

## Reasons of the Heart Conference, Edinburgh, 9-12 September 2004

### MYTHICAL MEANING, RELIGION AND SOULFUL EDUCATION: REVIVING THE ORIGINAL SENSE OF 'INTELLECT'

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the vital need for a revival of the qualitative education of the soul at a time of profound educational crisis when the dominance of a narrow utilitarian concept of schooling is bound up with a pervasive failure to awaken and nourish the higher cognitive, affective and spiritual faculties of young people.

This failure will be examined in the wider paradigmatic context of the dispiriting materialism or "reign of quantity" which can be regarded as one of the chief deformities of the contemporary world. Associated with this deformity is the reduction, since the so-called "Enlightenment", of the original sense of Intellect (as spiritual intelligence or the "eye of the heart" capable of symbolic and mythic understanding) to the lower level of abstract logical reasoning. It will be further argued that so pervasive has been the impact of scientism in Western thought that the original meaning of the word "intellect" is no longer generally retrievable in Western culture as a means of distinguishing the higher faculty from the lower one.

The paper will attempt to restore the authentic meaning of human intellect (Greek *nous*, Arabic *'aq*) with special reference to key concepts in Islamic spirituality. It will explore the notions of "sign" (Arabic *aya*), "similitude" (Arabic *mathal*) and "parable" and suggest that the ways of "seeing" reality represented by these religious concepts is essentially the same as the symbolic understanding developed through a soulful education rich in sacred stories (myth) and awareness of the sacred signs in the "displayed book" of Nature.

#### *The Reign of Quantity and The Signs of the Times: Modern schooling and the death of the soul*

The Call for Papers identified as a key purpose of this conference the need "to assess the contemporary educational neglect of mythical meaning, and to trace the extent to which the broader development of children and young people may have been impoverished by such neglect".

Now, in the limited time available to me, I don't want to focus too heavily on a critique of the obvious signs of this contemporary educational neglect and impoverishment, as this would be a very sorry catalogue indeed. I have documented the general points I wish to make in extensive footnotes to this paper. Such critiques abound, and the fact that you are here suggests that you are probably familiar with at least some of them, even if we may approach them from different perspectives and disciplines. We need critiques, but we also need a positive vision of how to restore the qualitative education of the soul to our schools in the face of the dispiriting "Reign of Quantity" (if I may borrow a well-known phrase of the metaphysician Rene Guenon<sup>1</sup>) which is failing abysmally to nourish our young people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*. Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The most obvious sign of the Reign of Quantity in our educational system is the debilitating testing regime tied into league tables of "performance" – a relentless and unremitting treadmill of assessment of uninspiring objectives and dangerously narrow prescriptive content. Research by Cambridge University for the National Union of Teachers refers to a testing "insanity" which is gripping primary schools in the UK (*The Independent*, 5 July, 2002). Almost half the weekly timetable is now taken up by mathematics and English lessons and thousands of children as young as seven are being tested *every week* on their reading. The disproportionate emphasis on the teaching and perpetual testing of a narrow

Without attempting at this stage to define precisely what might be meant by “mythical meaning”, I think we can broadly connect its neglect to a range of related omissions and deformities in our educational system (which are only in themselves reflections of a much wider and desperate crisis in Western civilisation) and I am sure many of us will recognise them, even if we might not explicitly make the connection with the neglect of “mythical meaning”. We might think, instead, of the neglect of creativity<sup>3</sup>

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band of literacy and numeracy skills, which are deemed to be essential for economic survival, is taking the heart and soul out of education. This regime coerces pupils in English schools to take more than 100 exams and tests in their school years. Children are now to be assessed on their physical, emotional, intellectual and social development between the ages of three and six, a task which will necessitate the completion of 3,510 tickboxes for a class of 30 children. (“Do we need to tick the tots?” by Caroline Haydon, in *The Independent*, 8 May, 2003). A survey has shown that over half of seven-year olds suffered from stress before taking Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) (“A generation of the hunched and slumped”, by Michael McMahon, in *The Independent*, 27 April, 2003). A poll carried out in September 2002 found that testing had replaced bullying as the biggest fear for schoolchildren during their schooldays (“The obsession with exams and targets is destroying childhood”, by Richard Garner, in *The Independent*, 21 September, 2002). The same national obsession with standardised testing can be seen in the USA, where its failure is leading many to call for a repudiation of all educational centralized planning. According to Jeffrey Tucker, Vice-President of the Mises Institute, preparation for tests on a narrow band of prescriptive content in core subjects has become the sum total of all public-school education in the USA. “Advanced students”, he says, “are bored out of their minds, while weak students are relentlessly frustrated.” (“Another Central Plan Fails”, by Jeffrey Tucker, posted 3 January 2003 on [www.mises.org](http://www.mises.org)).

Other signs of the Reign of Quantity are evident in the reduction of Mathematics and Science to mere numbers and facts. A joint Royal Society and Joint Mathematical Council working group reported in July 2000 that the teaching of mathematics was increasingly being reduced to nothing but numbers, and that the death of geometry, the study of shape and space, in mathematics education could only be to the detriment of visual and spatial intelligence (*Times Educational Supplement*, 18 January, 2001 – Curriculum Special: Mathematics). A report on science teaching at GCSE level drawn up by Dr. Ian Gibson, Chairman of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, found much of science teaching “boring, pointless and stultifying” with far too much weight given to facts and content. Few opportunities were given for experimentation, little connection was made with topical modern developments and controversial issues, let alone with that sense of wonder and mystery which authentic science evokes. The scientific method itself was rarely taught, and the limitations of science hardly ever addressed. (*Today* programme, Radio 4, 11 July, 2002 and *Times Educational Supplement*, 12 July, 2002). The *Times Educational Supplement* of 2 January 2004 (“Attack on science ‘by numbers’” by Warwick Mansell) reports Jonathan Osborne, professor of science education at King’s College London, as saying that the shepherding of pupils through GCSE practicals was like a set of “recipe-like steps” which had very little to do with the process of scientific exploration. He points out that at GCSE, assessment of investigation is dominated by just three experiments: measuring the resistance of a wire, the rates of chemical reaction and the rate of osmosis in a potato, which is “a bit like reducing the teaching of performance in music to three standard scales on a recorder. Any teacher with even half an understanding of science knows that this approach ... bears as much relation to science as painting by numbers does to art.” Einstein speaks of the way in which mere cramming of content undermined his love of science: “One had to cram all this stuff into one’s mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year.” Henry Brooke Adams (d. 1918), Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, said that “Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts”. Whitehead adds that “Education with inert ideas is not only useless; it is above all things harmful”.

<sup>3</sup> “Say ‘no’ targets”, *TES* 2 May 2003 in which the TES launched a campaign called Target Creativity to “liberate creativity in primary schools”, referring to the same poll as evidence that “targets are...stifling opportunities for both children and teachers to be creative.” Earlier this year a group of famous musicians, including Sir James Galway and Julian Lloyd Webber, wrote to Tony Blair to raise “their grave concern about the increasing marginalisation of music” in schools caused by the

and the neglect of the imagination and of other higher cognitive and affective capacities,<sup>4</sup> including the capacity for symbolic, allegorical and analogical understanding. We might see in this reduction of education (and in the desacralisation of the human being and of nature which it engenders and from which it springs) a pervasive loss of soul, and connect this in turn with the dispiriting and demoralising utilitarian concept of schooling<sup>5</sup> for the workplace which has replaced a holistic education as the main priority in the educational process.

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overwhelming pressure of tests and targets (*TES* 9 May 2003) They believe that if the subject is not rescued from the margins of school life, Britain will develop a generation of musically illiterate students. The problem here goes beyond the issue of musical illiteracy, because the benefits of musical education are transferable to other subjects. Well-attested research has found that learning to play a musical instrument can dramatically enhance human intelligence, probably because of the patterning activity stimulated in the brain. The mental mechanisms which process music are deeply entwined with brain functions such as spatial relations, memory and language. Spatial intelligence is crucial for engineering, computational abilities and technical design. Other creative people, including novelists Doris Lessing and Philip Pullman, have joined with the musicians to support the new TES campaign.

This is all very well, but, please, let us not restrict the notion of creativity to an exclusively Western concept of creative arts. A recent radio 4 series on the Sikh community included a program in which a young Sikh woman talked about the prejudice she had experienced in secondary school from teachers and examiners who had devalued and even openly scorned her artwork because its traditional form and content did not conform to their Eurocentric modernist assumptions about what constituted “creative” work. In this example, the diversity strand of the Citizenship program of the National Curriculum is actively flouted, although it may well be that this strand will more typically be simply given lip service in a curriculum overloaded with examinable content and delivered by teachers deficient in inter-cultural knowledge and skills.

<sup>4</sup> It might be hoped that with so much teacher talk in our schools, a good proportion of it might be directed towards the development of creative and critical thinking and problem solving. Not so. In fact, a wide-ranging survey of British secondary schools reveals less than ten percent of teacher talk is concerned with the development of higher order thinking skills. Most of it is directed to mere control and management, including keeping order and giving instructions. The rest of it (apart from the paltry amount involved in getting students to think) is low-level transmission of facts and information. Roland Barth reports the estimate of John Goodlad and others that 85 percent of lesson time in American schools is taken up by a prevailing pedagogy based on teachers talking and students listening, occasionally interspersed with teacher-directed discussion (Roland S. Barth, *Learning by Heart*, Jossey-Bass, 2001, p.32). Barth calls this the ‘Transmission Model of Knowledge’ (or ‘Sit and Git’), the dominant instructional regime with a disproportionate amount of didactic teacher-talk, to the obvious detriment of experiential education.

