
How were young Muslim minds shaped? A critical study of the *kuttāb* in Medieval Islam



ESSAM AYYAD

Abstract

In medieval Islamic times and afterwards, the *kuttāb* was a modest institution for elementary education, with most emphasis being placed on learning the *Qurʾān* by heart—hence a ‘*Qurʾānic school*’ in English. Thus far, the topic of the *kuttāb* has been addressed by only a few modern works, leaving inadequately researched a number of critical related issues. This article is an attempt to give insights into the intellectual development of Muslim pedagogy in such archetypal primary schools. It looks into the teaching programmes and methods adopted for that intellectual preparation as well as their assumptions, rationales, implications, and consequences. The *kuttāb*’s objectives are usually thought of as being universally identical, to help in the formation of a good Muslim. The picture, however, was more multifaceted, and the objectives, as well as means of their realisation, were moulded based on what a ‘good Muslim’ would mean according to those in command. Administrating the *katātīb* was a source, and a symptom, of competitive rivalry between the different intellectual tendencies in medieval Islam, who jostled for control over these critically significant institutions. The article thus delves into the intellectual, cultural, and socio-economic contexts in which primary education materialised and was practiced in pre-modern Islam.

Keywords: Medieval Islam; primary education; *kuttāb*; intellectual tendencies; *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*

*Be advised that educating children is one of the most gainful and certain ways [to acquire knowledge and please God]. The child is a trust in his parents’ keeping. His pure heart is a precious gem that is yet to be impressed by any carving or [mental] image, and is thus receptive to whatever would be carved on it.*¹

Kuttāb, whose plural form is *katātīb*, is itself originally a plural of *kātib*, ‘scribe’, particularly an apprentice particularly in the context of a scribe who is still learning his craft. It is derived

¹Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut, 2005), p. 955. This saying of al-Ghazālī, and his chapter on elementary education, in general (*Iḥyāʾ*, pp. 955–958), is clearly informed by Ibn Miskawayh’s *Tahdīb al-akhlāq [wa-taḥrīr al-ʿrāq]*, (ed.) ʿImād al-Hilālī (Beirut, 2011), pp. 288–295 (p. 289).

from the Arabic trilateral root *ka-ta-ba*, ‘to write’. The place where junior learners are taught writing (*kitāba*, also *katb* and *takṭīb*) is called *maktab* (typically used in modern Arabic to mean ‘office’). The learning space, however, was originally referred to as ‘*mawḍi‘ al-kuttāb*’, subsequently distilled into common usage as *kuttāb*. The learners themselves are usually referred to in the Muslim sources as *ṣibyān* (boys),² and very rarely referred to as *kuttāb*. The teacher, initially called *mukṭīb* and *mukattib*, was most commonly referred to as *mu‘allim* and *mu‘addib*. In later Islamic vernaculars, he was also known as *fiqī* (from *faqīh*), *shaykh*, *muqṭī‘*, *mullā*, *khūja*, and *sayyidunā*. In medieval Islamic times and afterwards, the *kuttāb* was generally a modest institution for elementary education, i.e. reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. However, most emphasis was placed on learning the Qurʾān by heart as the basis and precondition for all forms of higher learning in traditional Islamic cultures—hence it is commonly referred to as a ‘Qurʾānic school’ in English.³

This article seeks to provide insights on the intellectual development of Muslim pedagogy in such archetypal primary schools, which was the elemental root of Islamic civilisations. In particular, the article explores the pedagogies and teaching programmes adopted for that intellectual preparation as well as their assumptions, rationales, implications and consequences, with consideration of their similarities and/or differences. To that end, it delves into the intellectual, cultural and socio-economic contexts in which primary education materialised and was practised in pre-modern Islam. For the most part, this was a public and utilitarian form of education that was generally available to people from any socio-economic background, if they were willing to undergo instruction and could afford it (which mainly relates to the loss of potential income rather than any tuition costs, as educational institutions in the Muslims world traditionally relied on charitable endowments and rarely charged for services). Children of the elites usually had private tutoring (*ta’dīb*), a system not discussed here.⁴ Nor is this article meant to address such issues as elementary education of girls or the children of non-Muslims in the Islamic territories. For reasons to do with space and genre, these and other no less significant aspects, such as moral, psychological and physical education, will be dealt with in a forthcoming monograph.⁵ However, some of these topics will be touched upon incidentally in the following discussion.

