SIGNIFICANT SPEECHES AND EVENTS


Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

The value orientation of educational programmes in our time is often impacted by a number of variables such as science, secularism, globalisation—and how they have marginalised the role of traditional values and ethics. I shall presently elaborate on these and also characterise the Islamic approach to education as well as some challenges it is now facing. I conclude with some remarks on recent educational reforms in Malaysia.

One can readily say that education is more organised, efficient and materially better-equipped now than ever before, but also that there is more social conflict and clash of values within and between societies and cultures. Is it necessary to observe that our era of globalisation has been marked by myriad global crises? There is therefore a crisis of values, and we should revisit the value content of contemporary educational programmes!

Let me begin with a quotation from the American poet and literary critic T.S. Elliot who wrote: “Education is a subject which cannot be discussed in a void, as questions on education raise other questions, social, economic, financial and political. ...To know what we want in education, we must know what we want in general. We must derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life.” Education is generally identified with activating what exists as potentialities in human beings. A holistic approach to human development through education is therefore necessary to activate those potentialities to the fullest extent possible.

Secularism which has a European origin indicates a process whereby religious truths, sometimes anchored in scriptural revelation, and principles of morality based upon them no longer shape law and policy. Secularisation in Europe took centuries and reached its pinnacle in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century with the dominance of positivist thinking. Following this, the world witnessed a religious revival which also brought secularism under renewed scrutiny. Scholars now talk of a post-secular Europe re-discovering certain dimensions of religion, as well as changed perceptions of secularism or de-secularisation.

Science is of immense help in advancing knowledge of the means of human welfare, and understanding and discovering mysteries of the physical world. Yet science is ethically neutral and cannot guide us in the realm of life objectives. It views religious worldviews and ethics as inconsequential, even as obstacles...
to progress. Modernists and secular humanists thus argue that modern science provides a necessary and sufficient basis for education and learning.

Ethical norms and values of religion not only consider causes and effects to understand phenomena, but look beyond phenomena to develop and coordinate facts with transcendent values. Education is the connecting link between practical behaviour and values, and should be designed so as to refine behaviour and guide it toward values. This would imply learning to judge according to some consistent criteria the worth of ideas and human. It also requires engagement in a constant process of self-development and self-awareness. Science not tied to moral commitment and redemptive goals is now coming under renewed scrutiny.

Genuine Islamic thought does not admit an ontological distinction between tangible entities that may be sensorily apprehended, and immaterial entities of a spiritual and rarified nature. Being manifests at various levels none of which are less real than others, yet exhibit a hierarchy of fullness. We need philosophy, art, history and religious intellectuality to enable us to explore our inner lives, learn more deeply who we are, why we are here in existence, and how we may reflect and realise the meaning of our existence.

Although religion and ethics bear close affinities, unlike religious dogmas which tend to be exclusive with respect to other religions, ethical norms are often shared between followers of different faith traditions across territorial and cultural boundaries. It is generally acknowledged that morality as a principle does not exist without religion, but that morality as a practice and a particular mode of behaviour is not dependent directly on religiosity. Notwithstanding differences between ethical doctrines and philosophies, most philosophers would argue that the source of value is posited in the human being (a priori in the mind or in society). The Islamic perspective similarly holds that values have an innate basis in the human soul, while also having a transcendent origin. Humans must strive to nurture values by constantly upgrading their behaviour. Thus we read in the Qur’an: “By the soul that We fashioned and then inspired into it the awareness of wrongdoing and righteousness. Truly one who purifies it attains success, and one who corrupts it brings failure unto oneself” (al-Shams, 91:8–10).

Implementation of values often depends on the ability of each individual, community and nation, their material conditions, history and customs – which demonstrates that values are objective beyond the specificities of time and place, yet also relative and contingent. Our aspiration for the globalised world in which we live is that we enhance the objective and universal calibre of the values we commonly uphold. Globalisation has brought us face to face with fresh demands for realisation of values. The message is brought home to us ever more cogently that it is important in an open world to create shared human ethical values that cut across geographical boundaries and states in order to guide economic and political
cultures. Hans Küng (b. 1928) argues that “the idea of a ‘universal civilisation’ means in a positive way a universality in the technological, economical, political and, as we hope, also in the ethical dimension. In this time of globalisation of markets, technologies and media we need also the globalisation of ethics.”

