CHAPTER EIGHT

KNOWLEDGE IS SOCIETY

(Education)


Information is the cement that holds together any human society, and a continuous process of education is necessary to assure its preservation and extension. The goal is always identical, but the stages may be marked by a different terminology, and thereby the value system sustaining a given society on its course is altered in appearance and reality. The specific problem confronting us here is the degree to which a generalizing abstraction such as “knowledge” has dominated the verbalization of the human striving for improvement through learning and education in Islam. As we have seen, the term “knowledge” itself represents different notions and values. Modern discussions of what type of knowledge and what kind of education are preferable clearly show that the knowledge desired by some may mean ignorance and stagnation for others. However, the complexion of a society cannot fail to impress its historian as different, if all its intellectual efforts and, indeed, all its educational efforts constantly stress the importance of the term “knowledge” and the terms “teaching” and “learning” which, among the languages of Muslim peoples, the linguistic structure of Arabic at least makes almost one and the same thing as knowledge, and if there is nothing, neither morality, nor piety, nor action, nor any other possible societal value that enjoys the same degree of exposure as is reserved to “knowledge.” For medieval Muslim civilization, we have to rely upon the evidence of the preserved literature. Its abundance and variety make it virtually certain that the glorification of knowledge expressed by it extended to all phases of life and educational activity and to all classes of the population. It is hard to conceive of any place, no matter how remote, where there might have existed anyone, no matter how humble and uneducated, who was not filled with awe when he heard the word “knowledge.” And it was generally recognized that any genuine betterment of an individual’s standing in society depended on his share of knowledge, in preference to the uncertain avenues
of birth, power, and wealth, or as yet unverbalized values such as individual identity, usefulness to society, and the like.

There is pleasure (ladhhdah) in knowledge for the person who possesses knowledge.¹ According to Aristotle, the characteristic pleasure of man, the one he does not share with all other animals, is the pleasure of knowledge (ladhhdhat al-ma’rifah).² A littérateur and philologian such as Abû Hilâl al-Askari tells us how deeply he felt this pleasure of knowledge, which comes after the long process of learning, and he puts his feeling into verse: “Since we have come to know about the pleasure of knowledge, neither the sweet nor the tasty pleases us any more.”³ Since knowledge secures access to happiness in both this world and the next, it is the greatest of pleasures, just as ignorance is the greatest of pains.⁴ In fact, one who has tasted the pleasure of knowledge would never think of finding pleasure in anything else.⁵ A veritable physical love (ishq) can be felt for knowledge. This is stated in a work on love by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah in the first half of the fourteenth century.⁶ The lovers of knowledge feel a stronger attraction and infatuation than do lovers for their beloved, and even the most beautiful human form may not be capable to divert many a lover of knowledge from his one true love. Scholars cannot be tempted into giving up their dedicated search for knowledge, even if strenuous study affects their health. Half a century before Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, al-Ansârî expressed what was also in the mind of the later scholar, namely, that the love of knowledge—al-Ansârî uses the less sensual term mahabbah—is part of man’s innate love of any kind of inner perfection. In the Qur’ân, it is said that every group is pleased with

¹ Cf. al-Ghazzâlî, Mizân al-‘amal, 191.
² Cf. Kitâb as-Sa’dah, 43, 46 ff., 54, also, 84, where studying is described as a passive pleasure; at-Tawhidî, Inti’î, II, 36. On the Greek side, cf., for instance, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1174b21; Metaphysics 1072b24. The Mahâbhârata also speaks of knowledge as the only pleasure, or rather, as something that makes pleasure superfluous, cf. L. Sternbach, in JAOŠ, LXXXIII (1963), 52a.
³ Cf. al-Askari, Ḥathîth; also his Dîwân al-ma’ânî, II, 78 (Cairo 1352).
⁴ Cf. al-Kâfî, in Rosenthal, A History of Muslim Historiography, 575. In a more restricted sense, knowledge is one of the pleasures of this world. It becomes useful for the other world, only if it is acted upon, cf. al-Khaṭîb al-Baghdâdî, Iqti’dâ, 169. See also above, p. 205, n. 3.
⁵ Cf. al-Mubashshir, 177, in the name of Plato.
⁷ Cf. Qur’ân 23: 53/55 and 30: 32/31, where a negative judgment is intended.