

INTRODUCTION

The hand that holds this book is part of a body that has two eyes placed at a very specific distance from each other. Without this precise setting of the two eyes it would be impossible to read. Even when this anatomical balance is present, it is not the eyes that read; all they do is encounter certain black lines, curves, and dots spread on a white background. However, working in conjunction with the eyes are millions of neurons, an interconnected nerve system, and thousands of other processes involving complex chemical reactions that imprint an image of these lines, curves, and dots on the brain where, in the protected layers of visual memory, these shapes are perceived as familiar letters. Then the mind recognizes these combined letters as meaningful words, carrying a certain thought. The meaning and the thought conveyed by words are then instantaneously “interpreted” by the reader. This “interpretation”, however, takes place through a peculiar lens and on the basis of a pre-existing worldview which filters everything we see and do, from experiencing the rustling of leaves in the wind to traumatic moments in our lives. It is this worldview that has always been the prime concern of Islamic education.

How do we gain this worldview? Are we born with it or do we acquire it through active personal effort? Is it a conscious process? Does it happen suddenly or over time? What role does our education play in this process?

The young learner in a class or at home is not aware of these questions, let alone their answers. He or she is busy *living*—living a life in the here and now, in the very moment of his or her existence. This child entered the world a few years before, carrying the Divine breath as an *amānah* and an instinctive awareness of a *mūthāq* established by the Creator with all children of Adam ﷺ. The newborn child is not a “blank slate” upon which anything can be written; rather, the Qur’ān vividly describes various embryonic stages involving the unique interplay of a biological process—which imparts its own specific hereditary code, giving us characteristic physical features—as well as a spiritual process, beginning with the breathing of a unique *rūh* into the *jism* formed in the womb through the combination of two fluids emanated from the male and female. The life thus started in the protected and sanctified womb of the mother is fashioned on *fiṭrah*, the innate nature in which is ingrained an instinctive recognition of the Creator.

This view of creation is a reality recognized by all existing beings, whether willingly or under compulsion. This recognition does not mean that human beings are forced to *acknowledge* it; rather, it simply means that our beings—as they *exist* in various realms of existence (biological, spiritual, emotional, psychological)—have an innate recognition of the fact that their existence is due to a Creator. Furthermore, all existing beings also recognize that their existence is maintained at all levels through the continuous sustenance of a Sustainer. Thus, though we are not under any compulsion to consciously, willingly, and actively acknowledge this Creator-created relationship with the One Who fashioned us

amānah
trust
mūthāq
pre-eternal covenant
rūh
breath of life; spirit
jism
body
fiṭrah
innate nature

amr
command
arzāq
pl. of *rizq*; provisions

all as children of Adam ﷺ, with whom there has been established a pre-eternal *mīthāq*, we are nonetheless compelled to accept this relationship *existentially*; this is part of the unalterable human condition. At birth, children recognize this relationship instinctively and submit to it, since they are born upon *fiṭrah*—a state of natural submission to the Creator.

We come into this world with certain provisions: the heart, the organs of sense perception, the intellect, and the *nafs*—all in perfect harmony with the sublime and profound spiritual substance that is the source of life, the *rūh*. Thus, brought into existence through Divine *amr* and given numerous physical, sensory, spiritual, emotional, and psychological *arzāq* for a pre-fixed duration to be spent on earth, we come into this world innocently, in a state of purity, inwardly conscious of the Creator and in a state of submission; in short, as Muslims.

Within the first few moments of our birth we start to absorb sensory data. One of the first senses to receive this external data is the hearing, a sense that was already active in the mother’s womb during the preceding months. Soon visual memory begins to receive images of the persons and things in the immediate environ. From this point onward there is a non-stop acquisition of sensory data which rapidly stacks layers and layers of memory in the inner recesses of our being where it is rapidly processed. Our mind plays a very active role in these processes, though in addition to the mind there are several other realms of our being where this received data is processed. What we absorb from our environment contributes to the making of our worldview, the lens through which we “view” the world.