Islam recommends integration between the intellect, sense perception and values. This is in line with its over-arching principle of unity (tawhid), the Oneness of Being at all levels of cosmic and microcosmic existence. *Tawhid* is understood to imply five unities: the unity of God, of creation, of truth, of life, and of humanity. Arts and sciences may exhibit this unitive impulse in their aim to show the interrelatedness of all that exists.

Values, in the Islamic perspective, are therefore linked with practical behaviour. One can observe this correlation between doing and value in a recurrent phrase in the Qur’an, “Those who believe and perform good deeds,” (Surat al-ʿAsr 103:3, & passim), evidently implying that every creational statement should be expressed in practice with a beneficial purpose. To this effect one also notes the hadith where the Prophet Muhammad recommended acquisition of “beneficial knowledge (al-ʿilm al-nafiʿ), and stated that “knowledge which does not guide action is like a tree that does not bear fruit.” Beneficial knowledge subsumes, in addition to medical and biological sciences, knowledge that is now crucial to the material and spiritual well-being of humanity.

Islamic teachings visualise a symbiotic relationship with science. Its teachings positively exhort us to study what surrounds us and constitutes the context of our lives. Such studies constitute the sciences, for what else may result from our observation if not scientific knowledge. This was the spirit that kindled the quest for scientific knowledge in the golden age of Islamic science and civilisation. Muslim scholars and inventors were pioneers in fields as diverse as medicine and mechanics, cartography and chemistry, education and engineering, architecture and mathematics, astronomy and many more – leaving a splendid legacy of scientific creativity that formed the basis of many of today’s modern inventions.

It is significant to note that all reference to knowledge in the Qur’an are gender neutral. One also reads in a renowned hadith that “pursuit of knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim – man and woman.” When a woman complained to the Prophet that his teaching circles and sermons were crowded by men and requested that he should assign time for women, he granted that request, and also gave instruction that women should attend the mosque for congregational prayers to listen to his sermons.

The celebrated woman Sufi master of Basrah Rabi’ah al-Adawiyah (d. 801) is known to have taught men and women. The young princess Fatima al-Fihri founded the first degree-granting university in Fez, Morocco in 859 CE. Her sister Maryam founded an adjacent mosque and together the complex became
the al-Qayrawan Mosque and University. This tradition of providing education for women continued in many places wherever Islam found a home throughout Asia and Africa. Regrettably in recent times the education of women has been neglected. Poverty, social inertia and segregation of women imposed by ignorant segments of society have all taken their toll, and the bitter reality we face today in much of Muslim Asia and Africa is the widespread illiteracy of women and social prejudice. These problems must receive urgent priority in societal and educational reform efforts.

Islamic economics and finance should also integrate religious principles including bans on interest, gambling, alcohol, firearms, and excessive speculation. In these years of financial turbulence, Islamic finance has shown inner resilience mainly due to its commitment to principles of ethics and social justice. Ethically-oriented investment, business and finance which have gained prominence in the West over the last thirty years, bear close affinities with their (Shariah-conscious) Islamic equivalents. They comprise value-based decision making criteria relating to socially responsible investment, environmental concerns and sustainability objectives. Moral integrity has furthermore gained grounds in contemporary management theories in the West, as can be seen in such slogans as ‘Making Trust a Competitive Asset, Building Reputational Capital, and Building a Corporate Culture that Rewards Integrity’. That said, global financial crises have by no means left Muslim societies unaffected. Industry regulators have consequently become wary of market trends that have over the years moved Islamic finance away from its core principles. In many Muslim countries financial regulators are taking corrective measures. In July 2011 Bank Negara Malaysia initiated the Shariah Governance concept, which calls for greater vigilance to enhance market discipline in harmony with Shariah principles.

European colonialism left a problematic legacy that scuttled the natural evolution of traditional methods in preference to new education curricula grounded in a Western secularist outlook. The result was the onset of persistent dualities between traditional and modern education, between the madrasahs and government schools, between the Shariah and modern laws – problems that have proven difficult to overcome to this day. For reasons that I shall presently explain, education in many Muslim countries has experienced serious disruptions and thereby fallen short of producing inquisitive and innovative minds. Some progress has been made during the latter part of the twentieth century until now, but challenges remain and much more needs to be done.