²This is not to say, however, that there were no *katātib* for girls.

³See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, (eds.) ‘A. al-Kabīr, M. A. Ḥasab Allāh and H. M. al-Shādhilī, revised edition, 6 vols (Cairo, 1981), v, 3817; al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-balāgha*, (ed.) Muḥammad B. ‘Uyūn al-Sūd, 2 vols (Beirut, 1998), pp. ii, 121; al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *K. al-Ayn*, (eds.) Maḥdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrā’ī, 8 vols (Beirut, n.d.), pp. vi, 341; Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Fayyūmī, *al-Miṣbāḥ al-munīr* (Beirut, 1987), p. 200; Ibn Abī Bakr al-Rāzī, *Mukhtār al-ṣiḥāḥ*, (ed.) Dā’irat al-Ma’ājim fī Maktabat Lubnān, rev. edn (Beirut, 1989), p. 495; J. M. Landau, “Kuttāb”, in *EF*, v (1986), pp. 567–570 (p. 568); Sebastian Günther, “Islamic Education”, in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Volume 2—Communication of Ideas to Futurology*, (ed.) M. Cline Horowitz (Farmington Hills, MI, 2005), pp. 640–645 (p. 642); Wadad Kadi, “Education in Islam—Myths and Truths”, *Comparative Education Review* 50 (2006), pp. 311–324 (p. 313). Also in the same journal and volume, see Helen N. Boyle, “Memorization and Learning in Islamic Schools”, pp. 478–495; Yahia Baiza, “Islamic Education and Development of Educational Traditions and Institutions”, in *Handbook of Islamic Education*, (eds.) Holger Daun and Reza Arjmand (Cham, 2018), pp. 1–21 (p. 5).

⁴On that type of private education, see for example: M. ‘Isā Ṣālihiyya, “Mu‘addibū al-khulafā’ fī al-‘aṣr al-‘abbāsī al-awwal”, *al-Majalla al-‘Arabiyya li-l ‘Ulūm al-Insāniyya* 5 (1982), pp. 43–96; Maḥmūd Qumbur, “al-Mu‘addibūn wa-ṣan‘at al-ta’dīb: dirāsa fī al-turāth al-tarbawī al-islāmī”, in *Dirāsāt tuwāthiyya fī al-tarbiya al-islāmiyya*, (ed.) M. Qumbur (Doha, 1985), pp. 155–189.

⁵Tentatively entitled *Into the Mind of a Medieval Muslim Child*, to be published by Springer in 2022.

Thus far, the topic of *katātib* has been addressed by only a few modern works,⁶ leaving inadequately researched a number of critical related issues, such as their origin, rise and evolution in Muslim communities in the contexts of patronage, expenditure, architectural design, personnel, didactical functions and pedagogical purposes, teaching programmes, methods, enrollment, graduation conditions and age structure. It is of interest to note that the two most informative endeavours in this regard are separated by a century. Harking back to 1912, the first is palpably the earliest scientific article on Islamic education at large, namely Ignaz Goldziher's feature on 'Muslim Education' in Volume 5 of *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.⁷ In spite of the many insights it gives, Goldziher's article uses only a limited number of primary sources, and it was naturally bereft of the more significant primary sources that were published over the last century or so. The other informative attempt is by Sebastian Günther, who approached the topic in the course of his extensive writings on education in medieval Islam.⁸ Furthermore, in a lengthy introduction to a volume he edited on *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, Claude Gilliot provides a helpful list of early Muslim teachers and schoolmasters, mainly based on Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawārī (d. 276/889) and Ibn Ḥabīb al-Baghdādī (d. 245/860), and a no less helpful bibliography on early Muslim education overall.⁹

