

BOOK REVIEW

The Educational Philosophy of Al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, by Ahmad Bazli Shafie, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 2004, 160 pages.

The beginning of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century marked a new phase in the encounter of Muslims with the West. It was the “dark age” of the Muslim world, and it suffered a terrible decline not only in its political status but also in other aspects, including its intellectual and cultural life. On the other hand, it was the Age of Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) in England and France. This was the age of awakening in many parts of Europe from a long slumber which resulted from religious, intellectual, scientific and technological movements. Consequently, the Europeans became the major powers and acquired more and more territories and trade centers from Muslim rulers, defeating them even in their own lands. Gradually, the Muslims had to submit to European imperialism.

The above words form the introductory paragraph of *The Educational Philosophy of Al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh* by Ahmad Bazli Shafie, and gives a somewhat panoramic picture of the situation in the Muslim world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a good addition to the numerous works that represent a proliferation of analyses on the distinguished Shaykh. There is no doubting the fact that it is a unique work with an interesting approach. The introductory paragraph, as quoted above, demonstrates well the pleasant nature of its tone as well as the intelligibility of the ideas contained therein, as expressed by the author.

Ahmad Bazli Shafie’s book runs into 160 pages and meaningfully situates the Muslim educational system on the eve of the emergence of Shaykh ‘Abduh. Although information on Shaykh ‘Abduh’s background is rather sketchy and disjointed, the author does not fall short of putting the Shaykh’s contributions in a good perspective in the introduction, where he discusses Shaykh’s role as a Muslim modernist as well as his criticism of the educational system of Egypt. The introduction, which spans 21 pages, impressively fulfills the role of a compendium of earlier works on the Shaykh. The author is at his best when he seeks to justify his writing on the Shaykh. The weakest parts of the introduction, however, are repetitions. For instance, the statement, “Generally speaking, the Muslim attitude towards Western sciences can be divided into two contradictory categories, rejection or withdrawal and accommodation or approval” (p. 3) is repeated later on: “... in general, the reaction of the Egyptian toward Western sciences can be divided into two distinct attitude: antagonism and approval.” (p. 15). With reference to Al-Azhar, the author states that “the method of instruction there was too cumbersome, arduous and intellectually barren” (p. 10) and repeats himself almost verbatim when he later says in the same context that the “method of learning was too cumbersome and arduous” (p. 18).

Chapter 1, which represents the most significant effort of the author, starts by describing the aims and objectives of education as stated by ‘Abduh and traces how, through the process of education, Islamic terms have moved away from their original meanings. Here the author charges Shaykh ‘Abduh with inconsistency and unsystematic application of educational terms such as *ta’līm*, *ta’dīb*, *tahdhīb*, *tamrīn* and *tathqīf*. He observes that “one of ‘Abduh’s main concerns was the reformation of the Arabic language”. He adds that ‘Abduh endeavours to encourage Muslims “to produce new lexicons of language, the scientific lexicons and the philosophy of interpretation and criticism with equal emphasis on the history of the development of the language together with Arabised terminologies”.

The author makes an exhaustive analysis on the philological implication of *tarbiyah* as espoused by ‘Abduh and relies heavily on Ibn Manzūr, Al-Attas and Fairuzabadi to do so. However, his attempt to restrict the word *tarbiyah* to only physical training does not seem to hold water. The author believes that *tarbiyah* concerns physical and material development and progress and is therefore quantitative in character. This reviewer, however, is tempted to critically assess the soundness of the author’s argument here by seeking to know how true his premises are. His claim that the word and its derivative are mentioned in the Holy Qur’ān in twenty different places is not substantiated and his insistence that none of such Qur’ānic usages denotes education, is incorrect. Even al-Attas, in his highly scholarly attempt to reconstruct the concept of education in Islam, is cautious enough not to assert this so sharply and expressly. Al-Attas’ mild conclusion in this connection is that *tarbiyah* is more physical and material than rational and intellectual.

Still on terminological analysis, one would have expected the author to be more accurate and sensitive in his attempt to identify the original meaning point of the terms *rabb* and *murabbi*. It is surprising that he quotes Al-Zabidi, the author of *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, out of context and conjectures that Shaykh ‘Abduh’s view on the same question is consonant with that of the eminent Arabic linguist.