The Prophet ﷺ has informed us of this process in the famous *ḥadīth*: “Every child is born on *fiṭrah*; it is his parents who make him into a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian”. This “conversion” of the baby born pure and on *fiṭrah* is a complex process in which countless factors are involved. These range from the belief system and the way of life in the home where the young child lives to the unexpected, inexplicable, and totally unpredictable turns in one’s life which sometimes obliterate years of previously acquired beliefs and modes of living. No one can fathom the mysteries of these sudden turns: *He guides whom He wills and leaves astray whom He wills*. These transforming moments in one’s life have the potential to restore the initial purity with which the child was born and are manifestations of Divine Mercy, for which the best response on our part is simply *al-ḥamdulī‘Llāh*.

al-ḥamdulī‘Llāh
thanks and praise be to Allah

Apart from these moments of Divine Mercy, the worldview acquired by each one of us is, ultimately, constructed around our beliefs about the “Beginning” and the “End”—that is, the Beginning and the End of all things: How did the cosmos come into existence? How did life originate? What happens when we die? What will happen to the entire cosmos at the end of its time? These are foundational and primary questions; their answers condition, inform, and determine all relationships—from our relationship with ourselves to that with others and with the entire cosmos. Certain fundamental perspectives on the nature of reality, truth, and morality also originate in these primary concepts.

More often than not an adult does not consciously sit down and think about these questions and their answers; these are acquired and assumed questions and answers; they “emerge” through a variety of complex processes in which early childhood plays the most important role. During the years of early childhood, children are exposed to certain kinds of educational materials, tools, routines, customs, and a host of cultural, social, and family influences. In schools or at home they are subjected to educational techniques and procedures. They are “taught” certain books, written by writers who believe in certain answers to these primary questions and whose works demonstrate these beliefs, sometimes overtly but often in a subtext. Likewise, tools, teaching aids, and even material things such as the toys, balls, and blocks in many primary classrooms and homes have a contributing presence to the making of the framework within which young learners take their first steps.

The environment, learning materials, teaching methodologies, and specific worldviews of teachers all contribute to a rapid solidification of the conceptual framework in which young learners may spend much of the rest of their lives. Rather than arithmetic, language arts, and science lessons, it is this “molding” of the young learner that is the most important aspect of early childhood education. Once formed, this framework has a profound effect on one’s entire life. It not only influences initial ideas about how the physical world surrounding us came into existence, but also informs our inter-personal relations, lifestyles, habits, attitudes toward life and learning, and much deeper processes which affect the spiritual and emotional composition of our beings. In fact, one may say that the years of early childhood education are the most important developmental time in a person’s entire life.

Considering the tremendous impact these early years have on children, it is not surprising that a multi-billion dollar industry has come into existence to produce the material used in early childhood education. Every year, this industry churns out millions of books, toys, teaching aids, and other such resource material. This material is bought by schools and parents for use by children who cannot yet make their own choices. What is bought often reflects the prevailing worldview of society or the parents, though a large amount of this material is bought “thoughtlessly”, or merely because of successful marketing techniques.

At home and in school, children are often surrounded by the materials assumed to be aiding their education. Usually, the more affluent the parents, school, or society, the more abundant is such material. This is a global trend, but like all trendy things, it owes its existence more to marketing techniques than to any inherent value, for this commercialization did not exist even two generations ago, while the quality and standards of education were much higher then. This decline of the quality of education, which is a worldwide concern of educators, has reached such alarming levels that today many high school graduates, who have been surrounded by all manner of educational materials and electronic gadgets to aid their learning, can hardly add two four-digit decimal numbers or compose a paragraph of text to express their ideas coherently.

Regardless of where it sells, this commercial industry is a characteristic product of the Western civilization and one of its most apparent aspects is its monochromatic worldview: the entire industry caters to a consumption-oriented secularized worldview which attempts to shape the next generation through education on a particular model. It is, therefore, useful to note some of the primary beliefs which are ultimately reflected in the material churned out by this huge industry: the world has come into existence through a “Big Bang” or some other “automatic” beginning; life originated in cellular form through a random and chance process and then “evolved”, giving rise to more complex forms, of which human life is but one form. There is a linear development in this evolution: past ages were dark, less developed; future time will be better, more advanced, and more developed. These foundational precepts form the warp and weft of the belief system behind the products. Sometimes the idea of a Creator is applied to this worldview through secondary routes—by assigning the original “Big Bang” to a Creator, or by allowing the Creator to be the author of the random and chance processes through which life is supposed to have evolved. The position of this Creator, however, is never granted primacy vis-a-vis each action in daily life, let alone the cosmos. For all intents and purposes, this worldview generates a body of knowledge that is thoroughly secularized—that is, a knowledge from which the Sacred has been abstracted.