Although 'kuttāb' is its subtitle, the article by Eva Baer does not have any bearing on the curricula or teaching methods at such early learning spaces; it mainly investigates the visual reflection of the *kuttāb* and how it was perceived and depicted by artists.¹⁰ Likewise, the topic is covered rather cursorily in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*,¹¹ the volume of whose entries have, in a sense, been normative for some in deciding the weight in modern scholarship accorded to the topics in question. Most Arabic studies on *katātib* are focused on the modern era, especially in the contexts of colonialism and nationalism, although useful insights on their conditions in medieval times can be found on certain general writings on the history of Islamic education, most notably by Shalaby and Totah.¹² Other significant writings, such

⁶See G. Lecomte, "Sur la vie scolaire à Byzance et dans l'Islam", I, "L'enseignement primaire à Byzance el le kuttāb", II (by M. Canard) *Falaqa* = ΦΑΛΑΓΓΑΣ, *Arabica* 1 (1954), pp. 324–331, 331–336; Arthur. S. Tritton, *Material on Muslim Education in the Middle Ages* (London, 1957); id., "Muslim Education in the Middle Ages", *The Muslim World* 43 (1953), pp. 82–94; Avner Gil'adi, *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford, 1992).

⁷Ignaz Goldziher, "Education (Muslim)", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics: Volume V*, (eds.) James Hastings et al. (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 198–207.

⁸See Sebastian Günther, "Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory", *Comparative Education Review* 50 (2006), pp. 367–388; id., "Advice for Teachers: The 9th Century Muslim Scholars Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Jāhīz on Pedagogy and Didactics", in *Ideas, Images and Methods of Portrayal. Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, (ed.) S. Günther (Leiden, 2005), pp. 89–128; id., "Your Educational Achievements Shall Not Stop Your Efforts to Seek Beyond: Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings", in *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses*, (eds.) Nadeem A. Memon and Mujaddad Zaman (New York and London, 2016), pp. 72–93.

⁹Claude Gilliot, "Introduction", in *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, (ed.) Claude Gilliot (Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2012), pp. xiii–lix (for bibliography, see pp. lxi–xc). See also Devin J. Stewart's review of this edited volume in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25 (2014), pp. 239–241.

¹⁰Eva Baer, "Muslim Teaching Institutions and their Visual Reflections: The *Kuttāb*", *Der Islam* 78 (2001), pp. 73–102.

¹¹See Landau, "Kuttāb", pp. 567–570; id., "Maktab", in *EF*, vi (1991), pp. 196–197. See also A. Gil'adi, "Ṣaḡhīr", *EF*, viii (1995), pp. 821–827.

¹²A. Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Beirut, 1954); translated by Ahmad. Shalabī as *al-Tarbiya al-Islāmiyya: nuḏumuhā, falsafatuhā, tārikhuhā*, 6th edition (title of previous editions: *Tārikh al-tarbiya al-uslāmiyya*) (Cairo, 1978);

as those of al-Ahwānī, Hijāzī and Shams al-Dīn, come in the form of critiques of classical Islamic pedagogical works on children's learning.¹³

Studying the history of Islamic educational thought is imperative for the understanding of Islamic intellectual culture and the educational history of our world more generally.¹⁴ Despite a number of perceptive studies, education is one of a few disciplines related to medieval Islam that are not adequately researched or systematically understood by Western scholarship. Exploration is equally scant on the role of Islamic educational culture in the dominance of certain dogmatic interpretations and power structures within Muslim communities. In the absence of a 'thorough' monograph on *katātib*, the present article investigates the topic and its many facets as related to the wider and more complex socio-intellectual milieu of medieval Islam. It considers the relevant information dispersed in a multitude of primary and secondary materials on pre-modern Islamic teaching, learning, pedagogy, knowledge and childhood.

