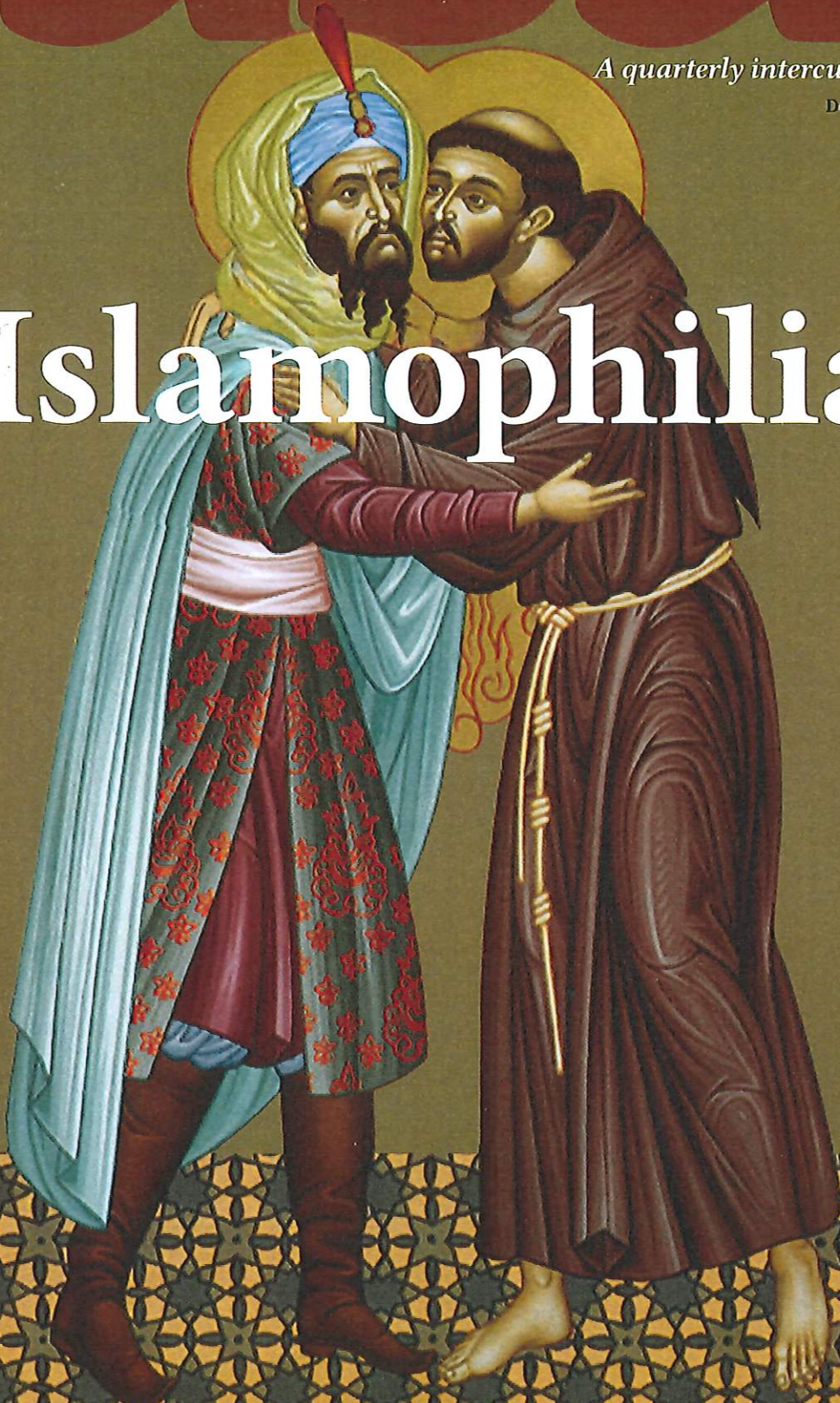


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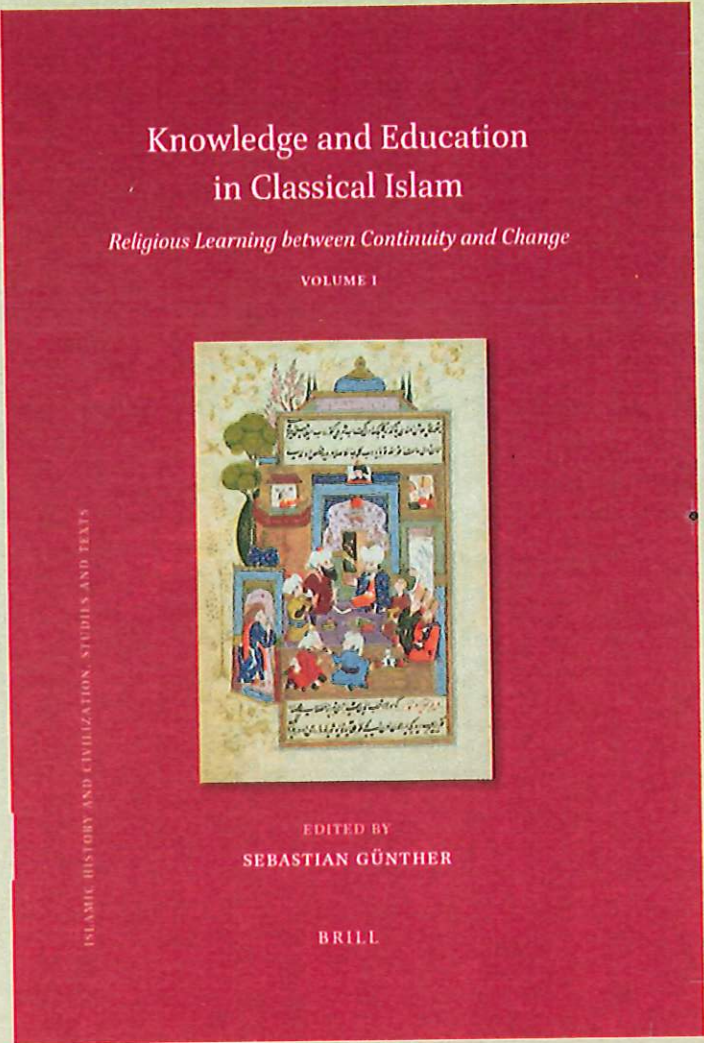
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# Epistle on Education On Transmitting Intellectual and Ethical Virtues

By Sebastian Günther

The ideal of lifelong learning was one of the most prominent ideas among medieval Muslim thinkers. At the same time, scholars in Classical Islam (eighth -fifteenth century AD) saw it as a religious duty and a path to intellectual and spiritual development. Knowledge was considered a 'divine gift,' a concept that implies that the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is not just a human endeavor, but also a manifestation of divine grace.



Just as the Prophet Muhammad and his companions frequently encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, this perspective on knowledge as a divine gift underscores its sacred nature. Maxims ascribed to the Prophet like 'Seek knowledge from the day of your birth until the day of your death' and 'Seek knowledge even if it were in China,' exquisitely emphasize the boundlessness of Islamic learning and the necessity of seeking it throughout one's lifetime, regardless of geographical or temporal boundaries.

Discussions on teaching and learning were central to many Arabic writings produced by Muslim philosophers, theologians, jurists, hadith scholars, and scientists from the eighth to the fifteenth century. While these scholars came from diverse backgrounds, they were united in addressing educational issues. Islamic educational theories were rooted in the Quran and hadith but were also heavily influenced by Greek 'paideia' ('education'), especially respective concepts advanced by Plato and Aristotle, but also by cultural elements from ancient Arabia, Persia, and India.

Muslim scholars creatively adapted and expanded these ideas, particularly in the ninth and tenth centuries. Unlike ancient Greek education, which was primarily philosophical, Islamic education blended reason with religious principles. Additionally, it often intersected with Jewish and Christian educational practices, creating a dynamic exchange of ideas during the medieval period.

**Student-Centered Education**

A significant aspect of the classical Muslim approach to education is its centering on students. For instance, Ibn Sahnun (817 - 870), a legal scholar from Kairouan and one of the earliest Muslim educational theorists, developed guidelines for elementary school teachers that emphasize the importance of fairness, compassion, and individualized instruction. His book, 'Rules of Conduct for Teachers' ('Adab Al-Mu'allimin'), provides specific advice on managing the classroom in ways that cater to the needs of different students, stressing that children should not be pushed beyond their capabilities but rather guided with patience and understanding. This reflects a deep understanding of the child's emotional and cognitive development, embodying what today we call a 'humanistic' approach to education — one that places the individual at the center of all value and recognizes the essential

role of reason in the pursuit of knowledge.

