

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

JEFFERSON REPORT: PROBING EDUCATION

Fez University – the Oldest in the Western World

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Second in a Series

Fatima al-Fihri's gift to her adopted city is clothed in ancient stories, but behind the history are important truths that rub up against many of our modern ideas of education. Al-Qarawiyyin University, founded in 859, in Fez, Morocco, is the result of a Muslim woman born around 800 AD. That will be a shocker to many in the West. The story goes that she and her family were refugees, rich ones of course, but forced from their original home by the politics of the day. The story also has her sister Maryam founding the Al-Andalusiyyin Mosque in Fez as well.^[1] Previous to Fez, the centers of learning were called, as to this day, madrassas. They had and still have a narrow religious content in part consisting of memorizing the whole Qur'an. In some countries they are "seminaries of sedition"^[2] against the West.

Thus, it was a surprise to find the multicultural and multireligious and multieducational nature of the institution at Fez. "The foundation Fatima laid for Al-Qarawiyyin would become the platform for a great center of learning, not just in the Maghreb, but worldwide: famous graduates of different religious traditions include Maimonides (1135-1204), the Jewish philosopher, jurist, and physician, and Nicolas Clénard (1495-1542), a professor at the Christian University of Leuven in Belgium. The Al-Qarawiyyin library houses a 12th century copy of the

gospel of Mark in Arabic, and exchanges with Al-Qarawayyin are credited with having brought Arabic numerals in use today to Western Europe.”[3]

Although students were initially male, tradition has it that “facilities were at times provided for interested women to listen to the discourse while accommodated in a special gallery (riwaq) overlooking the scholars’ circle.”[4] One of the hadith sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, states “To acquire knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim, male or female.”[5]

As with most ancient universities, Fez (shortened here for Al-Qarawiyyin University) was founded as a religious institution in Morocco that would have been a mosque with both worship and teaching. Most mosques still do not separate these into compartments as we do today in most of the non-Muslim West.

We don’t know the exact contents of the educational curriculum, but we can make a good guess, and to some extent it is still going on today. It was a rich curriculum. We do have information from another ancient Muslim university in Egypt. “Organized instruction in the Cairo Al-Azhar Mosque began in 978. Education would begin at a young age with study of Arabic and the Quran, either at home or in a primary school, which was often attached to a mosque. Some students would then proceed to training in tafsir (Quranic exegesis) and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), which were seen as particularly important.”[6] The early Muslim colleges were devoted principally to the study of law, but they also offered other subjects such as theology, medicine, and mathematics. Many have described the Islamic purpose of education as a balanced growth of the total personality through training the spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings, and bodily senses such that faith is infused into the whole personality.

To take an important figure in medieval Islam who set the tone for much higher education at the time up to the present, was a Persian polymath Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) who studied theology and education on a theoretical level. One of the ideas that Al-Ghazali was most known for was his emphasis on the importance of connecting educational disciplines on both an instructional and philosophical level. With this, Al-Ghazali heavily incorporated religion into his pedagogical processes, believing that the main purpose of education was to prepare and inspire a person to participate in the teachings of Islam more faithfully.”[7]

The period following Al-Ghazali has been called the Golden Age of Arabic philosophy initiated by Ghazali's successful integration of logic into the Islamic seminary Madrasah curriculum. Al-Ghazali also played a major role in integrating Sufism with Shariah. He was also the first to present a formal description of Sufism in his works. “He stressed the importance of understanding and sharing

cultures in the classrooms to achieve a civic harmony that would be expressed outside the classroom and kindness to one another.”[8]

Al-Ghazali didn't spare the horses and was educationally and politically critical of some other schools of thought at the time. He is also known to have written a fatwa against the Taifa kings of al-Andalus, declaring them to be unprincipled, not fit to rule and that they should be removed from power.

