breeding disguised terrorism or at least sponsoring stagnation and bigotry.¹¹

In the 21st century, students of al-Azhar read what would happen if a man tells his wife "I will divorce you if it is found that this flying bird is a crow." They have to study the fate of two bisexuals or two lesbians who make love in Ramadan before sunset or whether a man must wash after inserting his penis into the vulva of a beast. And since humans are supposed to bow in prayer while resting on seven bones--head, two hands, two knees, and two legs--what will happen if one was born with two heads and four legs and four hands?

Whatever existed at the time, centuries ago, when these books were written is presented as norms which must be obeyed. In a chapter on wedding banquets and refinement in eating, it says: "One should eat with three fingers and should clean the spaces between the teeth; he should wipe the plate and suck the remaining food and drink." A book on 'selling' instructs that it is prohibited to price things and to sell dogs. A section on funeral prayers teaches: "It is better for the patient not to be cured." Does this imply that we should get rid of health insurance in al-Azhar schools to save effort and money? It is written that the testimony of singers and those who eat outside their home, should not be approved. In brief, the testimony of Umm Kolthoum--the greatest singer of the second half of the last century--would not be accepted, neither would that of contemporary pop singer Hisham Abbas or any other singer. The same applies to anyone who has ever eaten in a restaurant since they, according to the

teaching of al-Azhar, can never have their testimony.¹²

Despite advances in medical technology and knowledge, al-Azhar students are taught about cures using camel urine, and that if a man talks while making love he may lose his voice or become a stammerer. These books instruct *muezzins* to place the forefinger in the ear while announcing the hour of prayer because this makes the voice louder. The prayer is void if a black dog passes by, because black dogs are devils. One book indicating the signs of death is used by conservative *faqihs* to block laws allowing organ transplants. The book on *Shafei* doctrine teaches that water at night is a shelter for jinn and that after doing the ablution before prayers, one should not dry himself with the lower part of the robe, since this would bring poverty. Clothes should be folded at night so as not to be worn by jinn. Thunder is reported as an angel whose wings are the lightning which helps direct the clouds!¹³

A firmly established concept of Middle Ages *fiqh*--to this day taught in al-Azhar and other religious institutes in the Arab world except for Tunisia--is antipathy towards women. Women are symbolized by the rapacious mother. The book of al-Raod al-Moraba teaches that a man is not required to pay for his wife's coffin since he is only required to pay for her clothes as long as they are married and he can take pleasure in his woman. The same book instructs: "A husband may not pay for his wife's medication or doctor fees, because treatment is not one of her habitual necessary needs." He also has the right to prevent her from attending the funeral of her father or mother and to beat her with a dozen strokes if she fidgets while talking to him. A woman's *deyya* (the money paid as compensation for killing someone) is half that of a man's. Even the *aqiqa* (the sheep slaughtered to celebrate the baby's birth) are two for a boy but only one for a girl.

The books also state that the husband is obliged to no more than one sexual intercourse every four months and his wife has no right to object. They sanction the marriage of a man to a girl who is less than nine years old. Other books which students have to study are full of ridiculous talk on female slaves, regulations for marrying them, their *deyya*, and on the private parts of the body. Regulations directing the

relationship with female slaves are different from those of free women. Strangely, it is better to marry a woman whose mother is dead than one whose father is dead, because mothers spoil their daughters. There are many more terrible things these books cite on women.

The second concept persistent in old Islamic *fiqh* is resentment towards non-Muslims. Today, leaders of political Islam still call for such concepts to be put into practice. When Mustafa Mash'hour called for expelling Christians from the army and transforming them to *dhimmi*s, he was applying what he had learned in the honourable al-Azhar. A chapter on *Aqd al-dhimma* (the contract governing the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islamic countries) instructs: this contract implies that Muslims approve the infidelity of some non-Muslims under the condition that the latter pay *jizya* (tribute paid by non-Muslims). They should be humiliated while paying the *jizya*; they should be forced to stand for a long time with their hands dragging, in accordance with Allah's saying: "pay tribute by right of subjection."