Rather than suggest education as a connotation of *tarbiyah*, the author seeks to support himself with reference to volume 5, pages 24 and 33 of ‘Abduh’s *Complete Works* published by Daru-sh-Shuruq of Beirut in 1993. Surprisingly, page 24 contains no more than an analysis of the plight of Maryam, the mother of Isa and her father, whereas page 33 contains a partial *tafsīr* on the Qur’ānic comparison of prophets Isa and Adam as contained in *Sūratul-Mā’idah*. There exists another major philological inaccuracy in the author’s assertion that “the term *rabbā* comes from a different root than that of *rabā*” and conclusion at the same time that the two “convey the same meaning.” It may not be out of place to state that the two words come from the same root, *r-b-w*, and draw a line of demarcation between the two by stating that *rabā* which means *to grow*, is an intransitive Arabic verb, while *rabbā*, which means *to educate, teach, instruct, or breed*, is transitive.

The author identifies an inconsistency in ‘Abduh’s extensive application of the term *al-ta’līm* alongside *al-tarbiyah*. He meticulously observes that the term *al-ta’līm* is “not only confined to the process of inculcating the sciences and skills but sometimes applied synonymously with *al-tarbiyah* as education.” He does a good job by calling to attention the fact that *al-ta’līm* appears in ‘Abduh’s writings mostly as a method of instruction and also as “the acquisition of basic skills inculcated in school.”

It may be noted that, according to the author, the term *al-tadrīs* has no

significant consequence but yet is widely used as “an equivalent of *al-ta’līm*”, and as a clear reference to formal education. This is in contrast to *al-tamrīn*, another key term, which does not enjoy prominence in ‘Abduh’s works on education.

In his discussion on *ta’dīb*, the author strips ‘Abduh’s writing of any technical and significant use of the term. He however does not equivocate in stating that the application of the term as the “comprehensive concept of Islamic education was first expounded by al-Attas.” In a rather unambiguous statement, the author posits that “*adab* manifests itself in all fundamental elements inherent in education i.e. the process, the recipient and the content.” He thereafter chooses to give al-Attas a very prominent place in his analysis. He digresses completely and ensures that no other name features in his references and footnotes except, of course, Wan Mohd. Daud, a disciple of this great intellectual (pp. 42-44).

Of great importance to educationalists is the author’s useful extension of the application of the term *ta’dīb* to non-human beings such as animals. The illuminative and penetrating analysis by the author in this regard is a great strength of the book. Clearly enunciated in the work is the initial *modus operandi* adopted by ‘Abduh in his pursuit of educational reform as he published criticisms of schools, teachers and methods of instruction, and submitted proposals for the general conduct of the educational programmes. This explains why one cannot but agree with the author that the Shaykh was indeed pragmatic with regard to the purpose and aims of education.

Chapter 2 focuses on the religious nature of man and his freedom of will. The author’s coverage includes the purpose of creation, the question of vicegerency and the status of man as a rational being. He successfully takes the reader on an exploration of the dialectical technicalities involved in the question of the nature of man. One finds especially interesting the author’s analysis of the incomprehensibility of the secret, reality and innermost essence of the intellect which man is endowed with. In fact, one cannot but give kudos to the author for his orthodox and scholarly amplification of the nature of the knowledge of man as against the *unlimited knowledge* expounded by Shaykh ‘Abduh. The author needs be congratulated on his successful moderation of the highly controvertible statement by the Shaykh.

However, a very sensitive textual and contextual inaccuracy arises in this chapter and might be of importance to scholars and writers who take the issue of *diqqah* (thoroughness) and *amānah* (objectivity or sincerity) in research very seriously. Yet there may be others who may dismiss the question as trivial and insignificant. The sensitivity of the question concerns the issue of accuracy in Arabic syntax, morphology and philology where a slight change like the deletion of a stroke or a dot on one single letter may alter the meaning of an entire paragraph. In volume 5, page 535 of his *Complete Works*, Shaykh Abduh employs the term “*ahammul-arkān*” meaning “the most significant of pillars” in describing the central message and fundamental teachings of Islam. But, Bazli Shafie (p. 76) in his reference to that very aspect of Abduh’s works (i.e. vol. 5, p. 535 of Abduh’s *Complete Works*) misquotes Abduh as having said “*ruknul-arkān*” meaning “*basic elements, fundamental principles, or foundation of pillars*” whereas Abduh’s words are “*ahammul-arkān*” (i.e. *the most significant of pillars*) (See *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* by Hans and Wehr) and not “*ruknul-arkān*”. This in fact is a clear case of misquotation and not miscomprehension.