Al-Jahiz (776 - 868), rational theologian and celebrated *littérateur* from Basra, argued — contrary to the spirit of his time — against excessive memorization. Instead, in 'The Book of Teachers' ('Kitab Al-Mu'allimin'), he suggested that education should prioritize reading good books, reasoning, and critical thinking over rote learning, and highlighted the importance of developing deductive reasoning skills in students. His views promote the idea that education should foster intellectual independence and creativity rather than merely replicating knowledge advanced by previous generations. This progressive stance places the learner's intellectual development at the center of the educational process, valuing active engagement and personal discovery over passive absorption of information.

Ibn Sina (980 - 1037), one of the most influential philosophers in the Islamic tradition, believed that education should nurture students' intellectual and emotional faculties. He argued that physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of children's development are interconnected and that teachers must pay close attention to their students' emotional well-being. According to Ibn Sina, a stable emotional environment is essential for effective learning, as emotional distress hinders both physical health and intellectual progress.

**The Inclusive Ideal**

Ibn Al-Sunnī (893 - 974), a hadith and legal scholar from Dinawar in Western Iran, offered a remarkably forward-thinking approach to religious education in his 'The Training of Students' ('Riyadat Al-Muta'allimin'). His manifold suggestions on pursuing religious studies also include specific advice on the exceptional politeness required of male students when women attend the class, including the direction for male students to offer their seats whenever a woman asks a question.

The text also indicates the need for separate instructional sessions for women where they could ask questions comfortably. Also, practical measures should be taken to assist students with disabilities, such as ensuring that deaf or blind students receive help during lessons. Ibn Al-Sunnī's emphasis on physical well-being — promoting cleanliness, moderate eating, and rest — alongside intellectual growth reflects a holistic educational philosophy. His advocacy of competition, interactive group learning, and student-centered approaches reveal



Aristotle teaching. Illustration from 'Kitab Mukhtar al-hikam wa-mahasin al-kalim' (The Book of Choice Wise Sayings and Fine Statements), by the Egyptian historian and savant Abu l-Wafa al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik. Reproduced with kind permission of Bridgeman Images, Berlin XIR (156555).



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interesting perspectives on education, perhaps unexpected in a tenth-century traditional Muslim learning setting.

'The Brethren of Purity and the Friends of Loyalty' ('Ikhwan Al-Safa Wa-Khullān Al-Wafa') was the name of a circle of high-ranking (probably Ismaili) administrators and scholars who lived in the Iraqi port city of Basra between the ninth and tenth centuries AD.

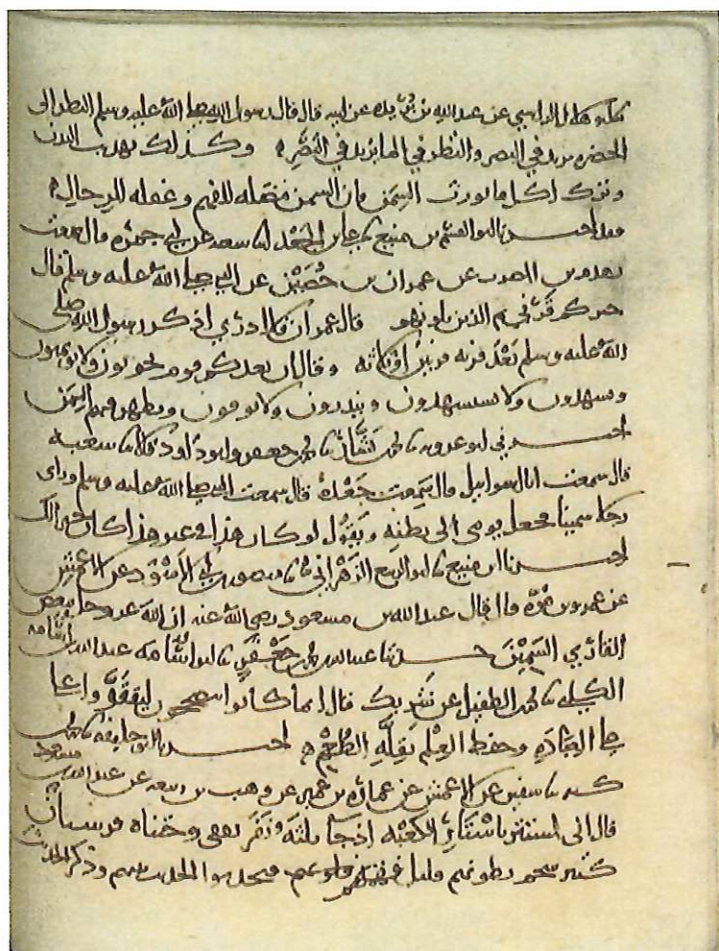
Their extensive literary legacy — of no fewer than 51 individual 'Rasa'il' or epistles on a wide array of philosophical and scientific branches of knowledge — displays an intimate understanding and appreciation of both Sunni and Shia beliefs. The brethren's classification of knowledge into mathematical, natural, psychological, rational, and theological categories guides learners from concrete to abstract understanding. Their encyclopedic vision emphasizes that knowledge satisfies intellectual curiosity like food satisfies bodily hunger.