Non-Muslims, it is taught at al-Azhar, should not be allowed to lead meetings; should not be treated respectably when they arrive. They should not be saluted, congratulated, consoled. They should be prevented from ringing their church bells; they should resort to the narrowest alleys when walking.

Had al-Azhar resorted to rational thought, it should have taught its pupils and students the book by the Egyptian historian Abbad Abdelrahman Kohaila, "Ahd Omar" Treaty of Omar--the treaty said to have been signed upon the surrender of Jerusalem to the Muslims (Dar al-Dirasat wal-Bohooth al-Insaniyya wal-Igtimaiyya, Cairo, 1996). The book manages, through using historical methodology, to show that attributing the Omar Treaty to Omar Ibn-al-Khattab is a myth. Islamic consciousness may thus open to the principles of modern citizenship which reject religious-based discrimination, or that based upon any other difference.

Except for Tunisia, the solid base of religious education in Arab religious institutions is the worship of forefathers, justified by near-mathematical axioms such as *Ijtihad* (individual innovative

judgment) is not allowed in things regulated by Koran and Hadith. To justify this idea, Rashid al-Ghannoushi, a Tunisian Islamist, said, "Our nation does not accept anything but what Allah and his Prophet said."¹⁴

This basic approach means rejecting everything new on the ground that it is a heresy. One Hadith says: "Each heresy is a deviation, and each deviation is doomed to hell." This implies rejecting modernity together with all its institutions, sciences, values, and lifestyles since modernity is supposedly an imitation of the infidel Jews and Christians. Ibn Taymiya said in his book Iqtidaa al-Sirat al-Mostaqim Mokhalaffat Ahl-al-Gahim (Walking in the Right Path Requires Being Different from the People of Hell): "Our forefathers used to say: if one of our Ulama deviates, it means he is imitating Jews, and if one of our ordinary people deviates, he is imitating Christians."¹⁵ He added: "Stress your differences from them in some or most things."¹⁶ Because being different from them [Jews and Christians] brings us benefits and good in everything we do. Even the good things they do in their lives could be harmful to us in our lives or in the hereafter, so remaining different from them will bring us goodness"¹⁷

Such psychological enslavement is part of the worship of the forefathers, which involves a commitment to their literal orders and prohibitions and a verbatim implementation of their texts without any independent judgment. Otherwise, the forefathers would inflict their wrath upon us.¹⁸

When one anthropologist asked members of an Australian aborigine tribe why they performed certain rituals, they answered, "Because our ancestors ordered us to do so." In New Guinea, members of the Cay tribe justify their refusal to change their lifestyles by saying, "Our ancestors used to do this and we follow them: we must slaughter as they used to do, and we should do today what they did in ancient times." This is a common way of thinking.¹⁹

Ancestor-worship impeded the development of primitive people's consciousness since it discouraged them from independent interpretation of the words and deeds of their forefathers. The *Salafi* school followed exactly that same path when it converted the text into an absolute reality--a ceiling to the freedom of thought. The text became a constraint

which chained mentalities, at least since the 12th century when traditional exegesis defeated rational exegesis. In this context, *faqih*s used to mock the 'jurisprudence of opinion' advocated by the Hanafi tradition.

The ancestor-worship which dominates religious education and Koranic sciences, including language, literature, and grammar, has succeeded in sidelining the humanities such as the comparative history of religion and the sociology of religion. It has resulted in a relentless war against the study of humanities and called for their Islamization, thus stripping them of their critical momentum. As for the natural sciences, they were either maligned or stripped of their original role--as concepts explaining phenomena--and exploited to serve religious delusions.