At another level, this worldview assumes implicitly that the present world order, in which the Western civilization has an economic, military, and socio-cultural dominance over all other civilizations, is a *fait accompli* destined to remain invariable for all time to come. It further holds that all other civilizations are somehow inferior to Western civilization, and that nations are divided into “rich” and “poor”, of which the “rich” countries are rich in all respects while the “poor” countries are poor in all respects. These underlying beliefs or rather, dogmas, then translate into social studies textbooks in which the present world order is not only a solid and unchangeable reality, it is also propagated as the natural outcome of history. That is, all other civilizations are treated as precursors to the present Western civilization and their present state is considered as nothing but a woeful state of chaos, poverty, and disintegration, in need of aid. Likewise, numerous international organizations which have come into existence in the post-World War II era—the United Nations, the World Bank, and the like—are generally portrayed as beneficial, genuine, and representative bodies reflecting the aspirations of all humanity. Even when there is a critique of this or that aspect of these organizations, it is presented within these broader assumptions.

In concrete and practical terms, these underlying beliefs produce material with long-lasting consequences for young minds. Such material presents a reified structure of today’s world as an unchanging and unchangeable reality; it presents history from its own monochromatic view and it may even ignore or distort solid historical data to maintain its own interpretations. In high school science textbooks, for instance,

one can find cursory mention of the Greek scientific tradition before the text jumps over seven centuries of Islamic scientific tradition to introduce to young minds the theories which arose in early modern science. In social studies, textbooks may advocate a watered-down version of what is essentially social Darwinism, and in language arts they either entirely ignore all literary traditions other than the Western or add some exotic texts from other civilizations as token gestures of inclusiveness. In short, educational material constructed on this secular foundation comes with a host of hidden ideologies which indoctrinate the minds of learners.

It can be argued that each civilization produces material which naturally advocates and reflects its own worldview, and thus there is nothing wrong with this industry churning out millions of copies of educational resources destined for markets where people freely choose to purchase what they buy. This may be true on a theoretical level, but as things stand, we live in a world where people do not have this free choice. The educational material produced on this pattern by a well-established industry has advantageous marketing and selling strategies and its global reach is unmatched by any other kind of material, not because of some inherent superiority of the worldview on which it is constructed but by the sheer economic and political leverage enjoyed by Western civilization. The result is obvious: Western education has spread across the globe to remote regions of the world where even a generation ago the English language was unheard. This rapid growth has of course not been only the result of marketing techniques but also of political, military, and economic manipulations as well as a process of social engineering that is transforming non-Western civilizations at an unprecedented rate.

Regardless of the causes of its spread, the fact is that educational material produced on a secular model is being used by a large number of Muslim children around the world. This brings these young Muslims in direct contact with a worldview—and a value-system based on that worldview—that runs against the grain of the Islamic worldview. This, naturally and inevitably, affects learners in deeply-rooted ways which can lead to internal conflicts of psychological and spiritual nature. This has, in due course, been recognized by many perceptive Muslim scholars who have called for an epistemic correction of knowledge.

It has been clearly recognized that this epistemic correction cannot be achieved by merely sprinkling Qurʾānic *āyāt* through material which arises from within a secular framework; it can only come into existence by redefining the two primary tenets which inform the development of educational resources and their delivery. The first of these is related to our understanding of the cosmos and our place in it, for the way we perceive the cosmos invariably defines our relation to it as well as our ideas about the nature and function of our own lives. How and why did the cosmos come into existence? What is life and how did it begin?

The second primary tenet pertains to the nature and purpose of education: What is knowledge? How does it come into existence? What

āyāt
pl. of *āyah*; signs

tawḥīd
unicity; oneness of God
taqwā
consciousness of the Creator
ghayb
unseen
Jannah
the Celestial Garden

is its purpose? How is it transmitted and used? These are foundational questions and all educational resources assume answers to them, even though they often remain only as subtext. Young learners receive the worldview on which educational resources are based in small doses, and slowly this worldview becomes the background of their own beliefs.

