THE TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT 1.4.77

The Muslim world sees its civilization threatened by the advance of western secular education. Muslim educationists are meeting from March 31-April 8 on the Mecca campus of the King Abdul Aziz University to decide on steps to redress the balance

**Islam: key to the crisis of alienation**

by Khursid Ahmad

Of all the problems confronting the Muslim world today, education is the most challenging. The future of the Muslim world may very much depend on the way it res- ponds to this challenge.

Education performs at least two basic functions in any society: it is a vehicle for the preservation, extension and communication of the cultural heritage, traditional values and social and national ideals and norms of a people; and it is a tool for change, innovation and development and a major means through which new know- ledge and skills are discovered and trained manpower produced to meet the demands of socioeconomic change.

These two functions are not always in harmony with one another. How to reconcile them to produce a new and higher level of convergence is the main concern of the modern educationist in the world of Islam.

Islam has been the most decisive factor in the long history of the Muslim world. Islam's concern is as much with building man's relation- ship with other men and worldly institutions as with building his relationship with God. Perhaps its chief characteristic lies in integrating the moral and the spiritual with the secular and the mundane aspects of life, with the result that the two become two sides of the same coin.

Islam also claims to be a complete way of life, dealing with all aspects of man's life-moral, spiritual, personal, social, political, economic, national and international. In this scheme of things, education occupies a unique position.

Prophet Muhammad claimed that he had been sent as an educator. He also said that acquisition of knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim. Under this inspiration Muslims developed over 1,000 years an efficient and dynamic system of education.

But then, starting some three centuries ago, the system became increasingly unable to meet the challenges that beset the Muslim world. It became over-occupied with the preservation of the intellectual and cultural tradition and ignored the explosion of new learning and technology in the west. The price for this neglect had to be paid. The Muslim world succumbed to the more powerful forces of the west and the long night of colonial rule set in.

During this period the traditional educational system shrank gradually and settled to confine itself to religious education only, to the exclusion of the overall needs of society, particularly those concerned with modern knowledge and technology and the socio-economic sectors. This gap was filled by the new system of education introduced by the western colonial rulers. A number of influences went into the making of this new system. Among the more important were the colonial administrators and Christian missionary organizations.

The new educational pattern was an imitation of the educational pyramid developed in nineteenth-century Europe: primary, secondary and university education, with a dominant bias towards literary and cultural subjects. The system showed no concern for the cultural and ideological context of Muslim society and tried to superimpose secular education whenever possible.

The basic problem now facing the educational planner does not merely relate to the quantitative expansion of education, although this, too, is an important dimension in view of the widespread illiteracy (ranging between 40 and 80 per cent of the population) and lack of proper educational facilities for the school age population (about 50 per cent lack any schooling at all) and the dearth of skilled man- power required for industrial development.

The major problem emerges, rather, from the crisis in education produced by the alienation of the people from the ethos of the new education. It has failed to take roots in the religious cultural tradition of the people and as such has remained an alien inroad into Muslim society.

The western educational model has failed to outgrow its own historical prototype, with literary and humanistic bias, secular approach, particularism and elitism being some of the significant elements.

Additionally, the liberal tradition that chaperoned this system is now threatened in the western countries themselves, with ideological challenges coming from movements like Communism and National Socialism.

An interesting number of both Muslim and western educationists have pinpointed these weaknesses in the system:

Education has failed to develop social ideals among students. Lack of commitment to ideals impairs the spirit of dedication, effort and sacrifice in the educated.

It has failed to instill moral values in the new generation.

Education in science and technology has failed to keep pace with the increasing demands of modern society. Not only is the technological content less than what is required, the supply of scientists, engineers and other highly skilled manpower falls short of the national and inter- national needs in societies where expansion of education is producing increasing educated unemployment.

Education lacks an integrating principle. There is over departmentalization of knowledge, with the result that the whole body of knowledge is not properly integrated within a consistent whole.

Muslim educationists are worried, too, over the relatedness of modern education to the religious cultural context of Muslim society. Their problem, therefore, is one of restructuring the entire educational milieu in such a way that it can cater for the ideological and cultural as well as the technological and professional needs of growing Muslim society.

How to do this will be the formidable task facing the international educationists meeting in Mecca this coming week.

Khursid Ahmad is director, the Islamic Foundation, Leicester.