Chapter 3 deals with knowledge, its meaning, sources and methods of

attainment. The author gives an in-depth explanation of the various issues raised in this chapter. This reviewer feels especially indebted to the author on his elaboration of ‘Abduh’s classification of the intellect into three groups, namely *al-dhākirah* (the recollective faculty), *al-mukhayyilah* (the imaginative faculty) and *al-mufakkirah* (the rational faculty). The author describes as vague ‘Abduh’s dismissal of earlier authorities on *tafsīr*. He also observes that the Shaykh ignores the “connection between the proper linguistic interpretation of the Qur’ān and the right understanding of the principles of religion,” such as its laws and ethics. The author again accuses ‘Abduh of contradicting the requirements stipulated for *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*. This reviewer feels that examples of such contradictions would have made his book more reliable.

Concerning ‘Abduh’s *tafsīr* of Qur’ānic verses on *jinn* and *ṭair abābīl*, the author describes ‘Abduh’s works as a demonstration of “an ignorance of the coherence and evidence ...” (p. 155). Of a similar nature is the author’s statement that ‘Abduh “refused to admit that good abridgment of huge works” is very important (p. 123). Tougher on Shaykh ‘Abduh than these two statements is the author’s agreement with Livingston who posits that “Abduh wrote about modern science without being a scientist himself or knowing anything about what the religious thinkers of earlier centuries knew of the sciences of their time.”

In such a fruitful exposition of the educational philosophy of Shaykh ‘Abduh, one wonders why the author maintains an unwarranted silence over the relationship between the definition of knowledge by the Shaykh as *ḥusul ṣūrah al-shay’ fī al-naḥs* (the arrival of the form of a thing in the soul) and its definition by al-Attas as *ḥuṣūl al-ma’nā fī al-naḥs* (the arrival of meaning in the soul). In the opinion of this reviewer, the heart of the matter here is *the arrival in the soul* which in fact is a common denominator in the two definitions. The only distinction is that ‘Abduh employed the word “*ṣūrah*” (form) whereas al-Attas used the word “*ma’nā*” (meaning). Whichever way one looks at it, these two definitions are related to each other and should have been so acknowledged.

This reviewer would have favoured a situation where the author convincingly substantiates his arguments with proof rather than leaving the reader in the desert of evidence in the face of statements such as: ‘*Abduh’s methodology of tafsīr and ta’wīl are similar to those of Christian hermeneutics* (p. 141); ‘*Abduh’s concept of Ijmā’ is narrow* (p. 141); and ‘*Abduh is too vague in his choice of wordings and inconsistent or contradictory in his reasoning* (p. 141).

There is no gainsaying that the author here makes a bold and brilliant attempt to expose the deficiency of the educational thought of ‘Abduh, but his analysis of the most important aspect of ‘Abduh’s educational philosophy, i.e. curriculum (content, process and outcome) is too thin. The author seems to be more at home discussing dialectical theology than the technicalities of educational philosophy.

In closing, this reviewer is of the opinion that a better use of pronouns at appropriate places instead of the monotonous repetition of “‘Abduh” would make a smoother reading. The author’s use of the proper noun in virtually every line of the first six lines of paragraph two of page 65, for instance, is lamentable.

Having succeeded in opening new and interesting vistas towards the understanding of the educational thought of Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, by giving heed to both his practical and theoretical contribution, Ahmad Bazli Shafie should be

applauded for a job well done. The weaknesses pinpointed by this reviewer do not diminish the quality of the book. Those students, scholars and instructors who wish to deepen their understanding of 'Abduh's contributions to education in the Muslim world today will find a rich source in Ahmad Bazli Shafie's book. It makes a worthwhile reading.

Saheed Ahmad Rufai