

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?

MUZAFFAR IQBAL

This unfair question has a way of reaching us through the ages of our youth. While it may not actually be the cause of a serious dilemma faced by high school and university students, it *is* an premonition of the crucial choices one is forced to make early in life. The root of this dilemma, however, runs far deeper.

The great career bazaar apparently offers an endless array of choices: one can choose to become a pharmacist, a medical doctor, a journalist, a social worker, an engineer, a computer scientist, or any one of a host of other professions. At the threshold of high school or shortly after entering university these choices appear with enticing promises: join a prestigious group of neurologists, the ranks of teachers directly involved in affecting the next generation, the great hall of journalists recording history as it takes place... and the options go on.

Confounded and bewildered by these invitations, when one begins to look at the practicalities of these available choices one often finds that with the passage of time, with the unwitting enrolment in this or that course, certain choices start to disappear; this creates a sense of urgency: 'one more wrong course, and I will have to start all over again! I must decide now.' Decisions made are however often subject to second thoughts and oft-times one discovers that the previous two years were spent in taking courses that do not lead to the degree of one's present choice. Thus the whole decision-making process becomes muddled.

This is an inevitable result of at least three basic maladies from which our time suffers: (i) the sacred has been hollowed out of education; (ii) work has been voided of the sanctified spirit that transforms it into a form of worship; and (iii) there is a disconnect between what is considered 'real life' and the more private inner life where one enters the sacred place in the recesses of the heart. Each of these three maladies produces multiple veils that cloud vision and produce misconceptions. At times like this, the Prophetic prayer, "O Allah, show me the nature of things as they really are" is a powerful antidote.

The general dilemmas faced by high school and university students become grave when the student is a Muslim striving to live every aspect of life under the shade of the Qur'an, in the sanctified realm of the Divine presence. Then, the question of the choices one has to make becomes more than the interplay of subjective personal interests and market forces. In such cases, a chasm opens deep inside, where the so-called "practical advice" of parents, the inner desire to live a life serving Allah, and the vast array of choices from the bazaar coalesce into a battlefield where one attempts to find a definitive answer to an unfair question. What would you like to be when you grow up?

At the heart of this very personal dilemma are some of the most acute maladies of modernity, produced by its foundational divorce from the sacred—a separation which has diminished modernity's supposed benefits in terms of quality of life to such an extent that a very large majority of human beings is now forced to subsist merely at the biological level of their existence, partaking of nothing from the higher levels of their beings where an inner connection with the spiritual world produces a transformation of the outer environment. Thus, a mechanical consciousness of space and time reigns supreme. This chronic malady of modernity has not only reduced workplaces to functional enclosures where transactions are made without the slightest spiritual involvement, it has also made educational institutions mere physical structures one

enters to obtain a piece of paper which permits one to join both the workforce and the social economy geared toward a ceaseless cycle of accumulation-consumption-spending—all without attaining any insight into the nature of Reality, and certainly without having gained any knowledge in the true sense of the word.

Thus the dilemma faced by every Muslim man and woman at the threshold of entering these institutions is, in fact, produced by a much deeper malady. Since education has been divorced from the sacred, it is now merely concerned with the transmission of information and techniques; it does not aim to impart wisdom or gnosis, which alone can help us find our way in this jungle of life, where the reign of quantity has produced such an abandoned crop of *takthīr* that lifestyles fully oriented toward *tawhīd* have become increasingly difficult to live. As a result, the inner self simply splits; the person begins to live two different lives: one mired in the material realm, the other striving to achieve meaning and purpose through devotion to Allah.

This divorce between the sacred and the institutions supposedly offering education may not be perceived intellectually by Muslim students who are conscious of the dilemma of choice, but they know it intuitively. There is something within which constricts their spirits, which affects their whole being. Of course, this only applies to those Muslims who have gained a degree of inner light through vigilant striving and tasted the perfume of the divine presence; for the rest, this dilemma does not arise—or if it does, it is merely the dilemma of dollars and cents. For those who have felt the other order of reality, subsistence at the biological level of existence is no more a satisfactory choice; for them, these educational institutions become prisons which they can neither leave nor accept. Thus, their dilemma is not merely that of choosing between a career in teaching or engineering, but that of obtaining a purposeful education and training: one that does not merely yield a permit to enter the workforce, but trains one to live a meaningful life in a community by offering services to the members of the community not merely for monetary gains, but for the sake of Allah, yet at the same time making it a means of earning *ḥalāl rizq*. At a certain level this dilemma is impossible to resolve, because one cannot change market forces nor an entire system which has severed itself from the Creator. Yet there remain certain things one can do to reduce the harm.