Compare a textbook based on the implicit belief that there is no real purpose behind the coming into existence of the cosmos or that assumes that life originated on its own through some random and chance permutation of cells with the one based on the message of the Qurʾān that informs us that there is a Creator Who fashioned this cosmos and all that exists in it for a purpose and for a fixed duration. These two books would have to be *fundamentally* different in the way they are conceived, written, and organized. There may be a certain overlap of data in the two books, but both would interpret data through their own lenses. In one book, the falling of rain will be presented merely as a physical process; in the other, it will have a metaphysical as well as a physical aspect. The book based on a foundational understanding of the One Creator Who sustains all creation will have a central unity reflecting the vertical axis of *tawḥīd*; all material in such a book will have to continuously reflect the purpose of learning: the transformation of the learner into a human being with *taqwā* of the Creator, and the purpose of his or her creation, which the Glorious Qurʾān tells us is to be a devoted servant of Allah.

Thus, a truly Islamic book for early childhood will not only contain *āyāt* from the Most Noble Book, but will also base all material to be taught on the worldview of the Qurʾān. It will not only draw upon the wise counsels of the Prophet ﷺ, the most eloquent of all Arabs, but will also infuse all of its material with his wisdom, nobility, and teachings. Such a book will not only teach what exists in the manifest cosmos but will also instill in the young learners a truly Islamic view of the *ghayb*. Such a book will have constant and subtle references to the Signs of the One Who has infused the manifest universe with numerous meaningful and discernable signs for our reflection. Such a book will view each and every aspect of the manifest universe in the Qurʾānic light which normally is only reflected in the “Islamic Studies” portion of the curriculum of Muslim schools. A unit on gardens in such a book, for instance, will not only be populated with the plants of this world but will also make the conceptual leap and bring the celestial Garden, *Jannah*, into full relief, as this Garden remains the most enduring goal of all believers. And this corrective of approach will apply to each and every aspect of the curriculum, from its scope and sequence to its delivery. In short, such a book will have to be constructed on a foundation that is radically different from the one based on secular worldviews.

Numerous Muslim scholars have identified these core issues over the last quarter of a century; conferences have been held and books have been published, highlighting the need for an epistemic correction of the foundation upon which Islamic curriculum should be based. But this intellectual activity has yet to see abundant fruit; the realization has yet to reach the vast body of believers. There is still a paucity of

truly Islamic educational resources. In spite of a clear perception of the disease from which Islamic education suffers, it is a sad fact of our times that the vast majority of “Islamic” schools are merely “Muslim” schools—that is, schools where the children of Muslim parents are sent, sometimes with the realization that this individual initiative is nothing more than an effort to protect the child from certain negative influences which abound in other schools. This is most often the case in regions of the world where Muslims are living as minorities, but the situation within the traditional lands of Islam is not less alarming. Most of the Islamic heartland is undergoing a rapid westernization and education is the first victim. Western-style education is rapidly spreading through the Muslim world.

These considerations have led the Canada-based Muslim Education Foundation (MEF) to embark on an initiative to produce source material, which can be used by home schooling families as well as teachers in schools to redesign the learning process. This approach is based on three primary Qurʾānic concepts: *tawhīd*, *risālah*, and *maʿād*. Its purpose is to actively transform the learners in the very process of learning.

Concentric Circles is the first book being published by MEF. It is based on a thematic approach which seamlessly blends the Qurʾānic worldview with pedagogical material, techniques, and tools, and situates the entire process of learning in Islamic intellectual soil. It integrates disciplines and allows teachers at schools and parents at home to draw upon a large body of material from the three realms from which the Qurʾān itself draws its material: the cosmos, the *nafs*, and the human story. Thus re-structured, the process of learning becomes transformative through its inseparable and seamless linkage with the Book.

This pedagogical scheme is anchored in the Qurʾān. *Concentric Circles* makes a clear and conscious decision to present to learners an understanding of both the unseen and the manifest universes, *al-ʿālam al-ghayb waʾsh-shahādah*, allowing them to acquire a systematic understanding of various levels of existence. This methodology bridges disciplines, incorporates Qurʾānic material in all subjects, and helps young learners to develop an understanding of the cosmos and their own place in it from various viewpoints: the world above us, the world below us, the world around us, the world inside us, the world before us, the world behind us, the world seen, and the world unseen.

