

MUSLIM EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA: A CASE STUDY OF EAST-WEST UNIVERSITY

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A three-member delegation of the Chicago-based East-West University, comprising Dr. Muhammad Wasiullah Khan, its Chancellor, Michael Burack, Director of Development and Zafar Malik, Director of Publications and the American Muslim Study Group of the University, visited Saudi Arabia for a week recently. During the delegation's stay in Jeddah, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Wasiullah Khan in order to have the latest information about the progress of the East-West University. But before we talk about the history and progress of the East-West University, I deem it worthwhile to acquaint our readers with the present condition of the American Muslim community, its socio-cultural life and the state of education of the American Muslims.

Muslims in the United States

The American Muslims are about six million or more now and constitute the second largest religious community after Christians. The American Muslim Study Group of the East-West University had conducted a Muslim Census of the Chicago land area in 1994. The Census Bureau of the United States has identified large urban areas of the country which go beyond the cities. For instance, besides New York proper, New York urban area has about twenty million people living there. The second largest urban area after New York is Los Angeles with nine and a half million, then comes Chicago, the third largest, having a population of nine million.

In 1995 the Study Group identified about 14 urban areas to conduct the census of the Muslim population. In Chicago land area, there are about 4,000 Muslims; 2% are African-Americans, 25% Indian-Pakistani and 25% Arabs. Then there are others.

The Muslim Study Group also conducted a census of Muslims in New York, after which they planned to go to Los Angeles area. But according to Dr. Ilyas Ba-Yunus, a Professor of Sociology in the State University of New York, who is also a demographer, "native American Muslims comprise 40% with few American Muslims who were born and

brought up in the United States. The remaining 60% are composed of Afro-American Muslims; immigrant Muslims,” said Dr. Wasiullah Khan, the head of the delegation from the East-West University and its Chancellor. There are great diversities in their history, ethnic background and economic status; because immigrant Muslims mostly came after the immigration laws were changed in 1966 and they mostly came on the basis of their education.

The immigrant Muslims are among the most educated and, for that matter, most affluent and prosperous Americans. For example, the per capita income of Indian and Pakistani immigrants is about twice the US per capita income because of their education. There are among them very highly paid doctors, engineers, business executives and computer scientists and professors who lead a life of great affluence and it is very common to find them owning three-million dollar-homes.

Muslim Education

Now let us discuss the issue of Muslim education in America. For the last 30 years, Muslim Students Associations (MSA), which was started in 1963 in Illinois and later became the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in 1983, has been engaged in the educational and socio-cultural domains in the United States. The MSA was founded by some Muslim Students from Muslim countries studying in the US Universities in the 1970s. The movement was inspired by the works of such stalwarts and scholars as Allama Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Abul Ala Mawdudi, Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, Saiyid Qutb, Hasan Al-Banna, Saeed Nursi and Ali Shariati.

In the early 1960s and 70s, Islamic educational institutions, which only taught the Qur’ân and —ad™th are very rare to find. There may be one or two such schools to teach Qur’ân, —ad™th and Fiqh and so on. But now, there are some 200 Islamic schools in North America. These are regular schools established by Muslims, which teach all school subjects. Most of them are actually charitable, non-profit making institutions and are well-recognized by the state boards. “I am not sure about Canada, but in the States, this is a double penalty for Muslims, as being US citizen, they are paying taxes but their children are not going to the public schools, they instead go to these Islamic or Muslim schools, which do not cater for a large section of the community. Obviously, no more than one or two percent of Muslim children can be taught by these Muslim or Islamic schools. Others go to public schools. The more affluent, prosperous and professionally successful parents are not satisfied with the teaching in the public schools,” Dr. Khan said.

These affluent immigrant parents do not want their children to go to public schools, they send their children to parochial schools, which are mostly Christian denomination schools and charge very high fees—\$15,000 or \$25,000 US dollars per year. There are some suburban schools as well. There are 50 states in the United States, with each state divided into counties, and each county, in a parallel manner, is sub-divided into two school districts. School districts do not function as the counties. Each

school has a board elected by the people, the real estate and other taxes are paid to them. The board starts as many elementary, middle and high schools, as are needed by the children of the school districts. As they are mostly in the poor areas of the large cities, the real estate taxes are very low; so they do not have enough funds to have better schools.

Dr. Khan said, "More than 30 years ago, the Supreme Court of the United States gave a verdict that children's education should have nothing to do with their parents' income. But that did not solve this problem. The problem still remains the same: highly impoverished communities with very bad schools faced with such problems as girls being raped, drug-pushing, poor quality teachers and teachers being attacked. In short, it is a very bad situation."

