

The Role of Culture in Education

by

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The spiritual life has been described as the “interiorization of the outward” (*khalwa*) and the “exteriorization of the inward” (*jalwa*).¹ Education is an aspect of the latter process; the very etymology of the word (*e-ducare*, “to lead out”) is an indication of this. As a “leading-out”, education is a rendering explicit of the immanent Intellect (*Intellectus* or *Nous*), the seat of which, symbolically speaking, is the heart. As Frithjof Schuon has said more than once: “The Intellect can know everything that is knowable.” This is because “heart-knowledge” (*gnosis*) is innate, and thus already fully present within us, in a state of virtuality.² This virtuality has to be realized, and this realization is education. This corresponds to the Platonic doctrine of “recollection” (*anamnesis*), which in the last analysis is the “remembrance of God” (*memoria Dei*). “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.”

Man is constituted by the ternary: Spirit, soul, and body (*Spiritus, anima, corpus*); only the last two are exclusively individual or human, the first being supra-individual or universal. The Intellect (*Intellectus*) is identifiable with the Spirit: Intellect and Spirit are but two sides of the same coin, the former pertaining to the theoretical or doctrinal and the latter to the practical or realizational. They pertain respectively to the objective (or discriminatory) and the subjective (or unitive) modes of knowing.

It is easy to see how education, both etymologically and philosophically, is an “exteriorization of the inward”. But it is also an “interiorization of the outward”, for an important function of education is precisely to ensure that the myriad of impressions coming from the outside be “inwardly digested” and reduced to unity. Thus education is both “exteriorization of

1. These “alchemical” definitions come from Frithjof Schuon. In Arabic, *khalwa* means “spiritual retreat” and *jalwa* means “spiritual radiance”, the former being logically prior to the latter. The two processes are symbolized respectively by the colors black and gold.

2. Examples (immediately apparent, and built into the human substance) of this innate and objective knowledge are our sense of logic, our capacity for arithmetic, our sense of justice, and our sense of right and wrong.

the inward” (intellectuality) and “interiorization of the outward” (spirituality). It is both *jalwa* and *khalwa*.

The following summary of terminology may be useful:

English	Latin	Greek	Arabic
Spirit (Intellect)	<i>Spiritus</i> (<i>Intellectus</i>)	<i>Pneuma</i> (<i>Nous</i>)	<i>Rūh</i> (‘ <i>Aql</i>)
soul	<i>anima</i>	<i>psyche</i>	<i>nafs</i>
body	<i>corpus</i>	<i>soma</i>	<i>jism</i>

In modern parlance, “intellectual” is often wrongly taken as a synonym of “mental” or “rational”. In fact, unlike the Intellect, which is “above” the soul, the mind or the reason is a content of the soul, as are the other human faculties: will, affect or sentiment, imagination, and memory. The spiritual or intellectual faculty, on the other hand—because of its higher level—can be categorized as “angelic”. The operation of the Intellect is referred to as “intellectual intuition” or “intellection”.

This is not to say that there is an absolute barrier between Intellect and mind. The Intellect may be compared to the center of a circle, and the mind to the circumference. Metaphorically speaking, the Greek philosophers and the Medieval Schoolmen were concerned with the “center” or, to put it even more accurately, with the Transcendent, symbolized by the axis running vertically through it. The Transcendent element—man’s infinitely precious link with the higher levels of Reality—is accessible only through faith, the voice of conscience, or what might be called Platonic intuition or “intellection”. From the Renaissance onwards such a vision of the higher levels of Reality became increasingly ignored, and latterly was dismissed as mere “dogma” or “superstition”. Properly modern philosophy—the starting-point of which was no longer certainty, but doubt—was epitomized by the 17th century philosophers Descartes and Kant and, from their time until now has, with a few honorable exceptions, been subject to a continuing downhill process.

In the light of the foregoing, we are also able to see that the error, in a nutshell, of psychologists such as Jung, is completely to confuse Spirit and soul and so, in the last analysis, entirely to “abolish” Spirit (the only truly supra-individual, “archetypal”, or “objective” element in man). It is not difficult to see the chaos—and the damage—that results from this fatal and anti-Platonic act of blindness.

The linking of education with spirituality may cause some surprise; but the parable of the talents applies to the mind as well as to every other faculty. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul...and *with all thy mind*. It is at our peril that we neglect

the need for “a well-stocked mind”;³ for it is surely obvious that, from a purely spiritual point of view, the mind cannot be allowed to lie fallow. This would allow it to become a playground for the devil, and *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* (“if you seek proof, just look around”).

Use of the phrase “a well-stocked mind” makes it necessary immediately to specify (and never more so than in the “reign of quantity” that is the present age) that, as far as true education is concerned, it is nevertheless a question, not of quantity (however intoxicating), but of quality; not of shadows (however beguiling), but of substance; not of trivia (however intriguing), but of essentials. In the present age, more than in all previous ages, the grasping of a true and permanent principle is infinitely more precious than the piling up of a hundred undigested and un-understood contingencies. In addition, there is no greater joy.