In order to reduce the harm, one needs to view the dilemma in its proper context. Education and training is related to the needs of a given society. It is geared toward producing men and women who can fulfill certain needs of the community. In general, Muslims living in the West do not have communities which are fully-empowered communities, capable of producing their own supplies and fulfilling their needs by themselves; they are generally sub-communities of a much larger market economy and hence their own members merely fit into the larger chain of demand and supply. Unlike traditional Muslim societies, those who live in the West and learn various professions do not actually fulfill a *farḍ ‘ala’l-kifāyah* because this concept is alien to the society in which they function. Thus the daily practice of their trade or profession is not a conscious act of *‘ibādah*, as it is for devout Muslims in the traditional Muslim lands where a weaver who produced cloth for the community simultaneously fulfilled the need of the community and earned his living in a single act that at once discharged two *farā’id*: a *farḍ ‘ala’l-kifāyah* arising from the needs of the community and a *farḍ al-‘ain*—the personal obligation to seek *ḥalāl rizq*. A student doing research in medicine knew that he or she was not merely serving the dictates of the discipline, nor the interests of a pharmaceutical corporation, but that his or her time was being spent in service to Allah and the community, as an act of *‘ibādah*.

This is no more the case, even in many Muslim lands, and certainly not so in the West. Communities are no more integrated purposeful entities, and even where certain relationships

are still extant, the means of production and distribution as well as the very nature of the transaction has been totally disfigured. There may be some exceptions to this in remote communities, but, for all practical purposes, education or training in educational institutions has been severed from the very purpose and goal of education and training. This severance makes the time in these institutions a period spent to obtain a piece of paper that holds a distant promise of a large fridge filled with food—an extremely unappetizing image for the young man or woman who has been striving to curb the appetites in order to stay awake to partake of that wonderful sense of belonging to Allah and Allah alone—the sense that fills the heart at that late hour of night when one is alone with the Alone. This is the proper context in which the dilemma of making a choice should be examined.

Thus viewed, the dilemma is not merely to answer the unfair question posed by an aunt or uncle, but to find a *modus operandi* for a life in this world at this late hour when the cup is almost full. There do remain certain choices available to those who wish to devote themselves to a life of piety and learning and whose choices are informed by a very deep consciousness of Allah the Exalted. These choices, however, require that one must break many of the idols and existing patterns of life, with a certain degree of courage and certitude. The idols which abound in our times are not the Lāt and Manāt of old, but more insidious, protean creatures. Very few people now actually worship physical idols, but a very large majority is entrapped in a tacit or overt worship of non-physical idols. Those connected with the choice of a career are, of course, the idols that can ultimately be reduced to numbers in a bank account or things that can be purchased using pieces of paper or plastic. In a certain sense, this is the most prevalent form of idol worship in our times—a direct result of the veiling of belief in *qadr*, and the forgetting of the fact enshrined in the famous ḥadīth al-Qudṣī, that if the whole world were to gather together to increase the *rizq* prescribed by Allah, it would not be able to do so, and conversely if the whole world were to join together to decrease that same *rizq*, it would not be able to do so.

Of course, what is being said is not to produce fatalism, but an inner certitude and contentment arising out of a trust in the *Rabūbiyah* of the *Rabb*—the belief that the One Who has fashioned us from a worthless drop of liquid and Who has given us senses and faculties, eyes and ears, has also portioned out our provisions for the journey in this world. Out of sheer Mercy, He has taken it upon Himself to provide us what we need, and *Allah desires for you ease and He does not desire hardship for you.* (*al-Baqarah*:185). Furthermore, the purpose of our creation, as described in the Qurʾān, is unambiguous and clear: Allah has created us to worship Him. This Qurʾānic view of our life is not meant to be solely operational on Fridays or Sundays, but is meant to be implemented in each and every instant of the duration of our earthly lives, encompassing each and every deed. Once again, these Qurʾānic verses do not impose a fatalistic attitude on the believer—rather, when viewed within the Qurʾānic framework, these verses orientate our lives toward a balanced and straight path that will lead to the great success, *al-fawz al-Kabīr, inshaʾAllāh.*

The dilemma of choosing a career thus assumes a much greater but much more appropriate form: it is, in fact, the dilemma of finding a practical way to exist in a thoroughly structured and secularized world, to transform one's mode of existence into a mode of *ʿibādah*, serving only the One Who has created us, to break the web of idols and *takthīr* that surrounds us.

Since the choices one makes early in life have a delimiting impact, one needs to be extremely careful when making these decisions; since this is generally a time in one's life when states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāms*) descend in rapid order, one needs to make this choice at a deeper, foundational, level—a level which would remain protected from the variations in states

and stations which inevitably fluctuate. In other words, one needs to come to a gnosis of the dilemma at a level that remains unaffected by temporary winds that blow away surface decisions.