"But in the suburban areas, there are some good schools. So, the Muslim parents have to live in an area where their children can go to free and better schools. But again there comes the question of school culture. Any Muslim, Jewish or good Christian parent will become very concerned about what their children will learn from their peer groups, not just what the teachers teach them. So, the Muslim schools can provide an alternative," Dr. Khan added.

As early as September 1989, ISNA held a seminar on Islamic education. It appointed five committees, the first committee was charged to investigate how Islamic education can be imparted to children, who perforce have to go to public schools; that is state schools. They are not like British public schools, in the US, state-supported schools are public schools. The second committee that Dr. Khan chaired was requested to inspect four Islamic schools in Chicago and find out what they were required to do to become accredited. Accreditation is a different process, it does not mean government recognition. These Islamic schools are all government-recognized, but are not accredited.

Accreditation is a peculiar American phenomenon. The whole country is divided into six regions and there are five different associations. Each association has two different commissions—one for schools and one for higher education. Dr. Khan said, "All schools and universities have to become members of these associations of colleges. Membership of these associations involves a lot of work. Four/five people will stay in the college concerned for two/three days, the college has to submit a 200-page report of what the school or university is like; then they will interview faculty members and administrators, in addition to attending the trustees meeting, which will not be attended by the president."

Dr. Khan went on to say that some of the best universities of the world, Princeton, Yale, Chicago and North-Western Chicago have their accreditation. "I do not know whether there is any accredited Muslim high school anywhere: they are government-recognized, but I do not know whether they are accredited or not. So it was our committee's job to find out what they should do to become accredited and it was also our job to combine Islamic curricula from all over the western world so that a compendium of what the teachers should teach or learn may be prepared," said Dr. Khan.

A fourth committee was chaired by brother Fakri who was to offer short training to the teachers. But, in the meantime Dr. Wasiullah Khan found that hardly any teacher of these schools were voluntary teachers, they were all paid ones. For a teacher to be paid, he or she has to have a teaching certificate which is issued only by the state government.

The fifth committee was supposed to develop a compendium of what books or learning materials are available on Islam or Islamic studies. The materials are very few and much work has not been done. If one compares the available textbooks in English, Maths and Science, they are excellent, in fact, they are the best textbooks. Here the government does not interfere; private publishers publish and produce these books.

Dr. Khan observed, "This is the condition of 200 or so Islamic schools. Now the question is how many Muslim children are there; no more than two or one percent of children. It needs a lot of hard work and some rethinking. Colleges and universities start from Grade 13, i.e. after 12 years of education in schools. In America, there are three exams. If you do not complete high school diploma but pass any of these exams, then you will be accepted by the college as a high school graduate."

The most difficult test is the SATs (Scholastic Aptitude Test); ACT (American College Testing) programme test and General Education Development Test (GED) are also available. The same subjects are there. Anybody who passes these tests or any one of the tests, is accepted as a high school diploma-holder. From Grade 13 (undergraduate level), higher education starts. By studying for a duration of four years, students obtain a bachelor's degree. By completing Grades 13 and 14, one can obtain an associated degree, while it is possible to obtain a bachelor's degree by completing only Grades 15 and 16.

East-West University

East-West University was founded in the year 1400 Hijrah in commemoration of the new Hijrah century, which corresponded to September, 1980. Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef is the President of the Board of Trustees from the very beginning with Dr. Muhammad Wasiullah Khan as its Chancellor. Dr. Khan, who is originally from Pakistan, was among the eminent Muslim educationists who participated in the First World Conference on Muslim Education, held in Makkah in 1977 and is one of the Editors of the Islamic Education Series, *Education and Society in the Muslim World*.

Charter of the East-West University. The University was established with one specific purpose, which has two aspects: "In terms of students we wanted to primarily enrol disadvantaged students; those who are almost barred from mainstream colleges. In the beginning, only African-American students enrolled at the University," Dr. Khan said. About 60% students are African-Americans, while about 40% students come from all over the world, among whom are included east Europeans, Bosnians, Ukrainians and Russians. There are East Asian students, Chinese, Buddhists, Japanese,

some Koreans and others. Many students come from India and Pakistan. Then there are African students and a very large number of Latin and Spanish-American students.

"The second aspect of our mission was to deliver education which is global, multi-cultural and feature-oriented which is not the norm in the US colleges and Universities," Dr. Khan observed.