There is no agreement as to specifically when the *katātib* were introduced to the Muslim intellectual culture. Some believe that the Islamic *kuttāb* borrowed its essential formulation and teaching methods from the Byzantine primary school system,¹⁵ although the training programme in the former was purely Islamic from the outset. Goldziher amassed a number of early historical references to *katātib*, arguing that a primitive educational system was already established as early as the formation of the nascent Muslim community.¹⁶ Ultimately, any attempt to investigate elementary education in seventh-century Arabia is challenged by a clear dearth of information, and remains largely speculative.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is likely that such educational institutions were known, in some form, as early as the time of the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23/-634-44),¹⁸ but we are on a firmer ground in saying that they were well-established and popular in Muslim territories in the aftermath of the great Arab conquests, and they further flourished under the Umayyads and the 'Abbāsids. At a relatively later stage in the 'Abbāsīd period, the *katātib* were established in almost every town and village in the vast *Pan-Islamica*.¹⁹ Ibn Ḥawqal counted nearly three hundred of them in Muslim Sicily alone.²⁰ Ibn Jubayr also mentioned many of these primary institutions

Khalil Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education* (New York, 1926; reprint, Piscataway, NJ, 2002); translated by Khalil Tawṭāḥ as *al-Tarbiya 'ind al-'arab* (Giza, 2019).

¹³A. Fu'ād Ahwānī, *al-Tarbiya fī al-islām* (Cairo, 1968); id., *al-Ta'lim fī ra'y al-Qābiṣī, min 'ulamā' al-qarn al-rābi'* (Cairo, 1945); 'Abd al-Rahmān Hijāzī, *al-Madhhab al-tarbawī 'ind Ibn Saḥnūn, ra'id al-ta'lim al-tarbawī al-islāmī* (Beirut, 1986); 'Abd al-Amīr Shams al-Dīn, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī 'ind Ibn Saḥnūn wa al-Qābiṣī* (Beirut, 1985; reprint, Beirut, 1990); id., *al-Madhhab al-tarbawī 'ind Ibn Sīnā min khilāl falsafatihi al-'amaliyya* (Beirut, 1988).

¹⁴See Gunther, "Be Masters", p. 367.

¹⁵Lecomte, "Sur la vie scolaire", pp. 324-331; Landau, "Kuttāb", p. 567; Gilliot, "Introduction", p. xxix; Baer, "Muslim Teaching Institutions", p. 73; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 93, n. 10.

¹⁶Goldziher, "Muslim Education", p. 198.

¹⁷Cf. M. Hamidullah, "Educational System in the Time of the Prophet", *Islamic Culture* 13 (1939), pp. 48-59.

¹⁸Ibn Ḥazm al-Zāhiri, *al-Fiṣal fī al-milal wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-niḥal*, (ed.) Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, 3 vols (Beirut, 2014), i, p. 333; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nafarāwī, *al-Fawākih al-dawānī 'alā Risālat Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Wāriṭh M. 'Alī, 2 vols (Beirut, 1997), i, pp. 50-51; M. 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī, *Nizām al-ḥukūma al-nabawiyya al-musammā 'al-tarātib al-idāriyya*, (ed.) 'Abd Allāh al-Khālidi, 2nd edition (Beirut, 2016), ii, p. 200.

¹⁹H. Gibb and J. Kramers, *A Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1974), p. 300.

²⁰Ibn Ḥawqal, *al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik*, p. 78. See also W. Granara, "Islamic Education and the Transmission of Knowledge in Muslim Sicily", in *Law and Education in Medieval Islam: Studies in Honor of Professor George Makdisi*, (eds.) J. E. Lowry et al. (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 150-173; 'Alī al-Zahrānī, *al-Ḥayā al-'ilmiyya fī Siqilliya al-islāmiyya* (Makka, 1996), p. 225 ff.

in Cairo and Damascus in the sixth/twelfth century (*infra*). In medieval Islamic times, the *katātib* played a markedly pivotal role in enabling literacy skills and spreading knowledge throughout the Muslim lands. They evolved, with the passage of time, into an integral manifestation of Islamic culture. In modern history, a number of factors coalesced to make the *kuttāb* a conventional token in the conflict between traditional Islam and the nascent forces of modernism, colonialism and post-colonialism, which according to some still seeped into modern Muslim societies through secular Western education. The *katātib* were seen (and called upon to be) bastions of anticolonial resistance among some Arab and Islamic nationalist elites as well as certain religiosities, required to inculcate in new generations a seriously needed ‘anticolonial spirit’.²¹ For example, the well-known ‘Umar al-Mukhtār who led tenacious local resistance against the Italian colonisation of Libya for around twenty years (1911–31) taught the Qur’ān to children in traditional village schools in Eastern Libya.