He wrote against other philosophers causing a heated dialogue. His 11th century book titled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* marks a major turn in Islamic epistemology. Al-Ghazali stated that he did not have a problem with other branches of philosophy such as physics, logic, astronomy, or mathematics. His only axe to grind was with metaphysics, in which he claimed that the philosophers did not use the same tools, namely logic, which they used for other sciences. It was critical of the misuse of ancient philosophers, claiming that the authors hadn't done their homework. In the next century, Ibn Rushd (or Averroes) drafted a lengthy rebuttal of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence* titled *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*.

Averroes' response defends the doctrines of the “philosophers” and criticizes al-Ghazali's own arguments. It is written as a sort of dialogue: Averroes quotes passages by al-Ghazali and then responds to them. Averroes attempted to create harmony between faith and philosophy, between Aristotelian ideas and Islam. He claimed that Aristotle is also right, and the words of Quran are also the eternal truth. He wanted to combine cultures, not separate them.

“In Europe, Averroes' philosophical writings were generally well received by Christian and Jewish scholars and gave rise to the philosophical school of Averroism.”[9] The greatest of these Christian writers who was influenced by al-Ghazali was St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who made a study of the Arabic writers and admitted his indebtedness to them, having studied at the University of Naples, where the influence of Arab literature and culture was predominant at the time. In addition, Aquinas' interest in Islamic studies could be attributed to the infiltration of ‘Latin Averroism’ in the 13th century, especially at the University of Paris.”[10] It is heartening to know of some of the cross-cultural and cross-religious barriers were at least partially overcome in the Middle Ages. Would that we could repeat this in the 21st century.

A surprising parallel to the two Muslim sisters in Morocco in modern Britain tells of the founding of Westminster College, Cambridge, a place for the training of English Presbyterian ministers. Twin sisters were the important benefactors - Agnes Smith Lewis (d 1926) and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (d 1920), nées Agnes and Margaret Smith (sometimes referred to as the Westminster Sisters) born on January 11, 1843 - were Arabic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Syriac language scholars and travelers. As the twin daughters of John Smith of Irvine,

Ayrshire, Scotland, they learned more than 12 languages between them, and became acclaimed scholars in their academic fields.[11]

We have some surprising results – the oldest Western university is Muslim, is in Morocco and still going strong, and was founded by a woman. They taught many subjects of importance then and now. They had some remarkable early alumnae from very different backgrounds: Maimonides (1135/1138–1204), Jewish philosopher, Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Sufi philosopher, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), historian and philosopher, and Leo Africanus (1494–1554), author.

The main point I want to draw out is the educational methodology that was developed early on in Western history from the Greeks through the early Muslim universities and as we shall see, in Christian foundations as well – it was, and we hope can remain where it is in place, *polymathic*. They taught a lot of subjects that all students studied and some of these universities tried to relate them to each other. Religion cannot be understood without law; medicine cannot be practiced without history. Include vice versa and put all major subjects under the same criterion. We need doctors, scientists, and engineers who know some philosophy and psychology, and vice versa.

There is also the notion of teaching the “whole” student, not just portions of his or her intellect. Psychological, philosophical, historical, legal, and other dimensions of life need to be factored in to help develop a complete social person who has a strong self-understanding and sense of citizenship, at least as far as we can try.

University of al-Qarawiyyin Today

Education at al-Qarawiyyin University today concentrates on the Islamic religious and legal sciences with a heavy emphasis on, and has particular strengths in, classical Arabic grammar/linguistics and Maliki law, though some lessons on other non-Islamic subjects such as French and English are also offered to students. Teaching is delivered with students seated in a semi-circle around a sheikh, who prompts them to read sections of a particular text; asks them questions on particular points of grammar, law, or interpretation; and explains difficult points. Students from Morocco and Islamic West Africa attend al-Qarawiyyin, though some come from Muslim Central Asia. Spanish Muslim converts frequently attend the institution, largely attracted by the fact that the sheikhs of al-Qarawiyyin, and Islamic scholarship in Morocco in general, are heirs to the rich, religious, and scholarly heritage of Muslim al-Andalus.