Examples abound. In 2000, al-Azhar banned writings on the theory of evolution, and barred all books which contained any sign of critical thinking. It is no coincidence that Cairo hosts an annual gathering on the miracle of science in the Koran--the pretension that the Koran contains all human scientific knowledge. This despite the fact that both Imam al-Shatbi and al-Taher ben Ashour denied the existence of any such miracle of science on the ground that Allah addressed the Arabs of the age of the Prophet in a manner which then suited their mentality. There have also been repeated *fatwas* (formal legal opinions voiced by Muslim clerics) throughout more than a century, deeming the theory of evolution a sign of apostasy. The most famous of these *fatwas* was issued by Sayed Qutb in his book *Maalem ala al-tareeq* (Milestones on the Path), in which he regarded the theory of evolution, philosophy, and humanities as antagonistic to religion in general and to Islam in particular. In the same context, some *faqih*s forced the Saudi government to close the institute of genetic engineering, under the pretext that "genetic and bio-engineering represent an interference by creatures in the affairs of the Creator."²⁰ Saudi and Muslim researchers had to migrate to Canada and the United States. In his book *Naqd al-aqliya al-arabiya* (A Critique of Arab Mind), Tunisian researcher al-Hashemy Shaqroun wrote: "Books are still to be written on counting the number of angels, using calculators and estimating them at 120 million, that

could be recruited in the war launched by Arabs and Muslims against Israel."²¹

The ancestor-worship which dominates education from school to university reigns supreme in all aspects of social life, even those covered with the gloss of modernity. Mid-20th-century Iraqi writer al-Zahawi was right when he said: "We have sciences, a Constitution and a parliament, but the meaning and role of each is distorted." Ancestor-worship is also manifested in the modernity-phobia which dominates the Arab mentality, modernism being regarded as heresy or imitation of Jews and Christians. This mentality resorts to two subconscious tricks to evade modernity. The first is religious self-sufficient narcissism which considers itself in no need of any kind of self-renovation, on the pretext that "The first left nothing to the last." This concept dominated the Sunni *Salafi* jurisprudence of the Middle Ages, which is based upon the superficial literal text, and excludes any interpretation thereof. Those who rely on interpretations are said to "inherit nothing but aberrations."

The second trick was adopted by most--if not all--Islamic reformers of the 19th century and is still to the present day advocated. It argues that we should renovate our thought so as to evade modernity. These reformists succeeded in eluding modernity but did not renovate *fiqh* due to a very obvious reason: the core of renovating *fiqh* lies in the adoption of modern legislation, values, sciences, and institutions whose logic and ends are different from those of the *fiqh* of the Middle Ages. The above-mentioned samples of this school of *fiqh* are but a mere drop in a sea of outdated values and regulations.

Egyptian Islamic writer Muhammad Emara says: "After Refaa al-Tahtawi (an early 19th century thinker) realized the threat posed by Western non-religious positivism while in Paris, he called for renovating the *fiqh* of Islamic dealings to block Napoleon's positivist secular law which was already infiltrating the Islamic world's commercial circles, governance institutions, judiciary and legislation. His student Muhammad Qadry Pasha codified the *fiqh* of the Hanafi doctrine to meet the same end: filling the void in the then-existing law through renovating and legislating Islamic jurisprudence. The huge effort exerted by the Ottoman state to codify the *fiqh* of the Hanafi

doctrine--published in 1869 in the journal of judicial regulations--followed the same path of renovating *fiqh*, thought and discourse to fill the vacuum in the Islamic world with an Islamic civilisational alternative instead of Westernization.²²

In brief, all manner of tools were used to abandon the imitation of Jews and Christians and reject their civilization. This was achieved either through ancestor-worship in its open form or through the less overt illusion of inventing a type of modernity exclusive to us. The third trick was the schizoid mating of modernity and authenticity, which merely neutralized one by the other.