<sup>5</sup> I deliberately refer to this kind of schooling as “dispiriting” and “demoralising” because these debilitating effects are the outcome of an educational process which often gives no real place to spiritual and moral development apart from the generalised lip-service paid to them in school mission statements. Dispirited and demoralised school pupils are also increasingly disaffected, as is clearly shown by truancy statistics which show that truancy is continuing to rise despite government measures designed to tackle this problem. The BBC Radio 4 News of 15 September 2004 reported that an average of 49,000 pupils were absent from school every day in the year up to April 2004. Worse even than this, there is a scandalous increase in depression, self-harm and even suicide amongst schoolchildren, with a growing number of websites offering advice to young people who want to take their own lives about the best methods of killing themselves. *The Independent on Sunday* (12 September 2004) reports that the suicide rate is now three times higher among schoolchildren than it was 20 years ago, with children as young as five being treated for self-harming. The main causes of self-harm amongst children and teenagers in the UK – believed to be the highest in Europe – are bullying at school and exam stress as well as an abusive parent or bereavement. A poll carried out in September 2002 found that testing had replaced bullying as the biggest fear for schoolchildren during their schooldays (“The obsession with exams and targets is destroying childhood”, by Richard Garner, *The Independent*, 21 September, 2002). Professor Louis Appleby, the Government’s mental health ‘tsar’, said earlier this year that the way to deal with this problem was to bring in an “army of therapists”, as if it were the children who are “sick” instead of the culture and school system in which they growing up. A wiser approach would surely be

We have to remember that the first priority of the government is the economy. The DfEE White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success*<sup>6</sup> gives the game away in the first paragraph of the Introduction: “*The success of our children at school is crucial to the economic health and social cohesion<sup>7</sup> of the country, as well as to their own life chances and personal fulfilment*” (my italics). Notice the priorities which are placed first in this sentence. In an exclusive interview reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* of 5 July 2002, Blair himself has confirmed this agenda: “Education”, he says “is and remains the absolute number one priority for the country because without a quality education system and an educated *workforce*, we cannot succeed *economically*” (my italics).<sup>8</sup> The real priority is clear, and it is the same one (economic power) as that which governs educational policy in the White Paper.<sup>9</sup>

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to attempt to rectify an educational system which not only demoralises and dispirits, but also causes widespread disaffection, depression and even suicide.

A truly holistic education includes the development of all human capacities – physical, intellectual, affective, imaginative, moral and spiritual. Mark Twain famously said: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education”. While such an able and independent-minded person may be able to offer such resistance, the fact is, as Thomas Moore has written that “One of the great problems of our time is that many are schooled but few are educated. True to our modern values and vision, we tend to the instruction of the mind and the training of the body, while we generally neglect the soul. It’s not surprising that as our culture advances in information and technology, we seem to become more inarticulate about matters of the heart.” (Thomas Moore (ed.), *The Education of the Heart*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996, p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> DfEE (2001) *Schools: Achieving Success*. London: HMSO.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Best identifies as one of the big issues the challenge that pluralism and cultural diversity pose for social cohesion (“Faith Schools – A Review of the Debate”, a paper presented by Ron Best to a seminar at the Center for Research in Religious Education and Development, University of Surrey Roehampton, February, 2003, p.10). Suspicion of the Citizenship Program of the National Curriculum amongst minority ethnic and religious groups is sometimes based on the perception that the program is designed not essentially to understand and respect diversity but to assimilate minority groups into the dominant secular liberal ideology. Concerns about assimilation are shared by all ethnic and faith communities. In an article in *The Independent* of 14 August 2004 (“Faith and reason: Western words are inadequate to carry Hindu truths”) Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies speaks of the difficult task faced by Hindu youths in their “search for an authentic identity, one that truly reflects their culture, philosophy and spirituality and yet which also engages with the reality of life in contemporary Britain.” He considers this to be a “tall order” because “even those who think they are sympathetic to the needs of religious minorities do not understand enough to see how profound is the gap between our different world views.” Das goes on to say that “cultural exchange has not gone deep enough. Indeed some efforts have even been counter-productive.” He identifies the central problem as the inadequacy of Western vocabulary in bridging the communication gap. “The trouble is that the Hindu tradition is fundamentally distorted if you try to talk about it in the framework of Western philosophical concepts and language. A vocabulary for true inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue doesn’t exist at this point, or is very limited.”

<sup>8</sup> Exclusive interview reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 5 July 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Widespread over-emphasis of the applied sciences over the social sciences and humanities in higher education is increasingly prevalent worldwide. An example is the call for a 60:40 ratio for natural and applied sciences to social science and humanities in Malaysian universities, as well as the establishment of specialized technology universities. Such imbalance puts national economic development goals over individual human development, and regards the educational process as a factory for producing human “products” and “resources” to drive up the pace of economic growth and national “success”.

A columnist in *The Independent* newspaper, referring to our education secretary as “Bruiser Clarke the boffin-basher”, believes that “his dead-eyed utilitarian code reduces education to churning out limited, wealth-producing units.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, if you want to produce the modern equivalent of a regimented empire-serving army of ledger clerks and petty officials (that is, an army of unquestioning and conforming cogs in the economic machine) you don’t need creative people with imagination,<sup>11</sup> apart from those who misuse their imaginative powers to manipulate consumers. Least of all do you need emotionally intelligent people, or reflective, soulful and self-aware people, or people of spiritual vision. You don’t even need people who can think much beyond the kind of functional “thinking skills” which reduce the miracle of human consciousness to mere rationalisation or, at best, to arid philosophical cogitation.<sup>12</sup> Ideally, you need conforming clones with a “digitally re-mastered consciousness”, to use a chilling phrase I recently heard uttered by a scientist heralding the future development of the human race.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, Jean Houston<sup>14</sup> has written eloquently about the importance of teaching-learning communities in stimulating, supporting and evoking each other’s highest sensory, physical, psychological, mythic, symbolic and spiritual capacities. In such a community, she says, education is an adventure of the soul in which our personal themes become joined with those of universal reality, and with the numinous dimension of the symbolic, the mythic and the archetypal.<sup>15</sup>

The neglect of the education of the soul is characterised by a lack of intimacy, by an over-emphasis on “competencies” and “tools” – the distancing language of technology, military strategy, surveillance, corporate efficiency, quantification, target-setting and managerialism which increasingly dominates our view of things in the West

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<sup>10</sup> Terence Blacker, *The Independent*, 12 May 2003.

<sup>11</sup> The sociologist Harry Gracey links the elimination of creativity to increasing conformity: “While children’s perceptions of the world and opportunities for genuine spontaneity and creativity are being systematically eliminated from the kindergarten, unquestioned obedience to authority and rote learning of meaningless material are being encouraged.” (Harry L. Gracey, “Learning the Student Role: Kindergarten as Academic Boot Camp” in H. Stub (ed.) *The Sociology of Education: A Sourcebook*, 1975.)

<sup>12</sup> In his publisher’s note to New York State Teacher of the Year John Taylor Gatto’s challenging book, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (New Society Publishers, 1992) David H. Albert refers to the words of the social philosopher Hannah Arendt that “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any”. (Hanna Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1968, p.168). Gatto’s indictment of the assumptions and structures which underlie modern state schooling in the USA exposes the same deadening utilitarian agenda which informs British educational policy, an agenda geared to turning children into cogs in an economic machine, children who are dependent, conforming, materialistic, and lacking in curiosity, imagination, self-knowledge and powers of reflection.

<sup>13</sup> BBC Radio 4, 26 August 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Houston, *Jump Time: Shaping Your Future in a World of Radical Change*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> “Art forms are of particular importance for an education into soul. Myth, fairy tale, story, symbolic imagery, poetry, drama, painting, music, and film...” (Robert Sardello, *Facing the World with Soul*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992, p.61).

and is contaminating the psychic health of our whole society. Is it any wonder that young people feel increasingly demoralized and dispirited?<sup>16</sup>

The neglect of the soul is also characterised by what Brian Thorne<sup>17</sup> has called the “blind slumber” ingrained in the lives of modern Western men and women, which is “fast becoming the collective neurosis of our contemporary culture”.<sup>18</sup> This chronic sloth (for that is what this forgetfulness essentially is) is just as evident in the frenetic hyperactivity which characterises modern life as it is in its more obvious manifestation as blank inertia. Sloth is not laziness but forgetfulness<sup>19</sup> of our true nature as fully human beings who have remembered our original relationship with the divine. We can do any number of things, become as “time-poor” as we like, but if we forget the one thing that is needful we are in a state of sloth and have wasted our lives. We have also failed to pass on to our children the wisdom which will enable them to live lives worthy of human beings.

That one thing that is needful can be defined in many ways, and we shouldn't switch off if the words some people use are different from ours and come from disciplines, perspectives, or traditions of which we are ignorant or which make us feel uneasy. These days, in our predominantly secular society,<sup>20</sup> it tends to be the language of

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<sup>16</sup> We need to understand on the paradigmatic level what is behind our increasingly mechanistic culture and the soulless regimes that it spawns. For me, the seminal insights I gained about this emerged from a conference on *Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Centre for Professional Education, St. Charles, Illinois, USA, 26-28 April, 2000). The essential message of this conference was that the paradigm governing the public education system, and other organisations, is obsolete. It is based on a machine-age model which over-emphasises cause and effect, logic, atomisation, and analytical reasoning, or, in other words, the lower level of the intellect. In tracing the life-cycle of products and innovations, as much as paradigms and organisations, we learn that in their terminal phase, the process of development naturally and inevitably slows down. Governments of “developed” countries, however, are obsessed with the need to exercise stringent control and demonstrate higher productivity, perpetual growth and improvement in standards of living, so that they can maintain their position in the first division in the competition for materialistic supremacy. They aim to achieve this, even in the educational sector, through the means with which we are now so familiar: micro-managerialism to ensure that the “appropriate goods” are “delivered” through the “ratcheting up” of “standards”, the imposition of debilitating testing regimes, performance indicators, strict “commercial disciplines”, “best practice”, measures of accountability such as league tables, performance indicators, inspections, targets, and a continual flood of new initiatives. This is the only way they can shore up a bankrupt system which has effectively exhausted all its possibilities and market the illusion of perpetual progress.