The *kuttāb*’s broad-spectrum objectives, during the medieval period, are usually thought of by commentators as being “universally identical—to impart the rudiments of instruction required for the formation of a good Muslim”.²² A closer look indicates that the picture was indeed more multifaceted, and that objectives, as well as means of their realisation, were moulded based on what a ‘good Muslim’ would mean according to those in command. However, it is agreed that there were unmistakable qualitative disparities between urban and rural areas and substantive distinctions in the priorities given to the subjects being taught. Administrating the *katātib* was a source, as well as a symptom, of competitive rivalry between the different intellectual tendencies in medieval Muslim communities, who literally jostled for control over these critically significant institutions—just as they did with regard to having the whole community, as well as rulers, reflecting their own sectarian or intellectual colour. The developments and repercussions of the Shī‘ī–Mu‘tazilī and then Mu‘tazilī–Ḥanbalī competition over caliphal support in the early ‘Abbāsīd times is revealing in this connection. The rulers, on their part, spared no effort or way to secure the loyalty of scholars and hold sway over the populace through them and other media.

Over their long history, the *katātib* proved a practical vehicle to instil Islamic core values in new generations. It was mainly through them that children were accustomed to traditional Sunnī dogma and were immunised against ‘heresies’ and ‘innovations’. The importance of the *kuttāb* is further highlighted by the fact that, for the majority of Muslim individuals, it was the one and only educational stage in their lives, seeing that most of them tended to quit formal learning and move on to learn a profession so as to earn a living and be able

²¹See Landau, “Kuttāb”, pp. 568–569; Abdullah Sahin, “Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education”, *Religions* 9 (2018), pp. 1–29 (p. 3); Charlene Tan, “Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Islam, and Education”, in *Handbook of Islamic Education*, (eds.) Holger Daun and Reza Arjmand (Cham, 2018), pp. 1–12; Baiza, “Islamic Education”, p. 18. See also Wadad Kadi, “Education in Islam—Myths and Truths”, *Comparative Education Review* 50 (2006), pp. 311–324 (p. 313). On how the Muslims in his time responded to calls for modernisation of traditional Islamic education, and Islam in general, see Marmaduke Pickthall, “Muslim Education”, *Islamic Culture* 1 (1927), pp. 100–108. On the cultural repercussions of “the juxtaposition of inherited Islamic and borrowed or enforced Western secular educational cultures”, see Sahin, “Critical Issues”, pp. 1–29.

²²Landau, “Kuttāb”, p. 568.

to establish families,²³ although most would continue to attend some form of remembrance and study circles in mosques and Sufi lodges. It was repeatedly stated in relevant writings that every child should learn, typically in the *kuttāb*, basic types of knowledge such as reading and writing as well as arithmetic before settling upon a certain science or trade.²⁴

Medieval Muslim theorists and pedagogues echoed philosophers since Aristotle in stressing the importance of education at a young age, thinking of the child's mind as a propitious *tabula rasa* to be benevolently moulded and fashioned with the correct way of thinking.²⁵ Al-Ghazālī cited an old and still common aphorism that reads: "learning at a young age is as firm as carving in stone, whereas it is markedly strenuous to try to train a grown-up",²⁶ which was in accordance with some popular, but weak, *ḥadīths*. According to one of them, "The example of him who learns at a young age is that of someone who carves a rock, whereas whoever learns at an old age is likened to one who inscribes on water".²⁷ Another reads: "The Qur'ān mixes with the flesh and blood of him who learns it at a young age (*fi shabībatihi*). However, it keeps on running away from the memory of him who learns it at an old age (*fi kibarihi*) [...]"²⁸ Based on that, childhood was looked upon as a crucial learning stage, particularly by traditional Muslim scholars.