If my diagnosis is accurate, the exit from the stormy crisis of modernity faced by the Arab world is through a conscious break with "the commitment to be different from Jews and Christians," especially in the media, education and religious discourse. This implies reconciliation with their modernism--which has become international in scope, belonging to many other peoples as well--without complexes or guilt feelings. Reconciliation with the other--in this case Jews and Christians--is an indispensable pre-condition for reconciliation with their civilization.

THE TUNISIAN WAY

In the case of Tunisia, the media, educational system, and religious discourse began some fifty years ago the break with the Islamic consciousness of the Middle Ages, dominated by a phobia of Christians and Jews. The three concepts central to religious studies in Zaitouna University are the promotion of *ijtihad* in understanding religious texts without any restriction on rational thinking; the reliance upon rationalist thought and the humanities which specialize in the study of religion as part of learning about religious texts; and realization that Islamic consciousness must reinstate the other, particularly the Jew and the Christian.

A law issued on February 8, 1995 delineates the tasks of Zaitouna University and the objectives of the education it provides as follows:

In view of the general objectives of higher education and scientific research and the mission of universities, and in view of the

Tunisian national identity, the commitment to Arab and Islamic civilisation, and the duty to enrich human civilisation, the system of study in Zaitouna aims at meeting the following ends:

1. Securing a cognitive structure which qualifies the learner to discover aspects of Islamic faith, thought and civilization which lead to the elevation of the human self to a free and responsible personality, able to adhere to the noble ends of religion and at the same time respond to the exigencies of life.
2. Entrenching the awareness that Islamic thought, with its different aspects, is a fruit of the efforts of generations of creative and thoughtful *ulama*. Commitment to Arab and Islamic civilization requires inspiration by its brilliant facets and the focus on *ijtihad* to advance knowledge so as to add to previous creative achievements.
3. Firmly establishing Zaitouna University as a model of a school for religious thought based upon enduring tolerance, a renovated viewpoint on religion and history, an aspiration to a rich spiritual life and persevering work for the good of humanity.
4. Empowering the learner to interact profoundly with cultures and civilisations, enrich human thought, and combine the brilliance of modernity with that of heritage. This would urge the student to understand well all the various aspects of modern knowledge, and would afford an opportunity to experience directly products of global thought.

TEACHING ISLAM AT ZAITOUNA UNIVERSITY

In view of this outlook, I herewith detail the most important parts of "The Student's Guide"--the program of the Higher Institute of Religious Fundamentals of Zaitouna University. This is a useful model for educational decision-makers in the Arab world--and elsewhere, too--who sincerely wish to reform education in general and religious education in particular. This should be the gateway to open the consciousness of Muslim young people to modernity.

Sira (biography of Muhammad) and Sunna (the Prophet's words and deeds)

"Writing the *Sira*. Objective:

The course is concerned with the early writers of *sira*, particularly Ibn Ishaq, and the nature of writing this art. The aim is to grasp:

a. The historical and mythical aspects of narrating *sira*;

b. The objectives of *Sira* associated with glorification of the Prophet and those associated with devotion;

c. The manner in which narrators perceived the Prophet's character.

Sunna, its problematic recording and legislation: "Objective: Justifying the need to record *sunna* and the conditions which surrounded the process of recording it. How *sunna* was transformed from a subsidiary of *sira* into a source of legislation. The aim is that the student understands the historical and scientific difficulties surrounding legislation that is dependent on *sunna*."

History of Fiqh

"Objective: The course aims at utilizing the perceptions adopted by *faqih*s concerning human society and societal values, based upon Islamic faith. It is concerned with revealing the role of *fiqh*, studying the early emergence of provisions and how *fiqh* opinions proceeded to reach the status of doctrines; each doctrine has its own perception, closely related to the society of the *faqih* with respect to time and place."

History of Religions

"Introduction to history of ancient religions. The course focuses on ancient religions among Egyptians, the people of Carthage and Indians. It reveals the general conception of these beliefs, and explains their emergence and development; it aims to objectively deduce the features of religious thought."