<sup>17</sup> Director of the Centre for Counselling Studies at the University of East Anglia.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Thorne, *Infinitely Beloved: The Challenge of Divine Intimacy*. Sarum Theological Lectures. London: Dartford, Longman and Todd, 2003, p.50. Chapter 3 of this book, “The Surveillance Culture and Economic Imperialism”, was delivered as the Keynote lecture at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child (Faith Feeling and Identity)*, University of Surrey Roehampton, 26-28 June, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (*The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*, Kuala Lumpur: 1990, ISTAC, p.3) reminds us of the Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) which tells us that man is called *insan* because, “having testified to himself the covenant (*al-mithaq; al-'ahd*) he sealed with God, he forgot (*nasīya*) to fulfil his duty and his purpose. In his note to Qur'an 20:115 (which refers to the forgetfulness of Adam, who is the symbol of the human race), Muhamamd Asad refers to Razi's comment that negligence of spiritual truths is one of the recurrent characteristics of the human race.

<sup>20</sup> The most recent survey of religious belief in Britain found that, of the 74 per cent of the population who described themselves as Christians, their religion was rated the least important to their identity out

religion which provokes such unease, or even downright hostility. We need to discover and articulate the essential unity behind all those perspectives which honour the innate capacities of the fully human being, whether the words used to describe them and the methods used to nurture them come from psychology, education, the creative arts, literature, history, cultural studies, mythology, spirituality or religion. We need synthetic minds which can discern the deep structure of shared concepts and values behind divisive terminology. In this way we may conceive of the one thing that is needful as the development of the imagination and of symbolic understanding, or the recovery of mythic meaning, or the education of the soul, or the development of full human potential, or the awareness of the sacred, or a relationship with the divine, or the attainment of self-realisation, or the knowledge of a higher reality or a Supreme Being, or, indeed, the consciousness and love of God. Let's not be bound by words to such an extent that we only feel comfortable with a set vocabulary.<sup>21</sup>

But, forgetting that one thing, however we may describe it, we go implacably about our business, striving, competing, achieving, performing, outwitting, texting, 'phoning, e-mailing, upgrading, optimising, ratcheting up standards, modelling best practice, driving forward the agenda, managing risks, managing time, planning short-, medium- and long-term goals, strategising, formulating policies and putting them in place, chairing, imposing sound commercial disciplines, meeting targets and deadlines, building cohesive teams, brainstorming, giving power-point presentations, rooting out dead wood, appraising, inspecting, evaluating, assessing, testing, improving efficiency, providing quality assurance, checking tick-boxes, defining outcomes, making others accountable, fast-tracking, overtaking, monitoring, networking, and of course, dare I say, conferencing, and even video-conferencing, and above all, *delivering*, – as Thorne says, “the list of frenetic activities and judgmental processes is endless”.<sup>22</sup> Thorne

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of ten factors in their lives. This Home Office Survey, based on 15,500 interviews, and reported in the *The Independent* of 18 August, 2004 (“Faith plays a minor role in lives of most white Christians” by Nigel Morris) found that although the highest number (74 per cent) called themselves Christians, “religious affiliation made little difference to the lives of white adherents. When asked what they considered important to their identity, religion was cited by only 17 per cent of white Christians, behind family, work, age, interests, education, nationality, gender, income and social class. For Black people, 70 per cent of whom say they are Christian, religion is third, and Asians placed it second, only behind family. The category “Asian” here encompasses the majority of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.

<sup>21</sup> However, there are genuine difficulties here in bridging these linguistic divides. In an article in *The Independent* of 14 August 2004 (“Faith and reason: Western words are inadequate to carry Hindu truths”) Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, speaks of the difficult task faced by Hindu youths in their “search for an authentic identity, one that truly reflects their culture, philosophy and spirituality and yet which also engages with the reality of life in contemporary Britain.” He considers this to be a “tall order” because “even those who think they are sympathetic to the needs of religious minorities do not understand enough to see how profound is the gap between our different world views”. Das goes on to identify the central problem as the inadequacy of Western vocabulary in bridging the communication gap. “The trouble is that the Hindu tradition is fundamentally distorted if you try to talk about it in the framework of Western philosophical concepts and language. A vocabulary for true inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue doesn't exist at this point, or is very limited.”

<sup>22</sup> Thorne quotes the French Orthodox scholar Olivier Clément's chilling description of the destructive power of forgetfulness: “I may forget that others have as deep an inward experience as I do; I may never stop for anything; I may never be captivated by music or a rose; I may never give thanks – since all things are rightly mine; I may forget that all things are rooted in mystery and that mystery dwells within me. I may forget God and His creation. I may no longer know how to accept myself as a creature with an immeasurable destiny. I may forget death and the possible meaning beyond it. All this amounts to a

describes how in his psycho-therapeutic work, he ministers in his consulting room to an ever-growing stream of angry, burnt-out, deeply unfulfilled people who sacrificed their souls in the frantic pursuit of personal achievement and material success. Bound by the imperative to “deliver” so much of what is useless and ephemeral they had failed to see to their own “deliverance”, which in its original meaning<sup>23</sup> is simply their liberation from all such illusion.

And God help us if we should fail, or if our new breed of sporting heroes fail us! Such is the impossible burden of expectation on them to carry the aspirations of a culture which increasingly projects all god-like qualities and mythic powers, and indeed its very soul, into physical prowess and sporting success. Whatever happened to the gods in the new blockbuster film of Troy? Air-brushed out, it seems, to keep the focus squarely on the god-like athleticism of Brad Pitt. And who on earth were those giant, god-like figures bestriding Grecian landscapes like colossi in the introduction to the BBC coverage of the Olympic Games? Not gods for sure, but giant-sized athletes powering their way on land and through water. Such a path can lead only to crushing disillusionment or anger as our souls are sucked from us every time our idol or our team fails – unless, of course, we can account for their failure by blaming someone or something else – the heat, perhaps, or the gradient of the hill, or the referee, or the turf on the penalty spot. It has been wisely said that it is through our failures, weaknesses and vulnerabilities that the divine enters us, precisely because the divine cannot co-exist with an inflated human ego in a state of *hubris*. Even Jason needed the help of a well-timed push from the divine hand of Pallas Athene to guide his ship through the Clashing Rocks.

We should resist not only the kind of language which reduces education to a kind of soulless managerialism, but also the kind of language which equates education with the postal service. Are teachers only there to “deliver” programmes of study, as if they were pre-packaged one-way parcels, mere items of content to be transmitted into letter-box brains? In authentic spiritual traditions, the teacher is not only responsible for the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge, but also with the education of the whole being. Such traditions never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul. In the Islamic tradition, for example, the teacher is both a *muallim* (a transmitter of knowledge) and a *murabbi* (a nurturer of souls).

We need, from our various disciplines, to reclaim this nurturing function for an education system which is continuing to compound the process of dehumanisation by devaluing not only the creative arts and the qualitative dimensions of science and mathematics, but also those subjects which seek to understand the human condition in all its diversity and complexity.<sup>24</sup> The marginalisation of history, archaeology,

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spiritual neurosis which has to do...with suppressing the ‘light of life’ which gives meaning to others, to the smallest speck of dust as well as to myself.” (Thorne, *ibid.*, p.51)

<sup>23</sup> The original sense of ‘deliver’ is to ‘set free’ (Latin *de-* ‘away’ + *liberare*, ‘to free’) as in the phrase “deliver us from evil”. The oppressive imperative to “deliver” has now become a form of bondage which could not be further from its original meaning.

<sup>24</sup> The latest casualty, so I understand, is archaeology, until now kept alive by only one examining board. This goes hand in hand with the demise of history, a subject whose ‘A’ level standard is now regarded as such a narrow, limited and impoverished historical education that Cambridge University no longer requires undergraduate historians to have it. The head of history at Latymer School in North London described the A-Level course as “history for the MTV generation – know a little but keep on

geography, and modern languages will only ensure that an ignorance of the richness of human heritage and diversity is compounded by an incompetence in cross-cultural communication, and this will remove our young people even further from that rich educational experience which is a prerequisite for the recovery of mythical meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Let me develop the point about the decline of history education. Campaigners for a return to a more traditional History syllabus in British schools have branded as a “disgrace” for the state education system the results of a BBC poll<sup>26</sup> which questioned 16- to 34-year-olds on their historical knowledge, and I expect that a similar poll might uncover even worse ignorance in the USA. History specialists have declared the results to be “really surprising” even if they do not necessarily share the apoplectic outrage of the traditionalists. We need not necessarily have sleepless nights at the finding of the poll that only half of all age groups knew that the marches of the Orangemen in Northern Ireland on 12 July mark the Battle of the Boyne. However, we perhaps ought to be seriously worried that 15 per-cent of 16- to 24-year-olds thought that these marches celebrated the victory at Helm’s Deep at the end of *The Two Towers*, the second book in Tolkien’s Trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, one in 20 thought it was Gandalf, the wizard, not Francis Drake, who had led the British fleet to victory against the Spanish Armada in 1588. One in 5, incidentally, thought it was Columbus. One in eight also thought Anglo-Saxon Britain had been overrun by Napoleon.