The University offers college as well as undergraduate education spread over eight years. The largest enrolment is in the college of science. The second largest number of students is in business administration, social behavioural science and electronics. There is also a medical technology programme called neuro-science and English, communications, maths and office administration. These are eight areas in all. "We have the best laboratories that are available anywhere in the world. Our buildings are modest and recently a very large building has been added," Dr. Khan observed.

The University got accreditation in December 1983 with the first batch graduating in 1983, while the 18th batch graduated in 2000. In the whole of the US, about 5,500 classes or institutions of higher education are now accredited. "We are very happy that we are among the 1400 top colleges and universities listed in a directory of best American colleges and universities. It was about five years ago that the famous weekly *US News & World Report* listed East-West University in its directory of best colleges and universities," Dr. Khan said. "Presently, ours is a four-year college, in the next five years, it will become a comprehensive university. Well, still comprehensive," said Dr. Khan.

Students: The East-West University had 885 students last year. In the coming year this number is expected to surpass 1000. According to Dr. Khan, "Within less than five years, we will reach the 2000-plus student-mark where we want to stop. The University authorities recently bought the new 96,500 sq. ft. building, while the existing building has 44,000 sq. ft. area. The two buildings have been connected by a bridge."

Teachers: There are 17 full-time and about 50 part-time teachers. Anybody who teaches less than four courses per quarter is considered to be a part-time teacher. They come from all over the world.

Teacher-Student Ratio: The teacher-student ratio is very low. "The norm here is one teacher for 20 students; very few classes actually have more than 30 students and quite a few of them have less than 12 students," Dr. Khan said and added, "There are 14 colleges or universities in the downtown Chicago area, but as I told you, our labs are the best among all of them," Dr. Khan said.

In college education, there is no syllabus prescribed by the government. Dr. Khan told me that US constitution bars the Federal government from legislating on education. It is not within the purview of Washington DC to meddle with education, as it is a state subject. There was no Department of Education in the Federal Government till 1977 and a Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) was created and government funds were allocated.

Another unique feature of the East-West University, according to Dr. Khan, is that “We have large numbers of disadvantaged students, many of whom were citizens or immigrants eligible for financial aid. We have fixed tuition fees at the same level as the financial aid they can receive from the Federal or the state government of Illinois. So, these disadvantaged students attend school and college almost free. In case they don’t happen to be immigrants or citizens, they are not eligible for any financial aid. They may have our own institutional aid,” Dr. Khan told.

Any requirements about the degree is set by the authority—in this case by the Chicago Education Authority. In fact, the only requirement for the quality is comparability. Every college has to have a comparable course outline. There are professional associations of the teachers, who are well aware of the requirements of quality; but there are two principles which are the hallmark of the American higher education: (i) academic freedom and (ii) institutional autonomy.

“The academic freedom means, once a person is hired by a college, he cannot be asked to teach this or that subject. Once the requirements of academic appointment have been fulfilled, a teacher cannot be forced by the academic dean to teach some other subjects. The academic dean has to do. The catalogue has been developed, the course outlines are there; the teacher may use whatever textbooks he wants to and he may make changes or alterations in the course, so long as he can defend or justify the change,” Dr. Khan observed.

Dr. Khan said, “The institutional autonomy means that the degree which we have awarded to a student, we are not accountable to anybody about that, except the membership requirement of accreditation. The concerned state or the Federal authorities have almost nothing to do with how we are managing the institution. For accreditation, there are some general institutional requirements which apply to everybody. They have to have a space which is considered to be appropriate. They have to have an administration, the President, the faculty members, an academic programme leading to the degrees, being just comparable to other academic programmes and students. The state board of higher education, in the case of the East-West University, that of Illinois, measures the number of contact per hour. For instance, take ‘Introduction to Islam and Islamic civilization’: it is a full-time credit hours course, which means four hours of classes are held every week for eleven weeks; two hours on Mondays and two hours on alternate days. So, that’s the only requirement in terms of hours that you have to comply with.”

The average tuition fee in the last year of the four-year colleges in the United States was \$16,000 dollars per year. At the East-West University the fee is half of that. “We increase the tuition fees only if the financial aid available from the Federal government and the state authorities is increased. Further, there are institutional scholarships—we call Islamic studies scholarships—to the extent of the one-third of the total tuition fees. These scholarships facilitate students to continue their higher education,” Dr. Khan observed.