[The ancient Egyptian religion, which influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is taught

solely at Zaitouna University; no other religious university in the Arab World--including al-Azhar--teaches it.]

"Introduction to Scriptural Religions. Objectives: The course scrutinises Judaism and Christianity, explaining their emergence and highlighting the similarities between them two, in a manner which respects the words of their founders."

[Note the relevance of "in a manner which respects the words of their founders" since it represents the first step towards reconciliation between the fanatic *salafi* consciousness and religions of the other, particularly the Jew and the Christian. The Tunisian religion curricula--from primary to higher education--prepare the consciousness of young generations to respect both the Jewish and Christian discourses, and consciously to break away from the hatred of Jews and Christians.]

Old and Modern Doctrines of Commentary

"Commentary and its doctrines up to the 7th century. Objectives: The course seeks to reveal the historical character of commentary and the fundamentals of commentators as shown by their works. To achieve this aim, the emergence of the need for commentary and the transformation of commentary into a science is studied, as are the directions of commentary and interpretation, through relating them to the commentators' concerns and to the period they lived in."

"Commentary currents in modern times. Objectives: the course seeks to explain how the interests of the Ulama influenced their interpretation of the Koran. It elaborates on the commentators' concerns, explains their views and investigates aspects of modernity in their discourse as well as the way they grasped preceding methods of commentary."

Fiqh and its Fundamentals

"The emergence of the science of *fiqh* fundamentals and its status among sciences of Sharia. Objectives: The course focuses on the fundamentals of *fiqh* as a science which regulates the relationship between faith and the development of society. It explains *fiqh* fundamentals through Islamic code, divisions of discourses and aspects of reasoning, and it construes the character of *fiqh* thought and determines the status of *fiqh* fundamentals among the sciences of Koran and Hadith."

Language

"English, French, German, Spanish or Turkish. Objectives: The courses focus on broadening the first year curriculum, and stress its application to religious texts.

"Latin, Greek, Persian or Hebrew. Objectives: The courses focus on broadening the first year curriculum, and stress its application to ancient religious texts".

Islamic Sects:

"Objectives: The course is concerned with:

- a. The central effect of socio-political factors on infidelity and belief;
- b. Differences among sects in interpreting religious texts in accordance with society's needs;
- c. The consistency between sectarian views and transformations of Islamic societies;
- d. Foundations of Islamic thought, based upon the different sects."

[Source: al-Nobakhty, Feraq al-shia (The Different Sects); Al-Ashaary, Maqalaat al-Islamiyeen (Sayings of Islamists).]

Sufism:

"Objectives: The course focuses on studying Islamic Sufism through investigating the history of its emergence, the factors behind Sufism and the roots of Sufi quotations. The course looks into the development of Sufism

and the relevance of the answers it gives--through private interpretation and personal worship--to the questions posed by Islamic societies. It deduces the standing of Sufism in the course of Islamic thought."

[Source; Ibn Arabi, al-Fotouhat al-Makkiya (Mecca Invasions). Al-Ganeed, Ibn al-Fared, al-Hallag.]

[Note that most religious curricula, particularly in the Gulf countries, consider Sufism a regression toward paganism, but the Tunisian educational system studies it objectively.]

Modern Islamic Thought

"Reformist thought in the 13th century of the Hijra (19th AD) and early 14th century of the Hijra (20th AD). Objectives: The course is concerned with the emergence of reformist thought in the Arab and Islamic countries throughout the mentioned period. It focuses on the writings of reformists such as Qabado, Tahtawi, Khairuddin, al-Afghani, al-Kawakbi, Muhammad Abdou, Rashid Reda, al-Thaalbi, al-Haddad, al-Taher bin Ashour, as well as the movements they expressed. Their writings are analysed to show the influence of modern values on their opinions."

[Sources: Selections of writings by reformists of the epoch.]