We might want to concede that outraged traditionalists have an important point to make about the decline in historical knowledge, even if some of their concerns give undue prominence to facts over understanding and interpretation, and reflect dubious nationalistic obsessions, but I believe we ought to be far more worried by the growing confusion between mythology and historical fact, and the *reduction* of both myth and history that this entails.

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repeating it” ( *Times Educational Supplement*, 28 June 2002). A Geographical Association survey has found that “geography has been dropped as a subject specialism by more than one quarter of initial teacher-training institutions”. Humanities simply do not have the status of core subjects such as English, mathematics and science, so “young teachers who want promotion will probably focus on core subjects” ( *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 March, 2002). More recently, The Geographical Association has warned that pupils’ education is being damaged by teachers’ over-reliance on standard textbooks, ( *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 May, 2003) largely because many of those teachers have not studied Geography themselves since the age of fourteen. A survey by the Association of Language Learning suggests that more than 1,000 schools in the UK are planning to drop foreign language lessons for pupils over 14. ( *Times Educational Supplement*, 25 May, 2002.). In February 2002, the German, Italian and Spanish ambassadors had spoken out in an interview with *The Independent* about the “sad” standard of language teaching in the UK. Research from Sussex and Dundee universities, reported in *The Independent* of 6 August 2004 (“Monolingual Brits miss out on European study” by Dominic Hayes) found that among academics in the UK “the general feeling was one of exasperation, but also resignation, about the foreign languages scenario in the UK”. The report states that “the problem of UK students’ generally poor and declining knowledge of foreign languages came up again and again”. A recent article in *The Independent* (April 2005), reporting the findings of an influential House of Lords committee, deplores the fact that “Language learning in the UK plummets as students stay at home”. The Government’s own qualifications body (QCA) has since warned that the study of foreign language A-levels was in “chronic decline”.

<sup>25</sup> On a more banal level, it will also give even more cause for the antipathy felt towards British tourists abroad. The British are rated as bottom in a list of 33 countries. Reasons given included linguistic incompetence and cultural isolationism.

<sup>26</sup> Reported in *The Independent* of 5 August 2004.

The success of the Tolkien films gives evidence of an abiding hunger amongst young people for absorption in inspiring works of the imagination which feed their yearning for higher values and a level of reality deeper than the mesmerising banality and baseness of so-called “Reality TV”.

When we read of the way in which their readings of history are influenced by movies, we ought perhaps to be less worried that historical fact is being corrupted by fiction than by the scandal of an education system which fails to feed that yearning for a symbolic and archetypal understanding of reality which goes to the core of what it is to be truly human. In the absence of such an education, and in the absence too of a properly rigorous approach to historical fact, the boundaries between the deep psychological and spiritual realities embodied in myth and the relatively factual domain of history are in danger of becoming blurred. The power of myth to shape and nourish the soul is diminished when it becomes a substitute for historical knowledge. We are then in the domain not of myth as healing and transforming education beyond the contingencies of history but of “myth” in its debased sense of a story without foundation, a distortion of real events. In this way, imaginal worlds are reduced to the merely imaginary. As Louis Dupré has written, “Demythologisation...is therefore necessary to preserve the deeper meaning of the mythic symbol itself. Demythologizing...is a constant and necessary process, while demythizing is ultimately destructive of the particular nature of religious symbols”.<sup>27</sup>

We need, however, to recognise the difference between those movies such as *The Lord of the Rings* which are clearly not intended to be distortions of history and those which are, indeed, deliberate distortions designed to promote nationalistic and supremacist ideology. The world of the imagination depicted by *The Lord of the Rings* is *beyond history*, a world of universals which is *more real* than the world of history, and that is what explains its enduring popularity, but the same cannot be said for a series of Hollywood movies which have blatantly rewritten history to glorify American military might.

While contemporary cinema has a vital role to play in giving new forms to timeless myths, and is a powerful medium for nourishing the hunger for mythic and symbolic understanding especially amongst a generation of young people who have been deprived of it in a stultifying education system, the importance of myth is not served by the falsification of history as a means of glorifying national identity. These are substitute myths embedded in a culture by rhetorical manipulation, which now includes not only words unchallenged by compliant media, but the full range of glamourising production values associated with corporate advertising, Hollywood and political conventions. They are, of course, the stock in trade of totalitarian methods of brainwashing whole populations, and we need only look across the Atlantic to see how they work even in a society which supposedly prides itself on “freedom” and sees its self-appointed moral mission as liberating the benighted peoples of the world.

### *Reviving the original meaning of ‘Intellect’ as the ‘Eye of the Heart’*

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<sup>27</sup> Louis Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, Cambridge: Wm. N. Eerdmans, 2000, p.120.

I find it very helpful to see the neglect of mythical meaning as one of the outcomes of the reduction of the original sense of Intellect in Western culture and the corresponding division between the heart and the intellect. This division is clear in the following statement by Thomas Moore : “Without an animated, educated heart,” he writes, “the intellect appears superior, and we give too much attention and value to it. Our institutions and ideas then lack the humanizing breath of the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

This is, of course, absolutely right if the intellect is equated with the lower intellect, or with mere rationality. In our culture, the intellectualizing tendency, in its sense of sequential and logical head-thinking, all too often displaces the faculties of perception, intuition and feeling which reside in the heart.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is vitally important not to reduce and restrict the authentic meaning of Intellect to this lower level. The Arabic word for Intellect, *'aql*,<sup>30</sup> organically combines reason and the higher intellect in its sense of intelligence-understanding, or mind-heart (indeed, “Reasons of the Heart”). In its highest sense it is the “universal principle of all intelligence, a principle which transcends the limiting conditions of the mind”.<sup>31</sup> The higher function of *'aql* can be equated with *nous* in Orthodox Christianity (Hesychasm). This tradition defines *nous* or *intellectus* as the highest faculty in man, to be distinguished from *dianoia* or *ratio*, the faculty of mere discursive reason. It is through the Intellect, if purified, that man knows God or the inner essence or principles (*logoi*) of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception. The Intellect is the faculty which dwells in the depth of the soul and constitutes the innermost aspect of the Heart,<sup>32</sup> the organ of contemplation.<sup>33</sup> It is this

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Moore (ed.), op. cit., p. 5. Sir Walter Scott goes even further: “We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny, unless we have taught ourselves to consider every thing as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart.”

<sup>29</sup> The bias towards thinking over feeling in Western culture, especially in corporate and business environments, is well-known by practitioners of the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Inventory) who are trained to make corrections for it in scoring questionnaires.

<sup>30</sup> The Arabic root has the sense of ‘binding’ and ‘withholding’, i.e. the faculty of judgment, discrimination and clarification and the intellectual power of speech (*nutq*) which enables man, the “language animal”, to articulate words in meaningful patterns. To Adam was imparted the Names (Qur’an 2:31), and in one sense this knowledge confers on man the faculty of logical definition and the making of distinctions which underlies abstract, conceptual thought. However, as I explain above, the faculty encompasses more than logical reasoning and verbal conceptualisation.

<sup>31</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufism*. Thorsons, 1995, p.94.

<sup>32</sup> In the Bible, too, both in the Old and New Testaments, it is the heart (Hebrew *leb/lebab*, cognate with Arabic *lubb/albab*) not the brain, which is regarded as the centre of consciousness, thought and will. The emotions are usually connected with the lower organs. Modern usage typically gives precedence to mental processes by regarding the ‘mind’ as the seat of consciousness and demotes the heart by making it the seat of emotions. That the heart is regarded as the seat of the intellect and the will, as well as feeling, is shown by The First Commandment, which, according to C. Ryder Smith (*The Bible Doctrine of Man*, 1951) probably means “You shall love (*agapan*) the Lord your God with all your heart – that is with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength”. (See the entry on HEART in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 625, for detailed references to the function of the heart throughout the Bible). Martin Lings describes the “centre of the macrocosm” as the “Heart” of the human being – “not the bodily organ of that name but the soul’s central faculty which...must be considered as being above and beyond the psychic domain...The capital letter is used to denote this distinction. Moreover since this centre reflects a whole

faculty, again, which confers on us the capacity to penetrate to mythical, archetypal and symbolic meanings.

So there is no opposition between the Heart and the Intellect in authentic spiritual traditions. The problem is that since the so-called “Enlightenment” in Western civilisation and its elevation of logical reasoning to the pinnacle of human cognition the word ‘intellect’ has generally lost its higher meaning and become synonymous with ‘reason’. Allied to this is the reliance on the empirical method which attaches such reason for the most part only to its rapport with the outer senses and reduces the many layers of human experience only to externalised experiments offering measurable results. In this climate, the original meaning of the word ‘intellect’ is therefore not generally retrievable in Western culture as a means of distinguishing the higher faculty from the lower one.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that there is widespread suspicion of “intellectuals” and growing disillusionment with scientism. People sense the inhumanity and arrogance of reason detached from the heart. There can be no true intellectuality without human values and spiritual intelligence. Every teacher should follow T.S. Eliot’s wise dictum that “It is in fact a part of the function of education to help us escape - not from our own time, for we are bound by that - but from the intellectual and emotional limitations of our own time.” Teachers bound themselves by such limitations are hardly in a position to help others escape from them.

The revival of the qualitative education of the soul and the restoration of mythical meaning are none other than the rediscovery of an authentic intellectual life, of an Intellect enthroned not in the head but in a Heart that sees beyond the surface of things to the essential principles and archetypes which animate our lives. This symbolic understanding of reality is at the heart of mythic, spiritual and religious traditions, and we need to discover the common ground shared by all such traditions.