Since education, by definition, is a thing of the *mind*, we can do no better than cite here the injunction of St. Paul:

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, *think* on these things. (*Philippians*, 4, 8)

One might say: whatsoever things are true, good, and beautiful; or whatsoever things manifest or reflect the Absolute, the Infinite, and the Perfect.

* * *

All civilizations—for example, the Chinese, Hindu, Greco-Roman, Christian, and Islamic—manifest the central or cardinal role of learning, at least for those classes or individuals capable of it. In this connection, it might be objected that the North American Indians—who possessed a daunting spiritual tradition if ever there was one—were not educated. In the light of the considerations expressed above, however, it is clear that the Red Indians too, in their own fashion, were “educated”. To regard the Indians as uneducated because they were unlettered, would be like regarding the Buddhists as atheistic, because they envisage Ultimate Reality as a supreme State (*Nirvāna* or *Bodhi*) rather than as a supreme Being. Just as the Buddhists are manifestly different from the superficial and arrogant atheists of modern times, so the Indians are manifestly different from the technologically-trained but culturally-uneducated and mentally-immature people of modern times. The Indians’ Book is Nature herself, and none have ever known this book better.

Education has many forms and, in any case, has in view only those classes and individuals who are capable of receiving it. Indeed the type of literacy resulting from the leveling-downward

3. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea, 4, 6). The text goes on: “Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee”.

“universal” education of the last hundred years may even be inimical to culture, as Ananda Coomaraswamy has so trenchantly pointed out in his important essay “The Bugbear of Literacy”. Coomaraswamy demonstrates beyond any dispute how the new-found capacity of the immature mind to read modern printed material—now always to hand in such staggering quantity⁴—has killed the rich traditional culture (largely oral for the mass of the people) in many societies, including European ones. This is the opposite of true education, which is depth, subtlety, and finally, wisdom.

* * *

The European tradition consists of two currents: the Greek and the Christian, or the Classical and the Medieval. The Greek current is evoked by such names as Homer, Pythagoras, and Plato; the Christian current is evoked not only by such figures as St. Gregory Palamas and Meister Eckhart (“apophatic” and “gnostic” metaphysicians respectively), but also by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas (whose viewpoints represent two important strands, amongst others, of Western Christian thought). Christianity is also epitomized by that “second Christ” (*alter Christus*), St. Francis of Assisi, and by the great epic poet of Christendom, Dante Alighieri. In practical terms, education in Europe has obviously to take account of both the Classical and the Medieval currents.

In English-speaking countries, a good education must start with the Christian catechism and attendance at Divine Worship, as well as the study of the Bible and the most celebrated Christian authors, such as the great names just mentioned. It must include the study of Greek and Latin, coupled with some Homer, Plato, Virgil, Horace, Cicero and other ancient authors. The “history of philosophy” (an understanding of the relative “stability” of Ancient and Medieval philosophy as contrasted with the innovative nature and “instability” of Modern philosophy⁵) is obviously necessary. Likewise, some notion of the “philosophy of science”—especially as regards the differing conceptions of science on the part of Ancient and Medieval times on the one hand and Modern times on the other—is also desirable. In present circumstances, some *Religionswissenschaft* or “comparative religion” is no doubt essential, but this must be of high quality and taught from a conservative and believing point of view, which, while being respectful of the authenticity of the non-Christian religions, is not lethal to the student’s faith in his own religion.

An important branch of education—and one which should never be forgotten—is what might be called “art appreciation” or “history of art”. This refers above all to the ability to

4. As Lord Northbourne has said (referring to the industrialized countries): “We live in an age of plenty; but what use is plenty of rubbish?” (*Look to the Land*, London, Dent, 1940; Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale, NY, 2003).

5. Frithjof Schuon has pointed out that, whereas Greek and Medieval philosophy is founded on certainty, the philosophy of Descartes, Kant, and their successors is founded on doubt.

discriminate between “traditional” art (that is, Medieval and Oriental) and “non-traditional” art (that is, European art of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods). Also, at a much more outward—but still very important— level, one must discriminate between art that is still “human”, however superficial and sentimental it may be, and the “infra-human” or satanic art of modern times.⁶

Also essential are subjects such as English and European (and perhaps world) history and literature—within the limits of the reasonable and the possible. It should be stressed that this proviso applies throughout, as does also the frequently forgotten principle that formal or “scholastic” education is only intended for those fit to profit by it. The need for the study of modern languages, above all French and German, is apparent. A study of these two languages, coupled with the study of Greek and Latin, has the additional merit of facilitating access to other modern European languages, such as Italian and Spanish. Obviously all aspects of mathematics must be available, and the essentials taught to all.

In the modern situation, modern science and technology are inescapable, since, in some branch or other, they will be indispensable for most, from the point of view of earning a livelihood. Modern science and technology, however, are alien to culture and consequently do not pertain to education as defined in this paper.

6. Regarding the successive, downward-cascading, phases of post-Medieval art, see the last chapter of the invaluable treatise *Sacred Art in East and West* by Titus Burckhardt.