This is not to say that it does not matter what profession one chooses; quiet the contrary. The commitment to a profession should, indeed, take into consideration personal aptitudes and dispositions; a person who is naturally inclined toward children is more likely to benefit from a teaching profession than a person who is disposed toward the solitude of writing; a person drawn to animals is more likely to grow in faith through a profession that brings him or her in contact with *anʿām*—creatures that Allah has created and made subject to us, some of which we ride and some of which we eat. (*cf. Yā Sīn: 70-1*). But beyond these personal inclinations, which need to be understood and comprehended early in life, there are certain basic considerations that are common to the very question of choice, no matter what career or profession one adopts.

Thus seen, the dilemma faced by Muslim students is not really that of a choice between this or that subject offered by a university, but of how to live a purposeful life in a community which does not have strong, Allah-oriented ties among its members and in a society that has forgotten even the most basic truths of existence. For young Muslims, taking their first steps in life to join a social, economic and political system alien to their faith, the choices offered by the external situation are, indeed, very bleak. But they have no choice; they have been created and placed in this world at a time when the Hour is drawing near and they have to live out their lives in this world, making the best use of the resources given them, and stoking the glow of *Īmān* in their hearts. Thus we all journey, stage by stage, to our Sustainer.

Thus, one needs to understand that the dilemma one faces is integrally connected to the means and not the ends. Means must be connected to a higher goal. Of course, the one constant goal of a believer is to please Allah—may He be Exalted. But in the present context, what is meant by “a higher goal” is something that is beyond the end result of earning dollars and cents—the goal of serving one’s community and fulfilling a *farḍ kifāyah*. This presupposes a strong sense of belonging to the community. And this brings us to a very crucial facet of the contemporary realities of Muslim communities living in the West. Most of these communities have come into existence through migration which, by nature, is a disruptive process. Children of emigrants are, however, not migrant individuals who have uprooted themselves from a community in which they were born and where they grew up; they are the first generation of a totally new phenomenon in Muslim history: the emergence of very large Muslim communities outside the traditional lands of Islam. This phenomenon seems to be irreversible and, some contemporary *fatāwa*⁷ notwithstanding, there is *khair* in it, *inshaʿAllāh*. Until now, Islam was a distant religion for the West; through this unprecedented migration, Allah has brought His light to lands where no one was previously reciting the Glorious Book.

In any case, the Muslim children who are growing up in the West face a very unique opportunity and they are the harbingers of a new hope for children in traditional Muslim lands, where Westerly winds are fast eroding Islamic space. At the threshold of entering universities, these Muslims need to make a very conscious choice to build communities in the lands of their birth. They need to break the taboos and idols carried by their migrant parents and form close-knitted strong communities insulated from the devastating currents of the society at large in which Allah has placed them. In order to become functional communities, Muslims living in the West need a very large number of professionals in all disciplines, and it is through dedication to the building of these new communities that the sacred can be reintroduced into the educational and professional choices an individual Muslim living in the West is forced to make.

Without this larger commitment, there is no way out of the secularized education and workspace; this is the only way to transform four or five years of life in the prison of educational institutions into a time as in the prison of Yūsūf—may Allah’s peace be upon him. This is task that young Muslim men and women beginning new families in the West can and must undertake. It is through this enormous but necessary task that Muslim communities living in the West would really become Muslim communities in the true sense of the word. Through this process, they will break the chains that shackle them to a market geared toward greed and profit. It is through this conscious act of building an Islamic economy in the West that these communities would make the largest difference in the system, by showing everyone that they need not partake of fruits and vegetables literally awash with pesticides while simultaneously fulfilling a religious obligation.

Of course, this is a very tall order, but anything short of a distinct, foundational break with contemporary structures will simply not work. And this is not an impossible task. Spread throughout North America, these distinct communities have successfully accomplished what is being proposed here. These small communities practice a lifestyle in which communities are central, self-contained, and distinct from the secularized world that surrounds them. And the fact that the reigning social and commercial orders of the day are themselves a product of a bold restructuring of an order that it preceded, is proof of its disposability.

It should be understood that the establishment of distinctly Muslim communities is not a quick process. But even a very long journey has to begin somewhere. No one is more suited to begin this task than the young men and women now entering universities or those who are taking the first steps toward establishing a new family unit. These young men and women, born or raised in the West, have opportunities which their parents did not and which their children will not have. They belong to a generation of Muslims which has appeared with a unique opportunity in Muslim history. They need to understand their place in history in a very clear way and accept the challenge. The task of building a new Madīnah, that would attract seekers of knowledge and insight from around the globe, is at hand now. Having understood the need, we must not be deterred by any apparent difficulties and begin at once the task of building small integrated Muslim communities where supply and demand are satisfied in an Islamic manner by the members of the community. We must be conscious that it is not the results that are in our hands, but only the effort, and that too *bi idhni’Allah*, by the permission of Allah, may He be Exalted. Seeds planted today with sincerity and trust will, *insha’Allah*, bear fruit in one generation. What is really needed is a long term commitment to the vision, and trust in the One Who has placed us in this situation.