Ananda Coomaraswamy invites us to rediscover in the fairy-tale what we recognise in Scripture. “The truth is that the modern mind, hardened by its constant consideration of ‘the Bible as literature’...could, if it would make the necessary intellectual effort, turn to our mythology and folklore and find there, for example in the heroic rescues of

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hierarchy of centres which transcend it, the term Heart is also sometimes used of Spirit, and ultimately of the Supreme Centre, the Divine Self.” (Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence*. Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991, pp. 2-3)

<sup>33</sup> This is described in very Islamic terms as the “eye of the Heart ” in the *Makarīan Homilies*.

<sup>34</sup> In the Islamic philosophy of Mulla Sadra, the perfection of man resides in the perfection of his soul, for which he uses the traditional philosophical term *al-nafs al-natiqah* or ‘rational soul’. But the term Arabic word *natiqah*, although usually translated as ‘rational’, must not be reduced to the modern understanding of this term, in the same way as the term *‘aql* must not be reduced to the lower level of the intellect alone. The word *natiqah* in Arabic still contains all the depth of meaning which such terms as *nous*, *intellectus* and even *ratio* possessed before Cartesianism and empiricism deprived reason of its connection with the intellect and reduced it for the most part to its rapport merely with the outer senses. (For a masterly discussion of this desacralisation of the intellect, see chapter 1, “Knowledge and its Desacralisation”, in *Knowledge and the Sacred* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, New York: State University of New York Press, 1980).

maidens from dragons or in (what is the same thing) the disenchantments of dragons by a kiss...the whole story of the plan of redemption and its operation.”<sup>35</sup>

### *The spiritual function of myth*

The word “myth”, like the word “intellect”, has suffered the same semantic degeneration and loss of original meaning typical of so many words<sup>36</sup> since the so-called “Enlightenment”.

A standard dictionary of word histories<sup>37</sup> defines a myth as “a fictitious legend or tradition, accepted as historical”. The pejorative sense of a myth as something imaginary and untrue is probably still paramount, based as it is on the ignorance of 19<sup>th</sup> century folklorists and others influenced by the prevailing ideology of progressivism. Such people were blind to the richness of traditional cultures, ignorant of the connection of such cultures to a *sophia perennis*, or timeless traditional wisdom,<sup>38</sup> and utterly seduced by the myth of progress central to the ideological purposes of Western materialism, scientism and modernism. It was inevitable that such a deformed understanding would lead them to characterise myths as the fanciful and savage tales and beliefs of primitive peoples, or at best childish pre-scientific attempts to “explain” or “rationalize” natural phenomena. I should point out that I use the word “myth” quite deliberately in its pejorative sense in the phrase “myth of progress”. Rollo May is surely right when he says that “there can be no stronger proof of the impoverishment of our contemporary culture than the popular – though profoundly mistaken – definition of myth as falsehood”.

However, following the welcome demolition in the twentieth century of nonsensical and ideologically motivated notions about “savages”, “primitive cultures” and their “survivals”, the primordial meaning of ‘myth’ was recovered by mythologists, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilisation? And Other Essays*. Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1989, p.124.

<sup>36</sup> See J. Henzell-Thomas, “Passing Between the Clashing Rocks: The Heroic Quest for a Common and Inclusive Identity” (*Journal of Pastoral Care in Education*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, September 2004, pp. 35-43). This is a revised version of a paper entitled “Identity and Dialogue: Spiritual Roots and Educational Needs” first presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child (Faith, Feeling and Identity)* at the University of Surrey Roehampton, UK, 26-28 June 2003. The paper explores the etymology of various words in English which originally illumined the notion of primordial human identity, including ‘identity’, ‘character’, ‘originality’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘authenticity’, relating all to the Islamic concept of *fitra*, ‘essential nature’ or ‘original disposition’.

<sup>37</sup> Cassell’s *Dictionary of Word Histories*. London: Casell, 2000, p. 401

<sup>38</sup> The *sophia perennis* can be characterised not only as the “timeless traditional wisdom” embodied, to a greater or lesser extent in traditional societies, but also the primordial ‘religion’ underlying its various expressions in the form of different religions at different times and places to meet the specific needs of different communities. While the exoteric forms and doctrines of these religions differ, just as different radii of a circle diverge from each other as they radiate from the centre, there is, on the esoteric level (that is at the centre of the circle, the point of Essence) a transcendent unity behind these forms. This is confirmed by the statement in the Qur’an that God “makes no distinction between any of His apostles or messengers” (Qur’an 2:285). It can be argued that religion, and the successive appearance of God’s messengers to remind mankind of his true nature as a being made in the image of God, became necessary only when mankind fell into the unnatural state of forgetting his transcendent relationship to the divine.

myths became synonymous with sacred stories<sup>39</sup> originating in pre-literate or oral societies,<sup>40</sup> and with metaphorical expressions of the truths and archetypal principles underlying the wholeness of human individuals and societies – a wholeness which is absolutely dependent on a relationship with the divine. “A *mythos*,” says James Hillman, “is a tale of interaction of humans and the divine. To be in a *mythos* is to be inescapably linked with divine powers, and moreover, to be in mimesis with them.” In this sense, as Hillman explains, although plots are myths (in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the Greek word for “plot” is always *mythos*), a *mythos* is always much more than a plot.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Now, I am not a classical scholar, and I am not able to give you the reference, but I believe it has been authoritatively stated that none of the 167 instances of the word *mythos* and its compounds and derivatives in Homer’s *Iliad* refers to anything that is either untrue, symbolic, or sacred. They are almost always used to describe a powerful male authority figure giving orders or making boasts and are performed at length, in public. The word “myth” is normally derived from the Greek word *mythos* which is given various meanings in etymological dictionaries, including ‘speech, thought, story’. (Chambers’ *Dictionary of Etymology*. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap, 1988, p. 691). Incidentally, the English word ‘mouth’, which I have seen now and then connected etymologically to Greek *mythos* (but without foundation) derives from Germanic \**munthaz* and, like the word “mental”, comes ultimately from the Indo-European root *men-*. (*The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, edited by Calvert Watkins. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p.54). The Greek word itself is of unknown origin, “lost”, as Shipley says “in the mists of prehistory”. (Shipley, *op. cit.*, p. 259). Later Greek prose writers such as Herodotus began to tinge *mythos* with notions of tall tales and legends, as did Plato after him. Plato, no doubt, gave a degree of philosophical respectability to Victorian reductionism in his association of *mythos* with things he could not believe, in contrast to the more rational concepts afforded by philosophy.

<sup>40</sup> See W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, Routledge, 1982. The advent of literacy is still often hailed as a giant leap for mankind in terms of the new kinds of thinking which it facilitated, as, for instance, inductive and deductive reasoning without which modern mathematics and science (and hence technological “progress”) would have been impossible. In this regard, Vygotsky used the term “technological amplifier” to describe the effect of writing on cognitive processes. Such cognitive benefits emanate from the fact that storage of propositional information in writing releases more cognitive capacity for processing, thus circumventing short-term and working memory limitations which make complex calculations generally impossible without the means of reviewing prior propositions in written form. However, there are other schools of thought (notably the school of “traditionalists” who follow the metaphysician Rene Guenon in his unparalleled corpus of writings on the *sophia perennis* and the excoriating critique of modernity entailed by it) which seek to re-establish the importance of the oral tradition as the authentic vehicle of traditional wisdom and to critique the role of literacy in giving unbalanced prominence to analytical and logical reasoning, and hence to the philosophical and scientific processes of argument which now dominate Western thought. Such revitalisation of the educative dimensions of oral tradition must encompass the vital importance of storytelling as a means of deep education of the soul. Narrow definitions of “thinking” in so-called “thinking skills education” which over-emphasise analytical thinking (inevitably geared to utilitarian schooling for the work-place) are merely symptomatic of this imbalance. I have written elsewhere that “One of the most pressing needs in modern education is to lift so-called “thinking skills” education beyond the level which merely develops prosaic logical and “critical” thinking skills for utilitarian ends, to a level which takes account of the higher level of the Intellect...”. This higher level, largely forgotten in Western culture, is that of spiritual intelligence, enthroned not in the seat of rationality but in the Heart, which, according to Islamic tradition, is alone capable of encompassing divinity. (J. Henzell-Thomas, “Passing Between the Clashing Rocks: The Heroic Quest for a Common and Inclusive Identity”. *Journal of Pastoral Care in Education*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, September 2004, p.4).