Sciences and Arts of the Arab-Islamic Civilisation

"History of sciences in the Arab-Islamic epoch. Objectives: The course is concerned with the classification of the sciences by the Greek philosophers, the development of the meaning of science among Arab-Muslim thinkers, and the way the latter classified the sciences. It reveals the philosophical prefaces justifying such classifications."

Introduction to Linguistics

"Linguistic theories in studying the text. Objectives: The course stresses the relevance of linguistic concerns in the science of lexical meaning especially in relation to understanding and

interpreting texts. To this end, it explains some of the relevant theories of linguistics and reveals their bases in philosophy and knowledge. The aim is that the student would realise the relevance of linguistics in understanding religious texts."

[Source: Ferdinand de Saussure, Lessons on General Linguistics.]

[Note the central goal of studying linguistics in religious education: "Linguistics are relevant in comprehending religious texts.]

Introduction to the Study of Law

"Objectives: The course is concerned with the emergence of the need for law institutions; it investigates aspects of legislation, the relationship between law and society, and the services offered by law to the human value of freedom. It studies the sources and development of contemporary Tunisian law."

[Source: Muhammad el-Shorafi, Madkhal ila Derassat al-Qanoon (Introduction to the Study of Law).]

Fiqh and its Fundamentals

"Tunisian doctrines of *fiqh*. Objectives: The course focuses on the history of Tunisian doctrines of *fiqh* and analyses the reasons behind the emergence of certain doctrines and the absence of others. Specific models of the *fiqh* on dealings are studied to grasp features of Tunisian thought of *fiqh* and to analyse them."

[Source: Sahnon, al-Modawana al-Kobra (The Greater Record). Ibn Aby Yazeed, al-Ressala (The Message). Al-Zelaei, Tabeen al-Haqaeq (Revealing Realities).]

"Fundamentalist positions on consensus, analogy, and tradition as means of concluding provisions. Objectives: The course stresses the relevance of these fundamentals among other basics of provisions; it explains questions of consensus, analogy, and tradition, and matters of agreement and disagreement; it manifests foundations of different opinions, investigates

the starting point of each current, and deduces some features of old fundamentalist thinking."

[Source: selections of books on fundamentals, consensus, analogy, and tradition such as Ibn Hazm and al-Amadi: al-Ahkam fi Ossool al-Ahkam (Fundamentals of Provisions).]

Scholastic Theology Research and Philosophical Questions

"People's deeds among the Motazalites, Hanabalites, Asharians. Objectives: The course is concerned with quotations from the three sects on people's deeds; the quotations are examined in the light of the societal concerns of their time. The aim is that the student would grasp the development of conviction among Muslims, the perceptions adopted by these sects on man's status in being, living and the hereafter, and the way they understood the reasoning behind human action. The explanation and interpretation of Koranic texts is the base of studying these questions."

[Source: Abedlghabar al-Moghny: Asl-aladl (Origin of Justice); Ibn Batta al-Hanbaly: al-Ibana (The Exposition); Ibn Fork: Mogarat Maqalat al-Sheikh abi al-Hassan al-Ashari (Mere Writings of Sheikh Abi al-Hassan al-Ashari).]

"The Question of Freedom in Modern and Contemporary Philosophical Thought.

Objectives: The course seeks an understanding of modern philosophical European thought on the question of man's freedom, will and actions, through investigating the thought of Espinoza and Sartre. It highlights the:

- a. Differences between Islamic and modern European thought on the question of fatalism and voluntarism;
- b. New values manifested by modern thought;
- c. The influence of new modes of understanding on modern Islamic thought."

[Sources: Selected writings by Espinoza and Sartre.]

"Sacred Religious Books. Objectives: The course is concerned with the faith of prophecy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; matters of disagreement are analysed."

[Sources: The Bible and Koran.]

[Note the relevance of studying the Bible and the Koran side by side to re-educate Islamic consciousness as to the equal status of the books of the three monotheist religions. Books of Judaism and Christianity are considered by religious curricula in other Arab countries as distorted books devoid of sacredness and whose instructions should not be respected except for those approved by the Koran.]