The landmark 1977 International Conference on Islamic Education in Mecca and the other conferences which followed made recommendations to advance the integration and unification of the educational system in the Muslim world. The idea of an Islamic University also began to gain ground as a result of those
deliberations. Numerous (International) Islamic universities have since then been founded in Muslim countries mostly with English as their main medium of instruction. Educational institutions became increasingly engaged in the revision and adjustment of university curricula and the balanced integration of traditional and modern disciplines and methods.

Critics often state that Islamic epistemology is predominantly analogical, looks to the past, and is deficient in originality and independence. Education planners are therefore keen to encourage originality and add value to the traditional patterns of acquired knowledge that emphasised memorisation. Universities are being advised to nurture academic freedom and value scholars and researchers who display originality and competent calibre. However, the substance of this critique actually relates only to certain aspects of Islamic epistemology. The analogical approach mainly applies to Shariah themes of permissibility and prohibition (halal and haram), and faith and worship (aqidah and ibadah). The analogical method loses much of its rigour with regard to the wider arena of civic transactions (muʿamalat), as well as the applied physical and biological sciences, which on the whole employ the inductive experimental method.

Malaysia has just introduced the Malaysia Education Development Plan (MEDP) 2013–2025, perhaps the most comprehensive of the many instances of reform which this country has seen since independence. MEDP examines the most critical issues confronting the education system from pre-school to post-secondary levels, ranging from equalisation of access to quality education, to the enhancement of various competencies with special reference to science subjects.

There are eleven so-called ‘paradigm shifts’ each with concrete proposals for implementation and expected outcomes. Space does not permit elaboration but concerning MEDP we spotlight its goal-orientation and how it is guided by a specific philosophy and worldview—namely to promote national unity, but also to produce balanced and harmonious human beings from intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical perspectives. MEDP also pays necessary attention to teacher training and building attitudes that produces future teachers who may serve as genuine bridge-builders to bring pupils and teachers from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities closer together.

One of these eleven shifts to transform the education system in Malaysia is to develop value driven Malaysians. By means of this shift the education system will move to inculcate strong ethics and the roots of spirituality in every child by preparing them to rise to the challenges they will inevitably face in adult life, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to employ sound judgment and principles during critical moments, and to have the courage to do what is right. The education system also seeks to nurture caring individuals who gainfully contribute to the betterment of the community and nation.
More specifically, the new MEDP education plan will take the following measures:

- Strengthening civic elements by making community service a pre-requisite for graduation by 2017;
- Enhancing Islamic and Ethical Education with a greater focus on core values and underlying principles of major religions by 2017;
- Developing students holistically by reinforcing the requirement to participate in a Uniform Body;
- Enhancing and expanding cross-school activity programmes in order to foster greater interaction across students from different types of schools, ethnicities and socioeconomic groups;

With all these measures, it is hoped that not only will students gain the requisite leadership skills, but they will also embrace strong universal values such as integrity, compassion and justice in order to guide them in making right ethical decisions. This will bring about a more socially beneficial behaviour reflected in an increase in volunteerism; a willingness to embrace diverse peoples of other nationalities, religions and ethnicities; and a reduction in corruption and crime. Every student also leaves school prepared to act as a leader, whether in their own lives and families, or as part of the broader community and nation.

Thank you.

The First World Congress on Integration and Islamicisation of Acquired Human Knowledge [FWCII] (Kuala Lumpur, 23-25 August 2013)

Elmira Akhmetova, IAIS Malaysia

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) convened the First World Congress on Integration and Islamicisation of Acquired Human Knowledge (FWCII 2013) on 23–25 August 2013 at the Prince Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. The theme was “Constructing the Alternative Paradigm of Tawhid” focusing on the integration and application of the Islamic worldview and unitive paradigm. This Congress sought to apply the epistemological perspective, values and norms of the so-called ‘Tawhidic Paradigm’ to all branches of human knowledge ranging from the arts and humanities, the social and physical sciences, to the medical sciences. Its three main objectives were: (1) to gather from around the world Muslim scientists, academics, professionals and experts involved in the well-known project of ‘Islamisation of Human Knowledge’ so as to mutually benefit from one other’s work and products; (2) to forge new transnational strategies that