<sup>41</sup> In D.H. Lawrence’s words, “Myth is an attempt to relate a whole human experience, of which the purpose is too deep, going too deep in the blood and the soul, for mental explanation or description”. Eugene Ionesco speaks eloquently of the truth of myth: “There is nothing truer than myth: history, in its attempt to ‘realize’ myth, distorts it, stops halfway; when history claims to have ‘succeeded’ this is nothing but humbug and mystification.” One is instantly reminded of the desperate attempts, so common today, to find “logical” or “historical” explanations for mythic and spiritual truths. The humbug and mystification to which Ionesco refers are all too evident in a whole genre of contemporary

Many leading mythologists consider that all myths are essentially religious myths, fulfilling a religious function.<sup>42</sup>

At this point we can return to etymology as a means of exploring the religious functions of myth. I have pointed out that the origin of the Greek word *mythos* is unknown, but it has been suggested that it may be related to the words “mystic” and “mystery”.<sup>43</sup> Thus, a *mythos* might be connected to the mystery or secret whispered to an initiate in the celebration of sacred rites. The words ‘rite’ and ‘order’ are cognate, both deriving from the Indo-European root *ar-*. Sacred *rites* connect the human being to the divine *order*, which is expressed in both the telling of sacred stories (*myths*) and the ritual celebration of *mysteries*.<sup>44</sup>

### *The essential identity of religious and symbolic understanding*

Unfortunately, the common and misleading association of religion with dogmatic literalism obscures the fact that *religious* understanding in its deepest sense<sup>45</sup> is also *symbolic* understanding. It is scientism, in fact, which is at once deeply dogmatic and literal-minded, denying as it does all forms of understanding which are not entirely focused on observable reality and on phenomena which point to nothing outside themselves. The ways of seeing reality represented by religious forms, terms and concepts are intimately related to the symbolic understanding developed through the

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books and television programmes purporting to “solve” ancient mysteries. These typically centre on such mysteries as Atlantis, The Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, and so on, all of which, it is claimed, have been “located” or “explained”. The crushing sense of anticlimax which accompanies such banal revelations should alert us to their impotence and total lack of explanatory power. The innate intuitive capacity of the human psyche knows better and sees further. For Thomas Mann, “myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows...”. And Nietzsche was surely right when he said: “Here we have our present age... bent on the extermination of myth. Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots...” Jung wrote that the loss of the mythological heritage of the tribe causes it to fall to pieces and decay like a man who has lost his soul. “A primitive tribe’s mythology”, he said, “is a living religion, whose loss is always and everywhere, even among the civilized, a moral catastrophe.

<sup>42</sup> “Myth... is now recognised as a serious expression of some sacred truth” (Cooper, J.C. (ed), *Brewer’s Book of Myth and Legend*, Cassell 1982); “So we may say that a myth is typically a sacred story” (Don Cupitt, *The World to Come*, SCM Press 1982, p.29); “A myth is a story that is sacred to a group of people” (Tarzia Wade, ‘A glance into mythology’, *3rd Stone*, 36, 1999, p.39);

<sup>43</sup> The word ‘mystery’ is derived from Greek *múein*, meaning ‘close one’s eyes and mouth’ (cognate with Latin *mutus*) and hence was used figuratively for ‘keep secret’. The Greek word for ‘initiate’, *muein*, is derived from it, as is *mústes*, ‘an initiate’, from which came *mustérion*, ‘secret thing’ and *mustikós*, the source of English ‘mystic’.

<sup>44</sup> The Eleusinian Mysteries in honour of Ceres were solemnly observed for 1,800 years.

<sup>45</sup> I deliberately avoid the facile (and fashionable) distinction between “religion” and “spirituality”, for spiritual understanding is simply “religious understanding in its deepest sense”, i.e. the internalisation of the exoteric forms of religion as inner spiritual realities. In the same way, the attainment of true “faith” is a progression from “belief”, which may be relatively unexamined, mechanical and conditioned. True faith is increasingly an outcome of knowledge. Ultimately, faith turns to certitude (*yaqin*) through “tasting” or “spiritual savouring” (*dhawq*).

sacred stories of mythology, even though it is often difficult to recover the authentic and original sense of key terms and concepts in translated scriptures.<sup>46</sup>

I will say a little about what Islam tells us about symbolic understanding because of all the religions it is perhaps Islam which has been most severely misrepresented as the one most rigidly tied to a literal understanding of The Book. True, there are literalists and fundamentalists in all traditions, and a great many fundamentalist Christians in America (after all, the word was first used in America in 1922 to refer to those who followed strictly literal readings of the Bible), but in Christianity we also have the parables of Jesus. The etymological idea behind the word 'parable' is of "drawing analogies".<sup>47</sup> This is identical to the concept expressed in the Arabic word *mathal*,<sup>48</sup> which occurs

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<sup>46</sup> I have already identified this problem in my discussion of the Arabic word *'aql*. The problem exists not only because of mistranslations but also through translations which provide only restricted meanings capturing only a single dimension of the semantic field encompassed by the Arabic trilateral root. James Morris points out that translations of Arabic words often reflect "a later, fossilised abstract (theological, philosophical, legal, etc.) or semi-technical usage" which fails to capture the "far more concrete, poetically evocative 'literal' awareness of the various earlier, original Arabic meanings of the same key terms" (James Morris, "Ibn 'Arabi's Rhetoric of Realisation". *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, Vol. XXXIV, 2003, p. 130). Furthermore, as Morris explains, fundamental terms are often associated with "particular reified historical or social groups (or individuals, imagined concepts, etc.)" and "it becomes almost impossible to conceive their universal...meanings" (ibid. p.134) or "to adequately communicate the multiple dimensions of Qur'anic discourse and meaning in various Western languages and new cultural settings" (ibid. p.128).

The same can be said for translations of the Christian Gospels from New Testament Greek. For example, the original "concrete" and "poetically evocative" meanings behind the Greek words *hamartia* and *metanoeo* are not generally retrievable because their respective meanings are now fixed in translation as "sin" and "repentance". The word *hamartia* means "missing the mark or taking the wrong road" and *metanoeo* does not merely denote a feeling of regret, or even of changing one's mind, but of a complete turning round, a conversion, an irrevocable alteration in the direction of one's life. New Testament usage of the word *metanoeo* is strongly influenced by the Old Testament Hebrew word *sub* ("turn back, return"). Both *hamartia* and *matanoeo* therefore relate in a very concrete way to the underlying concept of 'orientation'. (Significantly, the word 'orientation' is itself related to the word 'origin', both being derived from Latin *oriri*, 'to rise'). The meaning of *metanoeo* also corresponds closely to the Arabic *taba*, which, although often translated by Arberry and other Qur'an translators as "repent", also has the concrete sense of "turning". The concept of orientating oneself in the right direction, which is none other than turning back to one's Origin, is also expressed by the Arabic word *qibla*, the direction faced by Muslims in prayer. This is derived from the verb *qabila*, 'accept', which often refers in the Qur'an to God's acceptance of "repentance" (e.g. *yaqbalut tawbata* in Qur'an 9:104). In its deepest sense, the word *qibla* refers to the inner orientation of the spiritual seeker to the central point of Divine Unity within the *qalb* (Heart). Significantly, both *qibla* and *qalb* are numerically equivalent in the Abjad system which attaches numerical values to letters of the alphabet in Semitic languages.

<sup>47</sup> The word parable comes from Greek *parabolé*, a derivative of *parabálllein*, meaning 'throw aside', hence 'compare'.

<sup>48</sup> Note that in the New Testament the word 'parable' is used with the same broad variety of meaning as Hebrew *masal* (cognate with Arabic *mathal*) to refer to almost any kind of non-literal utterance, including a proverb, a conundrum, a protracted simile, a simple illustration, a short descriptive story and a more elaborate comparison, some of which may be given detailed allegorical interpretations by which all the details have their instructive counterparts in the application (e.g. the parable of the sower and the tares in Matthew 13:18-23, 36-43) or at least contain details with allegorical significance (e.g. the wicked husbandmen in Mark 12:1-12, the marriage feast in Matthew 22:1-14, and the great supper in Luke 14:16-24). It might be tempting to suppose that the Arabic word *mathal* (derived from the trilateral root M TH L, of which there is a variant, *mithl*) is related to the word 'myth', but I have no evidence for this.

many times in the Qur'an, translated as "likeness", "similitude", "parable" or "illustration". The Qur'an tells us again and again that God "strikes" or "coins similitudes" for mankind. There are two kinds of revealed "books" which present these analogies: the Holy Scriptures and the "displayed" Book of Nature.<sup>49</sup> The Arabic word *aya*, meaning a sign,<sup>50</sup> communication, message, or revelation, refers both to a verse in the Qur'an<sup>51</sup> and to all the manifestations of beauty and majesty in the created universe – most evidently the signs in the natural world and the cosmos, and above all in the human being – that is, "man himself as he was created – True Man as the Taoists name him – the greatest of earthly symbols".<sup>52</sup> The Qur'an tells us that "We shall show them [i.e. mankind] Our signs in the farthest horizons and in themselves."<sup>53</sup> and "wherever you turn, there is the Face of God". In every *aya*, every sign, through the intuitive<sup>54</sup> reach of the "Eye of the Heart" we catch a glimpse of the

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<sup>49</sup> "The book of Nature...is full of holy lessons, ever new and varied; and to learn these lessons should be the work of good education." (Mary Martha Sherwood, 1775-1851). In the present climate of 'distancing' from nature, increasingly pathological fear of the 'risks' posed by 'dangerous' natural phenomena, and declining powers of observation of the real three-dimensional world (as opposed to the increasing dominance of screens and monitors mediating and impoverishing our experience), we must nourish by every possible means the connection of our young people to the beauty and beneficence of the natural world and the rich multi-sensory world of experience it opens to them.

<sup>50</sup> I want to avoid in the context of this paper an academic discussion about strict differences between a 'sign' and a 'symbol'. See the chapter 'Of Holy Signs' in Louis Dupré, op.cit., p.1ff., for a discussion of these differences.