This way of conceptualizing the content is not merely a novelty; it fundamentally alters the way material is organized for learners and produces a uniquely Islamic orientation of teaching that aims to increase the awareness of the prime relationship that we all have in our lives: our relationship with Allah. Young learners gain an understanding of their own beings through this perspective, and all other relationships are then defined by it. This reordering also produces a unification of the entire learning process, and allows to build greater complexity and richness successively: what learners learn in their early years can then be used to deepen conceptual understanding in higher grades.

In respect to language acquisition, Muslims have always recognized

risālah
prophecy
maʿād
the Return

nafs
self, soul, the human being
al-ʿālam al-ghayb
the unseen universe
al-ʿālam aʾsh-shahādah
the manifest universe

that among all the languages of the world, Arabic has a special place because it is the language chosen by the Creator for the final revelation to humanity when He chose to send the Qurʾān in clear Arabic, *al-ʿarabī al-mubīn*. Arabic is also the language of the noble Prophet, whose words and deeds are a constant source of guidance for Muslims. In addition, a majority of primary sources for the study of Islam and its civilization are in Arabic. Thus, one of the most important decisions to be made by schools and parents in respect to teaching and learning of languages is about the status of Arabic in the curriculum. In non-Arabic societies, schools and home educators show considerable divergence about their approach to Arabic. Certain schools teach Arabic as a second language; others simply ignore it; and still others add a simplified and often inadequate dose of Arabic through an “Islamic Studies” programme.

This confusion is a recent phenomenon, introduced into the educational systems of Muslim societies through the colonization of their lands by European powers. Previous to this experience, Arabic had the status of *lingua franca* throughout traditionally Muslim lands. Every educated Muslim learned Arabic as the language of scholarship. The ability to read and write Arabic was not an exception, and this made hundreds of years of Islamic scholarship available to educated Muslims. The vast corpus of Arabic texts, in turn, provided access and attachment to the entire intellectual tradition of Islam.

During the last three centuries, the situation has been reversed. Today approximately only 15% of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims have direct access to the language of revelation and to a formidable tradition of scholarship which provides a profound understanding of life and its dilemmas. This is the unmaking of a living tradition at a mega-scale, the most horrible experiment in social engineering.

For Muslims to regain their personal and collective moorings, there is simply no other path but to re-establish a living relationship with the language of revelation. *Concentric Circles* recommends simultaneous acquisition of Arabic along with another language in schools and homes where Arabic is not the primary language. Of all approaches to teaching and learning languages, this is the most natural: learning through living a language. This approach simplifies procedures, builds vocabulary in a natural way, and imparts a “feel” for the language that cannot be experienced through pedantic procedures.

Critics of this approach may suggest that it may be too heavy a burden for the child, but this criticism is based upon the false assumption that children have limited linguistic abilities. Research and experience show that young children have a great capacity to learn many languages simultaneously. In fact, there is no time in one’s life better suited to the acquisition of languages than these early years, when correct sound patterns can be stored in the deepest recesses of one’s memory. Research also shows that the ability to learn new languages diminishes after a certain age, and in time no other language can be learnt as a naturally acquired language; then one can only learn a new language as a second or third or fourth language. Considering all this and yet recognizing the contemporary difficulties associated with the simultaneous acquisi-

tion of Arabic and English, *Concentric Circles* recommends that parents and schools integrate simultaneous teaching and learning of Arabic as much as they can, depending on the specific situation.

In conclusion, it must be pointed out that this book makes a number of basic assumptions. It assumes that at home and in the classroom, there are, in fact, two learners: the “young learner” and the “not-so-young learner” (that is, the teacher or parent). This assumption is based on the Prophetic teaching that a believer is a learner from the cradle to the grave. The process of “teaching”, therefore, acquires a totally new dimension in which the “teacher” is required to be a learner in the very process of facilitating learning for the young child. *Concentric Circles* also assumes that the main goal and purpose of education is to learn to develop and enrich an inner relationship with the Creator—a *taqwā* which should inform all other aspects of life. This approach to learning is not by any means somehow “lesser than” other models, and indeed given its more holistic and integrated approach to learning, can exceed the pedagogical outcomes and standards defined by secular education. A cursory glance at any of the thematic units should affirm these assumptions, but the real test of this newly produced material awaits field testing. It is hoped that schools and homeschooling parents will join this effort which aims to produce a fundamental corrective in the very foundation of learning, with the goal of transforming the experience of learning for both the young learner as well as the not-so-young learner.

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Muzaffar Iqbal
Wuddistān