They stressed education as a means of refin-

ing human dispositions, paving the way for eternal happiness, and advocating self-education alongside traditional learning. Unique aspects include attention to diverse learners' capacities, linking them to natural predispositions and astronomical constellations. Rejecting physical punishment, they promote self-purification, justice, freedom of opinion, and respect for nature, reflecting a universal humanism in their educational and ethical thought.

A common theme in the educational writings of classical Muslim scholars is the ethical responsibility of the instructor. For instance, Al-Ghazali (1058 - 1111), the great philosophical theologian and mystic from Tus in Iran, argued that the role of the teacher extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. In 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences' ('Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din'), he posited that teachers have a moral duty to guide their students toward ethical conduct and spiritual growth. Al-Ghazali's vision of education is deeply concerned with rearing well-educated youth who





cultivate intellectual, ethical, and spiritual virtues.

He also emphasized the importance of leading by example, suggesting that a teacher's personal conduct would inspire students. This principle reflects the broader humanistic concept of an integral relationship between knowledge and virtue. In Al-Ghazali's view, proper education cannot be separated from ethical living. However, the ultimate goal of learning is to draw closer to God, which he believed could only be achieved through a combination of intellectual rigor and moral discipline.

### Prophetic Wisdom for Societal Progress

The pioneering Tunisian scholar of historiography, sociology, and political economy, Ibn Khaldun (1332 - 1406), in his 'Prolegomena' ('Muqaddima'), identified three types of knowledge: A) Understanding essences, B) Grasping the natural world and human culture (technology, social, and political relations), and C) Moral knowledge.

He emphasized the importance of experi-

ence, social skills, and cooperation for personal and societal improvement. Interestingly, Ibn Khaldun also asserted that religious knowledge based on prophecy takes precedence, especially when reason conflicts with sharia or divine law. This prophetic knowledge, he argued, is the foundation for a sound political society in which humans, as naturally social beings, build a cooperative and just existence.

Classical Muslim scholars were deeply committed to humanistic values, focusing on the holistic development of individuals – intellectually, morally, and emotionally. Their progressive approach to education emphasized lifelong learning, student-centered teaching, the ethical responsibilities of teachers, and the importance of fostering both emotional and moral growth through innovative, interactive learning methods. These contributions laid the groundwork for Islamic educational thought, which flourished in the centuries that followed and remains highly relevant today. Modern educators can draw valuable lessons from these thinkers in balancing intellectual rigor with ethical and emotional development.

A research project at the University of Göttingen, Germany, is currently exploring the early history of Islamic pedagogy through an extensive range of classical Arabic sources. This project highlights the originality and depth of classical Muslim educators and sheds new light on the multicultural influences and universal aspects of their ideas, bridging the gap between historical and contemporary educational thought in East and West.

*Ibn Al-sunni, 'Kitab Riyadat al-muta'alimin' (Ms. or. oct. 3196). State Library Berlin. Folio 19v.*



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