<sup>51</sup> According to Dupré (ibid. p. 43), "Language is *the* symbol, *par excellence*." This is because "words [provided they are in a context] *name* relations and by doing so are able to embody concepts not only of things, but of things by combination...The possibility of combining units [each of which conveys an "independent content"] into "enormously complex yet clearly defined meaning enables language to build structures of far greater variety than nonverbal symbols" since visual and auditory symbols "do not *mean*...in the way words do" (ibid. p.43). The Old French *parole*, meaning 'word', comes originally from the same Greek source which gives us the word 'parable' in English, i.e. Greek *parabolé*, a derivative of *paraballein* 'throw aside', hence 'compare'.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Lings, op. cit., p. 2. Lings continues: "The universal doctrine that he was made *in the image of God* (Genesis 1:27) signifies this pre-eminence: man is the symbol of the sum of all the attributes, that is, of the Divine Nature in its Totality, the Essence, whereas the inanimate and animate creatures that surround him reflect only one aspect, or certain aspects of that Nature. Taken all together these symbols constitute the great outer world, the macrocosm, of which man, God's representative [Arabic *khalifa*] on earth, is the centre; and that centre is itself a little world, a microcosm, analogous in every respect to the macrocosm which is, like it, a total image of the Archetype" (ibid. p.2) The central ideological claim of scientism that the only reality is that which can be superficially observed and measured strips the displayed Book of Nature of its sacred *significance*. Thus divested of purpose or meaning, its beautiful and majestic signs and similitudes, whether in the "farthest horizons" or within ourselves, are no longer seen as *indications* of an originating intelligence but only as phenomena referring to nothing outside their own self-sufficient laws and mechanisms.

<sup>53</sup> Qur'an 43:53.

<sup>54</sup> By the term 'intuition' I mean 'spiritual perception, insight, immediate knowledge', which is not based on reasoning. Intuition is a faculty of 'intellection' in the higher sense which I have tried to bring to light in this paper, i.e. one of spiritual intelligence, not intellectualisation. (See the entry in Chambers' *Dictionary of Etymology*. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap, 1988, p. 541). The word 'intuition' comes from Latin *intueri* 'contemplate' (*in-* 'at' + *tueri* 'to look at, watch over'), descended from the Indo-European root *teu-*, meaning 'consider, regard'. The word 'tutor' comes from the same source, for, as Shipley comments, "a tutor was first a guardian" and "what is regarded is guarded". (Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words: A Discursive Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 409). Interestingly, the Arabic word *taqwa* combines

divine; we see its face, if not its totality, because that is a mystery beyond our reach. And this is what symbolic understanding is, this innate human capacity to sense and apprehend the divine presence behind the veil of forms in all their infinite variety. I say “sense” as well as “apprehend” because the perception of the divine is not an abstract rational process but a very concrete experience of “tasting”.<sup>55</sup>

However, this is not to say, as Martin Lings notes, that a symbol is merely “a ‘concrete’ image arbitrarily chosen by man to illustrate some ‘abstract’ idea; a symbol is ...the [actual] manifestation, in some lower mode, of the higher reality which it symbolizes and which stands in as close a relationship to it as root of tree to leaf. Thus water is Mercy; and it would be true to say that even without any understanding of symbolism and even without belief in the Transcendent, immersion in water has an inevitable effect upon the soul in addition to its purification of the body. In the absence of ritual intention, this effect may be altogether momentary and superficial; it is none the less visible on the face of almost any bather emerging from a lake or river or sea, however quickly it may be effaced by the resumption of ‘ordinary life’.”<sup>56</sup>

It is precisely the concreteness of the imagery of fairy stories, myths, and parables which makes them so universally accessible and powerfully educative.<sup>57</sup> The mystic, however, takes this symbolic understanding further. He or she no longer needs symbols woven into stories to gain access to the numinous, but is able to penetrate to that level through an act of direct contemplation.<sup>58</sup> This can be through a visual

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the meanings of ‘consciousness and awe of God’ with that of being vigilant in ‘guarding’ oneself from whatever is spiritually negative or harmful.

<sup>55</sup> Islamic mystics say that progression from belief to certainty (*yaqin*) is through ‘tasting’ or ‘spiritual savouring’ (*dhawq*). This is the activation of the primordial capacity to perceive the truth intuitively and the internalisation of the forms of religion as direct spiritual experience. There is a well-known Sufi dictum: “He who tastes, knows”. The same connection between wisdom and direct experience is preserved in the origin of the English word ‘sapience’ (wisdom) which is derived from Latin *sapere*, to taste. In the same way, other sensory analogies in addition to “tasting” are often drawn to express the concrete nature of such spiritual experience, which may be likened, for example, to a “fragrance”, or a special kind of ‘seeing’. The Qur’an reiterates many times that God has endowed mankind with “hearing, and sight, and hearts” (e.g. Qur’an 46:26), and these are not of course the physical organs but faculties of perception which have access to the ultimate truth. The Qur’an also makes it clear that men and women can lose the ability to see and hear the truth, and that such people “have squandered their own selves” (Qur’an 11:21). “Have they then never journeyed about the earth, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and causing their ears to hear? Yet, verily, it is not their eyes that have become blind – but blind have become the hearts that are in their breasts!” (Qur’an 22:46). Jesus is of course referring to this capacity to perceive the truth when he says: “Those who have ears, let them hear.”

<sup>56</sup> Martin Lings, *op. cit.*, p.67.

<sup>57</sup> “When we work with a great adventure like the Search for the Grail, with a mythic figure like Odysseus, or with a historical personage whose actions through time and legend have been rendered mythic like Gandhi or Cleopatra, we see the experience of our own life ennobled within the story of that great life and join our personal themes with those of universal reality. In stories of love and loss, death and rebirth, revenge and reconciliation, we meet ourselves writ large and gain a cache of experience that empowers us to act in the world in noble and creative ways.” (Jean Houston, *op. cit.* p.98).

<sup>58</sup> It would be more correct to say that the act of contemplation lays the Heart of the mystic open to the divine presence and ‘surrenders’ it to the receipt of the gracious gift of divine qualities (if that is the will of God) which cannot be ‘pursued’ or ‘grasped’ because they are beyond the reach of the human seeker as such. This qualification, acknowledging our absolute dependence on God, might be applied both to

symbol, such as an icon, mandala, or other sacred image; through a sacred word or phrase, as in the use of a mantra or the repeated invocation of the name of God in the *dhikr* of Islam; through the words, postures and spiritual attitudes associated with the manifold forms of prayer and worship; through the sacraments, and indeed through all actions offered in the spirit of service and centred in the love of God and of all beings.

The mystic is able, too, to catch an intimation of the divine presence in nature, that “sense sublime”, in Wordsworth’s words, of “something far more deeply interfused”, not as symbolic elements of heroic stories - mythical mountains, fabulous creatures, enchanted forests, and the like - but through direct experiential contact with the living natural world and with the

“... motion and spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of thought,  
And rolls through all things...”<sup>59</sup>

This is simply the primordial state of man, the natural state of continual and effortless remembrance of the divine and constant awareness of the sacred. Every natural object that such a person sees is a sign, symbol or similitude of a higher reality, and every action he or she takes is a “rite” or “ritual” which connects him or her to the divine order.<sup>60</sup> Such a life, which is none other than a truly natural life, is indeed a “mythic” life endowed with profound meaningfulness and continual symbolic significance. And a person who lives such a life is one who, in the words of Jesus, is “given to know the mysteries” – that is, one who does not need the analogical medium of stories and parables but can see and taste and catch the fragrance of the truth directly.<sup>61</sup> For such a person, too, the “signs” which point to the truth are not the spectacular miracles, the “signs and wonders”<sup>62</sup> which Jesus chides the Pharisees for needing as evidence, but

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the “pursuit of wisdom”, regarded by St. Thomas Aquinas as a pursuit “more perfect, more noble, more full of joy” than any other human enterprise, and also the right to the “pursuit of happiness” recognised by the American constitution.

<sup>59</sup> William Wordsworth, from *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

<sup>60</sup> Note that the words ‘rite’, ‘ritual’ and ‘order’ all derive from the same Indo-European root, *ar-*.

<sup>61</sup> The word *mysterion* is used in the Gospels to refer to the Kingdom of God, the knowledge of which is reserved for those to whom it is ‘given’. For those ‘outside’ (*exo*), the unrevealed mystery is hidden in ‘parables’. The Gospels are always disparaging towards *mythos* (as ‘story’) and *mythologia* (‘story-telling’). Myths are set in contrast to gospel truth: “we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses” (2 Peter 1:16). Timothy is told to discourage interest in myths (1 Timothy 1:4), which are “godless and silly” (1 Timothy 4:7) and which false teachers use to beguile hearers who have “itching ears” (2 Timothy 4:4). See the entries on MYSTERY and MYTH, MYTHOLOGY in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., Vol 2. pp. 1041-1043.

<sup>62</sup> The Greek word for sign, *semeion*, is used in the Fourth Gospel more often than any other New Testament writing, almost always in relation to Jesus’s miracles. John is critical of a faith based on miracles as such, and regards faith in Jesus merely as miracle worker as defective faith. Jesus himself responds critically to the Pharisees’ request for signs (Mark 8:11f.; Matthew 12:38f.; 16:1-4; Luke 11:16,29) and warns against “false prophets” who “show signs and wonders” (Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24). “A faith based or nurtured exclusively on signs, rather than on the reality to which they point, is immature and at grave risk”. (*The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, op. cit., 1980, Vol. 3, p. 1450).

the self-evident signs<sup>63</sup> which are always relatively transparent to the higher human faculties.<sup>64</sup>

### *Concluding remarks: some educational implications*

I have tried to draw out a range of educational implications throughout this paper, but it might be useful to reiterate some key points as concluding remarks because many of the implications are hidden away in detailed footnotes.

Let me offer two anecdotes from my experience as an inspector. I once observed a very good hands-on science lesson for Year 5 pupils, in which the teacher had brought into the class specimens of clay, loam and sandy soils for the children to handle. At the end of the lesson, the teacher anxiously came up to me and apologised because, in her words, “the children should have been wearing plastic gloves” in accordance with health and safety policy!