Another unique feature of the East-West University is its culture of being helpful to each student. Starting with the Chancellor and Deans the authorities try to help students. "Our doors are always open for the student to see us whenever there is a need. We have also a department of counselling—director of counselling or the careers counsellor. The counselling involves financial counselling—how you will pay the fee, grants one may get and so on and so forth. It involves academic advising and counselling, like which courses you should take each quarter to make a steady progress towards the final degree," Dr. Khan said.

So far as the performance of the University is concerned, the accreditation and becoming a member of the accreditation body and getting selected to be included in the best colleges of America are proofs of that. The annual rankings are based on a survey of college and university administration and comprehensive data collected from the schools. Dr. Khan, who visited the Chicago State University on December 6, 1995, to address Illinois House Education Committee, said, "Since starting operation in September 1980 and achieving accreditation by NCA in December 1983, East-West University has turned out thirteen classes of graduates, numbering in the hundreds now, with associate and bachelor's degrees in electronics, computer science, business administration, behavioural and social sciences, English and communications, biology, and secretarial science. We are listed in the US News & World Report's *Best Colleges of America Guide*."

A Muslim-Managed University

The East-West University is a Muslim university in the sense that its founders, trustees and majority of the faculty members are Muslims. It is being administered by Muslims. The East-West University is a Muslim university because the basic underlying principles in setting up were conceived by Muslims. Its motto is to take higher education to the underprivileged. "What could be more Muslim than that?" Dr. Khan asked to stress this point.

The East-West University is the only Muslim-managed university in the United States. It is not only run and managed by Muslims but it also encourages, promotes and initiates teaching on Islam and Islamic studies. The following courses taught and the institute run by the university testify to the above observation.

Islamic Studies Courses: The University decided to have the Islamic Studies courses as part of the general education core requirements of the University degree. With the involvement and support of eminent scholars the University instituted four courses in Islamic studies. Donations amounting to \$100,000 dollars were received with which it initiated a scholarship programme so that any student, male or female, coming from any background, may take that course and if he or she needed financial help towards payment of tuition, 30% or \$2,475 dollars will be paid to finish their courses. "In the last four quarters we had 85 students, besides all-Muslim faculty to teach the courses. The Board decided that for any

religious course, teachers of only that particular faith will be hired for teaching that discipline,” Dr. Khan said.

Giving a detailed break-up of the students who had done courses in Islamic Studies, Dr. Khan said, “Among those 85 students, mentioned in the foregoing, there are Hindus from India and Nepal, Buddhists from East Asia, Jews from Eastern Europe, but the majority were Christians. But Muslims too were in sizeable numbers. Percentage-wise, about one quarter of the student body is Muslim, in other words, 33%. In the United States, it is against the law to ask a person to denote his or her religion, so there cannot be any religious column in the registration or application form.”

Institute of Islamic Studies: The University has an Institute of Islamic studies. The discipline has been written by eminent Islamic economist, Dr. Nejatullah Siddiqi and forms a part of the Catalogue. The number of courses offered in Islamic studies are four per quarter, and two per year.

Talking about his personal involvement in the course, Dr. Khan said that he has taken some special courses on Islamic studies. Dr. Khan added, “It will be very stupid and un-Islamic on my part to actually degrade their religions and impress upon them that what they were pursuing is actually an academic course, it is not intended for you to convert to Islam or to anything else. Basically, the course is on human life and human society. For this course I developed an 11-page summary of my own notes and have done some research in discipline.”

Talking about religion, Dr. Khan observed, “When one studies any religion, there are three basic aspects that one needs to study—(i) beliefs; and (ii) injunctions—do’s and don’ts, and (iii) institutions of the society.”

Dr. Khan introduced Dr. Hamidullah’s book and Suzanne Hanif’s book to his students at this stage so that the students could develop a sound understanding of Islam. He said, “In that course, we used the book by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah—*The Road to Islam*, but I have found Suzanne Hanif’s book, *What Everybody should know about Islam and Muslims* as the best book.”

Future Programmes

The University has bought a new building and wants to add one or two more bachelor’s degree and two Masters degree programmes. Enrolment is supposed to reach 2000 by the year 2005 which will double the present enrolment. In America, the number of students available is getting fewer and fewer because the white Americans’ birth-rate is going down steeply. So colleges in the US are facing a severe enrolment crisis as there are more colleges with less enrolment from the majority white community. African-Americans and Spanish-Americans do not have a good tradition of going to college. So, soon enrolment will become a major concern of every college and university. Immigrants or Asian students are among the most educated ones—be they Indian, Pakistani, Chinese or other groups—but they constitute only three percent of the US population.