Human rights in Islam, religious heritage and international and regional conventions. Objectives: The course seeks to construe the perception of the believer in Islamic revelation on the one hand, and in scriptural religious heritage on the other. The aim is that the student would grasp the interest of all religions in preserving the rights of human beings, and in liberating them from any constraints which hinder their ability to bear personal and civil responsibilities. It is also concerned with presenting international and regional conventions on human rights and analysing the modern values advocated by these conventions. The aim is that the student would be aware that the question of human rights is a totality that leans on global values and represents a consequential for progress. For the question of human rights to be established, daily efforts and a sustainable culture are required."

[Sources: Koran, Sahifa, the Bible. Human Rights International and Regional Documents, prepared by Mahmoud Sharif Basuini, Muhammad Said al-Daqaq, and Abdelazeem wazeer.]

Comparative Fiqh

"Earthly provisions among Sunni and Shiite Imams. Objectives: The course elucidates earthly provisions as thought of by both Sunni doctrines and Shiite jurisprudence of imams; these provisions are analysed in the light of conditions in Islamic societies. The aim is to grasp how Shiite and Sunni doctrines considered social reform on the basis of faith and interpretation of Islamic texts."

[Source: Malek: al-Maota. Abu Youssef Kitab al-Kharag. Al-Toussi, al-Mabsout.]

Comparative Religions

"Monotheism in scriptural religions. Objectives: The course is concerned with monotheism faith in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; it traces and analyses common and different perceptions."

Comparative Religious Research

"Prophecy in scriptural religions."

Contemporary Commentary on Islam and Islamic thought

"Modernity in contemporary Arab-Islamic thought. Objectives: The course deals with the problematic of modernity in contemporary Arab-Islamic thought through explaining:

- a. The philosophy of modernity as formulated by some contemporary Arab thinkers;
- b. The currents of thought they present to modernise their societies;
- c. Foundations of each current in relation to the understanding of heritage and the present challenges of knowledge."

History of the Philosophy of the Middle Ages

"Introduction to political philosophy in Islam. Objectives: The course tackles the dimensions of politico-philosophical thought in relation to the problems facing Arab-Islamic societies in the Middle Ages. It also focuses on evidence

of Greek philosophy in Islamic politico-philosophical thought."
[Sources: Al-Farabi, Araa Ahl al-Medina al-Fadela. (Opinions of Utopians).]

Sociology of Religion

"Currents, methods and problematic of sociology in relation to studying the phenomenon of religion. Objectives: The course deals with sociologists' explanations to the religious phenomenon, the questions they deal with when analysing the affect of religious beliefs on social attitude, and the impact of social affairs and societal requirements on religious writings on divinity, prophecy, revelation, Day of Judgement and completion of creation."

[Sources: Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.]

Methodology

"Research methodology.

Objectives: The course tackles four major questions:

- a. The character and tools of sociological research;
- b. The use of necessary references including dictionaries, encyclopaedia, and original texts such as al-Tabaqat, al-Regal, al-Boldan (Classes, Men, Countries);
- c. Summarizing articles and books and determining how to benefit from them;
- d. An acquaintance with the art of verifying manuscripts."

History of Ancient Philosophy

"World and divinity in Greek philosophy. Objectives: the course is concerned with the theory of divinity and the relationship between God and the world in Greek philosophy; it evidences the influence of Greek philosophy on Islamic philosophical thought."

[Sources: Aristotle's book on Metaphysics; Platos book on Dialogues with Timeos.]