The other example is even more worrying. On a training course for inspectors, one of our tasks was to evaluate a lesson on video according to a scale of 0-7, where 0 was excellent, 4 was satisfactory and 7 was very poor. The lesson was one on “creative writing”, I believe for year 6 pupils. Every moment of the lesson was managed. The topic was chosen by the teacher and the whole lesson was entirely dominated by teacher talk. Every word the children were to use in their “creative” writing was chosen and written on the board by the teacher. When children tried to suggest ideas from their own personal experiences and words from their own vocabularies they were cut short and re-focused sharply on the “objectives” set out by the teacher, which was to “produce” a piece of creative writing. There was virtually no discussion of the topic, no allowance for the alternative ways in which the topic could be approached. I

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<sup>63</sup> Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, made it clear that in Islam the only miracle was the Qur'an and its self-evident inimitability (*ijaz*). Evidence for the divine origin of the Qur'an is held by Muslims to be shown by the fact that the Prophet's opponents were unable to take up the challenge given in the Qur'an for them to match or surpass the Qur'an in its eloquence and rhetorical beauty, and its precision, economy and subtlety of style - that is, to “produce another discourse like it” (52:34) or even “just one *surah*” (10:38). (See “The Doctrine of Inimitability” in Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A short Introduction*. Oxford: One World, 2002, pp. 102-105). This is not to say that Islam denies other miracles, and, indeed, the Qur'an recognises the miracles of Jesus, who is described as a “Word” and a “Spirit” of God, and confirms that “Jesus son of Mary” was born of a virgin. However, apart from the miracle of the Qur'an, miracles “play no role” in Islam, “nor do they embody any essential element in the life of the Prophet”. (Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*. London: Stacey International, revised edition 2001, p.310). Their significance is often entirely dismissed by Muslim writers. Ansari, for example says: “If thou canst walk on water, thou art no better than a straw. If thou canst fly in the air thou art no better than a fly. Conquer thy heart that thou mayest become somebody”. The Persian Sufi, Bayazid al-Bistami (d. 875 AD) warned his followers not to pay any attention to miraculous powers possessed by him or anyone else, but advised them always to investigate whether such miracle workers “observe the divine precepts and prohibitions”, whether they “stay within the limits of religion”, and whether they “accomplish the duties this imposes on them”.

<sup>64</sup> In addition to the higher faculties of the Intellect (*'aql*) and the Heart (*qalb*), Islamic spiritual psychology also refers to Mindfulness (*taqwa*), Discernment (*a'raf*), Discrimination (*furqan*), Reflection (*tafakkur*), and Insight (*basira, albab*), all of which are conferred on mankind so that he might fulfil his ultimate destiny - to distinguish the Real from the unreal, or in other words, to know God or realise the ultimate truth (*haqq*).

gave it a grade of 6 (“poor”) because it had manifestly failed to foster any creative activity or to engage the children through the medium of their own knowledge or experience.

The experienced reporting inspector leading the session commented on my judgement by saying that I had to give it a grade of 4 (“satisfactory”) or better because, in his words, it was a “well-managed lesson”<sup>65</sup> and had “delivered” a piece of writing. No other budding inspector in our training session had given it less than a grade 4. The majority had thought it was good or very good and some had considered it excellent.

I am reminded of Hanna Arendt’s point that “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any”,<sup>66</sup> and of the indictment of state education in the USA by John Taylor Gatto, New York State Teacher of the Year, who sees the system as geared to producing children who are “dependent, conforming, materialistic, and lacking in curiosity, imagination, self-knowledge and powers of reflection”.<sup>67</sup>

We should never, never underestimate the capacity of children to perceive the truth and to engage with their deepest selves, nor their hunger to do so. The level of expectation in our education system is miserably, scandalously low because the system no longer has any conception of the range of human faculties. As such, we have a system which purports to educate the human being, but has no idea what a fully

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<sup>65</sup> This comment reminds me of Susan Ohanian’s remark that “school administrators are always intoning that ‘in order for learning to take place, there must be order in the classroom.’ That may be true, but I feel the emphasis is in the wrong place. In order for learning to take place, there must be something worth learning”. (“There’s only one true technique for good discipline”, in *Who’s in Charge?* 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Hanna Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1968, p.168.

<sup>67</sup> John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. New Society Publishers, 1992. It is important to note, however, the negative, neutral and positive connotations of *conformity* and words related to it. In its negative sense, the word denotes a slavish adherence to established forms; in its neutral sense, as in the phrase “in conformity with” it simply means “in accordance with”; its positive sense is captured by Muhammad Asad in his translation of *fi ‘ahsani taqwim*, (Qur’an 95:4) as “in the best conformation”, i.e. man is created in the image of God, according to a divine shape, pattern or stamp. Other translations of this phrase are “in the fairest stature” (Arberry), “in the highest station” (Sells) and “in the best of moulds” (Yusuf Ali). In the same way, “uniformity” needs to be distinguished from “unity”. Uniformity is the enemy of diversity, and therefore the antithesis of the divine Unity which underlies the infinite diversity of the created universe. The conformity and uniformity typical of totaliltarian educational systems fails to produce a human being who is “in the best confirmation”, that is *at one with* the original pattern or mould which makes men and women capable of reaching “the highest station” as human beings embodying the totality of the divine attributes. Instead, they are made to conform to what is essentially a *deformed* and stunted model of the human being which strips them of all their higher faculties.

Concomitant with this control and regimentation is an essential distrust and disrespect of students. The psychologist and therapist Carl Rogers said that his “deepest criticism of the educational system...is that it’s all based upon a distrust of the student. Don’t trust him to follow his own leads...tell him what to do; tell him what he should think; tell him what he should learn. He...is regimented and shoved into a curriculum, whether it fits him or not”. (Carl Rogers, in R. Evans, *Carl Rogers: The Man and His Ideas*, 1975, p. 39). The social psychologist Alfie Kohn also criticizes the “behaviorist” assumption that when students are “off task” (perhaps because the task appears meaningless to them) they need a “program” to get them back “on”. “Thus is the desire to control children, or the unwillingness to create a worthwhile curriculum, rationalized as being in the best interests of the students.” (Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, 1993).

human being is, nor what his or her human potentialities truly are. Most scandalously of all, it is not a system in which the blind are leading the blind, but in which the chronically blind who have long lost any hope of regaining their sight are leading young people who still have the capacity to see, even if that capacity is being eroded day by day. Could we conceive of any worse nightmare for our children – the sighted being led by the blind.<sup>68</sup>

The key imperative for all of us who want to restore the education of the soul is to resist the way in which materialism, rationalism and scientism deny and debase *all* forms of symbolic understanding. In this enterprise, we are all allies, whether our perspective is derived from religion, mythology, psychology, literature, the creative arts, or from any other discipline which recognises and nurtures the higher faculties of mankind.

Of course we can make distinctions between different *levels* of symbolic understanding, and I have done so myself in this paper, but let us not pit one level against another as if they are mutually exclusive. All these levels have their place in the education of the soul.

The sacred dimension may be mediated by stories in the form of fables, parables, allegories, or myths (ideally *enacted* through drama as well as read in classrooms<sup>69</sup>). It may be tasted more directly through activities which evoke a sense of wonder and mystery. Observation of the night sky immediately comes to mind, or any kind of immersion in nature which goes beyond all that wretched counting, measuring, analysing and theorizing, and evokes that sense of something infinite, unfathomable

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<sup>68</sup> And, as the Qur'an tells us, "it is not their eyes that have become blind – but blind have become the hearts that are in their breasts!" (Qur'an 22:46). My striking analogy of the blind leading the sighted (or at least those who still have vestiges of sight) is very much in tune with René Guénon's assertion that "inversion" is a characteristic sign of these materialistic times. It is also characteristic of many sayings (*ahadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad with reference to the future decline of spiritual wisdom. One such saying refers to the low calibre of future leaders, who will "mislead" the people. The inversion of divine order, in which the good and just ruler (the temporal symbol of that higher order) is exiled or murdered by a tyrant, is also a central theme of Shakespeare's plays, which, by virtue of their symbolism, should be considered as important examples of sacred art in Western culture. In many of these plays, the divine order is symbolically reinstated with the restoration of the throne to the rightful ruler, but in others, notably *Macbeth*, the unredeemed tyranny of the lower self brings tragedy. The "tyrant" who displaces the kingly representative of the divine (i.e. the Intellect enthroned in the Heart, the true and original state of man) is, of course, the lower self or ego, the "commanding self" (*an-nafs al-'ammara*) of Islamic spiritual psychology. In Shakespeare, such inversion is invariably associated with darkness, disorder and evil. The ultimate expression of such inversion is the murder of the saintly King Duncan by his own subject, kinsman, beneficiary and host, Macbeth.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Houston (op. cit) reports research which suggests that only 15% of learners are auditory learners (i.e. absorb information through hearing it). 40% of students are visual learners (i.e. they process information primarily through seeing pictures) and fully 45% are kinaesthetic learners (i.e. they learn best through the immediate sensory stimulation of hands-on experience and action). The best schools will therefore use the power of drama to enrich the learning experience. Dramatic enactment allows the exploration of the many guises of what it is to be a human being, using a rich array of skills – music, movement, rhetoric, expression and feeling – to tour the landscape of human experience. What is more, what is *enacted* is more readily remembered through the stimulation of the connectivity of the brain.

and limitless, far beyond the practical dimension of human affairs. And it may be tasted too in the more direct spiritual contemplation of spiritual symbols in the context of religious faith and sacred art – not merely learning *about* religion, but engaging in the spiritual practice of whatever tradition is appropriate. We can offer children both myths *and* mysteries, and they are innately capable of encompassing both.

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