Most students at al-Qarawiyyin range between 13 and 30 years old, and study towards high school-level diplomas and university-level bachelor’s degrees, although Muslims with a sufficiently high level of Arabic can attend lecture circles on an informal basis, given the traditional category of visitors “in search of [religious and legal] knowledge” (“zuwwaar li'l-talab fii 'ilm”). In addition to being

Muslim, prospective students of al-Qarawiyyin are required to have fully memorized the Quran, as well as other shorter medieval Islamic texts on grammar and *Maliki* law, and to be proficient in classical Arabic. Women are welcome.[12]

A current Islamic study center in the West is in England. The **Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies** was founded in 1985 and follows in the Fez traditions. Its patron is King Charles III. In 2012, it was granted a Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth II. The governance of the center is managed by a board of trustees made up of scholars and statesmen from around the world, and representatives of the University of Oxford nominated by the council.

The center is dedicated to the study, from a multi-disciplinary perspective, of all aspects of Islamic culture and civilization and of contemporary Muslim societies. The center's fellows are active in different departments, faculties, and colleges across the university. The center arranges lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences, exhibitions, and other academic events throughout the academic year.[13] I attended the opening lecture by the then Prince of Wales. It is close to my house in Oxford and the main building on site is a mosque.

From the Prince of Wales (now King Charles III) speech on the granting of the Royal Charter:

It seems to me absolutely right that, here in the United Kingdom, we should do all we can to nurture an institution which not only promotes a better informed understanding of Islamic culture and civilization, and the challenges facing Muslim communities, but which can also remind both the Islamic world and the West of those timeless, **universal principles of harmony enshrined within Islam** that the world needs so urgently to re-discover in the battle to preserve the future for our descendants. **Only from such understanding can we increase the dialogue, respect and tolerance which underpin our national values.** This is something I have been trying to do for more than two decades. Indeed, it was under the aegis of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in 1993 – and standing next to a strikingly young-looking Farhan Nizami! – that I set out my thoughts in a speech called *Islam and the West*. Interestingly, it is still the only speech which brings in a bit of an income each year!”[14]

[1] There is a debate on all these points. Many historians question not only dates but whether Fez was a “real” university or only a seminary with some additional training in law. It all depends on definitions of what a university or college is. But the balance of writers that I have looked at favor Fez as first among early equals. Most claim it taught a variety of subjects.

[2] A term used by the British in the 18th century to describe the pre-Revolutionary colleges in America.

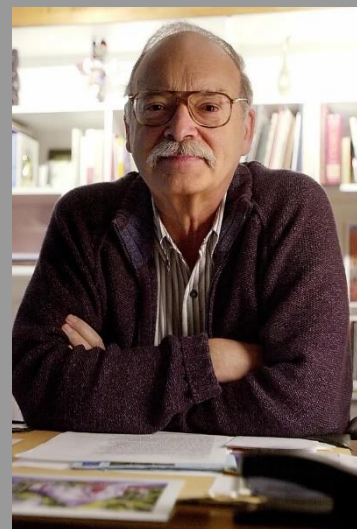
[3] Ann Bayliss, *Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fes: Brainchild of a Muslim Woman*, Sep 15, 2019, *Inside Arabia*, online

[4] A.L.Tibawi, *Reviewed Work*, in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.2 No. 3, Summer 1980 (pp. 286-288) jstor.org/stable/i40087958, p 288 quoted by Ann Bayliss, op cit

- [5] Günther, Sebastia, *Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory*, in *Islam and Education: Myths and Truths*, Wadad Kadi and Victor Billah, eds. Chicago University Press, 2007. (pp. 61-82) quoted by Ann Bayliss, op cit
- [6] *Education in pre-modern Islam*, Wikipedia
- [7] *Theories of Islamic Education*, Wikipedia
- [8] *Al-Ghazali*, Wikipedia
- [9] ibid
- [10] Ibid
- [11] Janet Soskice, *The Sisters of Sinai, How Two Lady Adventurers Discovered the Hidden Gospels*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009
- [12] University of al-Qarawiyyin, Wikipedia
- [13] *Oxford Center for Islamic Studies*, Wikipedia
- [14] A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at a reception to mark the Granting of a Royal Charter to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, 15 MAY 2012, <https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh>. His speech *Islam and the West* at the opening of the Center is available online.

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