

Islam & Education: A Vision and a Focus

The following is a synopsis of a thought-provoking and insightful lecture delivered by Sheikh Mohammed Amin at a dinner hosted by CPSA – a Muslim high school in Lombard, IL. Please note that this article is copyrighted and requests for reprints, publication or distribution must be directed to Darul Qasim. Contact us by clicking on the [contact](#) button.

Substance; Expression and Creativity

One of my favorite short stories is the story of the snail. A snail was crossing a bridge, slowly and steadily, and it took him fifty years to get across. As soon as he crossed the bridge, the bridge collapsed. The snail looked back and said, "Thank God I crossed it so quickly!"

Allah has given people tremendous talent and power. One of our most unique talents is the power of expression or bayan. In Surah al-Rahman Allah says: "He is the Beneficent; He teaches the Qur'an. He created Man and taught him Bayan (expression)."

It is this talent that needs to be developed in our schools. Excellence lies not in the quantity of education provided by Islamic institutions, but in their quality. Substance is necessary but amassing information is not an end in itself. One of the greatest scholars the Indian subcontinent ever produced, Maulana Qasim Nanautavi – the founder of Darul Uloom Deoband, said that "if a person memorizes everything in the Lawh Mahfooz – the Preserved Tablet where the destiny of all human beings is recorded - but does not know how to evaluate or understand it, he will still remain a jahil (ignorant)." You won't find more substance anywhere than in the Lawh Mahfooz. Memorization of information, whether it is Islamic or not, is only a means to the end. The end is to apply that information in real life through the process of bayan or expression. The great Sufi poet and scholar Jalaluddin Rumi said, "If you apply your knowledge merely to your body, it will be a snake." It will bite you and desert you. If you make it part of your heart, your understanding, it will be your friend. True knowledge is a manifest sign of the heart. The difference is the human experience of bayan or expression. You can put information on a compact disc, but it doesn't make the CD an alim or a scholar.

Bayan is the principle of knowledge and Prophethood. Allah tells us that He sent every messenger with a message in the language of his people, so that they can explain what it means. Merely reciting Qur'an and hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet T is not enough. They must be explained and then applied. Allah took it upon Himself to teach and explain the Qur'an to Muhammad T. Muhammad T, in turn, taught and explained the Qur'an to his companions y.

Bayan requires that one understand context and apply information and knowledge based on it. Before the Hijrah (migration to Madinah), Muhammad T went on the Mir'aj – a miraculous tour of the heavens. Just before he left for Madinah, the Prophet T left Ali t on his bed to thwart the Makkans. He did not assume that Allah would take care of him – even though Allah did protect him and Abu Bakr t in the Cave of Thaur through the flimsiest of defenses – a spider's web. The Prophet T did not ask Allah to transport him T to Madinah the way he took him for Mir'aj. Rather, the Prophet T made plans and strategized given the context of the situation that he T was in.

It is necessary to explain Islamic principles in the light of Prophetic maturity. The Hijrah was perhaps the greatest event in Muslim history. The Islamic calendar is dated from that event. The Prophet T hired a non-Muslim to guide him all the way to Madinah in order to realize this Hijrah. The Prophet T understood that the non-Muslim was the best man for the job and did not hesitate to hire him for that purpose¹. Even the kafirs (idolators) of Makkah did not criticize the Prophet T for that decision. It takes maturity to understand reality. Bayan is not possible without understanding context, reality and history. American Muslims must ask themselves whether we can introduce Islam in light of contemporary ideologies. To this end, starting Islamic schools is not enough. We have to be mature in both our vision and in our focus and understand reality. If you accept the hadith in which the Prophet T said "seek knowledge even unto China" and you consider that the person making the statement was the source of all knowledge and that those who heard that statement were being asked by their leader to travel away from him to learn, then you realize that he T was creating a mindset among his companions (may Allah be well pleased with them), not to be naïve. You cannot project Islam with emotion. Bayan requires a certain personality, a definite maturity.

In Jannah (Heaven), we will be given the power of creation in some form. Things will happen the way we wish them to. Jannah is all about expressing one's creativity based on one's Iman (faith) and one's previous actions and knowledge. When we say Arabic is the language of Jannah, do we understand what it means? When you understand what Jannah is all about, you will understand that Arabic, like all languages, is a creative language. Arabic is such a powerful and creative language that it will be a tool of creation, of expression, in Jannah. Bayan is not possible without language. If you do not understand the American context, you can never give dawah in America. The Prophet T was able to penetrate, and was successful in, Arabic society because he T understood everything about the Arabic culture and psyche. Both culture and psyche do not exist outside of any language. We must understand American culture, history, politics, philosophy and language. All prophets (peace be upon them all) understood their people, and the context in which they lived.

As far as learning from undesirables, we should remember the Prophetic dictum: "Wisdom is the lost property of a believer; wherever he finds, he is much more worthy of and entitled to it." So even this fear is easily processed into a mature attitude.

Knowledge is by definition creative. The creation and development of Urdu is a creative process that is unparalleled. The rulers of India knew they needed a unified language and did not insist on using Arabic, so they pioneered the language of Urdu. We don't have their imagination or creativity because we do not have their maturity. Maturity is the same as hikma. If there is anything Prophethood teaches, it is to develop and acquire Hikma – both in knowledge and in action. Islam is not a slogan. The Prophet T never spoke of anything he T did not know about. The focus now must be on introducing hikma into our schools. We must remember the famous Arabic proverb: "If you understand the language of a people and a culture, you can never be harmed by it." Language must be understood in a comprehensive sense so that it includes history, philosophy, etc. If there is good, we must grasp it. If there is evil,

¹ Muslims have always employed this attitude in non-religious affairs that do not infringe on matters of faith.

then we must protect ourselves from it. Our scholars and our community were always part of mainstream human culture and civilization. When we became isolationist, we lost everything. When we understood that we are part of human civilization, we were successful.

But for all this to happen we must act out of hope rather than desperation. Hope is conducive to creativity and progress. Desperation creates reactionary acts and can be very destructive. The Prophet Muhammad T was undoubtedly the most intellectual and mature person on Earth. He was a visionary and the absolute optimist. His optimism knew no bounds. Consider the chaos and trauma the world will experience when the events of the Last Day on Earth unfold. Can you imagine the doom and the gloom of that day? But Muhammad T showed us how to be optimistic and positive even in those circumstances. He eloquently expressed this optimism in one of the most remarkable hadith ever recorded: "If the Day of Judgment comes upon you and you find yourself planting a tree, finish planting the tree."

We are quite far from that day – at least it would seem – of universal destruction and doom. We have a lot to do. The snail made it – just before the collapse of the bridge.

As long as we keep on walking forward, we will reach our destination. Our bridge can be crossed quicker by learning substantive knowledge, by being creative and by expressing our thanks to Allah via our deeds and our wisdom. We can travel at a snail's pace and live in that mode. Or, we can travel quicker than the pace of change and influence human existence and history. For that, we need a vision and a focus.

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