EXAMPLE OF A TEST AT ZAITUNA UNIVERSITY

Following the above sample of the courses offered by Zaitouna

University, is an examination model which summarises the central dimensions of the philosophy of religious education in Tunisia. We hope that they would also become the central dimensions of the philosophy of religious education in the Arab World:

Ministry of Higher Education,
University of Zaitouna
Higher Institution for Fundamentals of Religion
Exam for the academic year 1997/8
Year: first
Course: Koran

Questions:

1. You remember that a number of instances were behind God's saying: "Let there be no violence in religion" (The Cow). Among these incidents was one in which a man of the Ansar [people of Medina] had a son whom he wanted to force to convert to Islam. When the father raised the issue to the Prophet, the verse was revealed. Another incident was when a man of the Ansar had two sons who were evangelized by Syrian merchants and departed to Syria; he wanted to run after them to bring them back to Islam. A third was when Ansar women made a vow that if they bore a boy, they would make him a Jew or a Christian so as to live longer. Their fathers wanted to bring the sons to Islam. When they raised the issue to the Prophet, the verse revealed and he said: "God asked your friends to choose, if they choose them, they will be theirs and if they choose you, they will be yours."

2. Investigate these stories and use them to elaborate on the Koran's stance on the freedom of belief, and the question of accepting the other who is different in religion. Try to employ them in accordance with modern requirements to found the civil society, which prerequisites tolerance and coexistence in order to guarantee progress and security, and in accordance with the aspirations by global community to build interactions on a base of the exchange of interests, regardless of colour, sex or religion.

Signature: Muhammad al-Toumi [then head of Zaitouna University, and the present Minister of Religious Affairs].

* Lafif Lakhdar was born to a family of poor peasants in Tunisia in 1934. He

attended al-Zaitouna University, then the Law Faculty. A lawyer between 1957 and 1961. He worked in Algeria with that country's first president Ahmad Bin Bella. Leaving after Bin Bella was overthrown in a coup, he lived mainly in Amman and Beirut where he published a number of books whose main theme was the critique of traditional religious thought. During this period, he was very close to the Palestinian movements and especially to Nayef Hawatmeh of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. He left Beirut in the mid-1970s and has been living in Paris ever since.

** An earlier version of this article was published in Middle East Transparent, <http://www.mettransparent.com>, June 24, 2004.

NOTES

¹ The passage is a quotation from a forthcoming book entitled: al-Ma'zaq al-Arabi: al-Arab fi Mowagahat al-Istratigiya al-Amrikeya (The Arab Crisis: Arabs in the Face of the American Strategy), in the chapter on 'Misunderstanding Faith.'

² Tawheed, secondary education, first year. These parts were mentioned by the two Saudi Sheikhs Ibrahim al-Sakran and Abdelaziz al-Qassem in a presentation in the second national Saudi gathering 2003, al-Ahdath al-Maghribiya.

³ Tawheed curriculum, third year of secondary education.

⁴ Curriculum of *hadith*, second year of secondary education.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tawheed curriculum, third year of secondary education.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Khalid Montasser, "Laissat Amrica Wahdaha Allati Totalib Betagheer al-Manaheg," *elaph.com* news site, February 6, 2004.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rashed el-Ghannoushi, "Nahwa Maqamat Moshtaraqa lil Mogtama el-Madani," *Maraya*, Parisian periodical, Autumn 2002.

¹⁵ Ibn Taymiya, "Iqtidaa al-Sirat al-Mostaqem Mokhalafat Ahl al-Gahim," p.33.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ M. Panoff, *l' Ethnologie*, p. 35.

¹⁹ Lafif Lakhdar, "al-Moqaraba al-Elmiya lil Dahera al-Deeniya," in Babel wal-Kitab al-Moqadas, translated by Rose Makhoulouf, Dar Kanan, Damascus, 1994.

²⁰ Iqbal al-maghrebi, "Tatbeeq al-Sharia al-Youm Haram," *al-Osboia, Haqaeq*, no. 336, November 1992.

²¹ *al-Osboia, al-Maghreb*, no.89, 2714/1988.

²² Dr. Muhammad Emara, *al-Akhbar*, 24.