The question of childhood learning as a unique and particular stage of educational possibilities is well known and supported by educational psychology and psychology in the broader sense, for many of the principles, norms and values which one would acquire in their earliest learning years are commonly reiterated throughout one's lifespan, manifest in leanings and behavioural patterns. The importance of education in fashioning the intellectual disposition of the society is beyond doubt, and the Prophet has always been the archetypal model of the ultimate teacher in Islam.²⁹ In medieval Islam, a number of factors amalgamated to make of the pursuit of knowledge a remarkable attainment, a devotional duty and, in a sense, a type of asceticism.³⁰

²³See Abū 'Alī b. Sīna, *K. al-Siyāsa*, (ed.) 'Alī M. Isbir (Jableh, 2007), p. 88; Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, (ed.) 'Abd Allāh M. al-Darwīsh, 2 vols (Damascus, 2004), ii, pp. 354–355; Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, (ed.) Muḥammad 'A. 'Aṭā, 2nd revised edition, 4 vols (Beirut, 2003), iv, p. 349.

²⁴See Khalīfa Ḥājjī, *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asānī al-kutub wa-l-funūn*, (ed. and translated) Gustavus Flügel, 7 vols (Leipzig and London, 1835–1858), i, p. 29; Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī *al-Lu'lu' al-naẓīm fi raww al-ta'allum wa-l-ta'tim* (Cairo, 1901), p. 5.

²⁵This opinion is held by Ibn Sīnā (*Siyāsa*, pp. 83–84); Ibn Khaldūn (*Muqaddima*, ii, p. 353); al-Ghazālī (*Ihyā'*, p. 955); and Ibn al-Ḥājj al-'Abdarī, *al-Madkhal*, 4 vols (Cairo, n.d.), iv, pp. 295, 299. See also Tritton, "Muslim Education in the Middle Ages", p. 82.

²⁶Al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-'amal*, (ed.) Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo, 1964), p. 227. See also al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, p. 955; Günther, "Be Masters", pp. 381–382; K. M. El Bagir, "Al-Ghazālī's Philosophy of Education: With Special Reference to Al-Ihyā'", Book 1" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1953), pp. 171–172.

²⁷Al-Haythamī, *Majma' al-zawā'id wa-manba' al-fawā'id*, (ed.) M 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut, 2001), *ḥadīth* no. 515; Abū Tāhir al-Jīṭālī, *Qanāṭir al-khayrāt*, (eds.) S. Kasrawī Ḥasan and Kh. Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Samī', 3 vols (Beirut, 2001), i, pp. 102–103. See also Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Minḥājj al-muta'allim*, (ed.) Aḥmad 'Ināya (Damascus, 2010), pp. 88–89; al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, p. 50.

²⁸Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimūn*, (ed.) M. al-'Arūsī al-Maṭwī (Tunis, 1972), p. 81.

²⁹See Kh. Semaan, "Education in Islam: From the Jāhiliyya to Ibn Khaldūn", *The Muslim World* 56 (1966), pp. 188–198 (pp. 191–192).

³⁰According to some medieval Muslim pedagogues, a genuine scholar is advised not to be engaged with such 'distractions' as marriage and having children.

It seems that in the first three centuries, at least, the *kuttāb* did not have the formal stamp which it later enjoyed. There were no fixed norms for such related aspects as age structure,³¹ enrolment, teaching programmes and methods, and graduation.³² As Bulliet puts it, “the whole panoply of modern educational administration was absent”.³³ Nevertheless, it is neither helpful nor realistic to look at medieval Muslim *katātib* from a perspective that is informed by modern schooling system. In any case, this situation did not disqualify such embryonic, yet dynamic, learning institutions from playing a notably instrumental role in the shaping of young Muslims’ minds in the first three centuries of Islam.

In the following sections, this article will shed light on how the *katātib* were rated and employed by the state. In this regard, the position of al-Jāhīz is contrasted to that of Ibn Ḥazm. That will be followed, and complemented, by a discussion on the types of official, as well as individual, patronage and supervision of such institutions. The article then investigates the approaches adopted by the different intellectual tendencies in the medieval Muslim societies on the proper teaching methods as well as programmes for the *katātib*. It will begin with the most dominant approach in this respect, i.e. that of the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*, followed by an early criticism of it, as championed mainly by Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn. Next, the stance of medieval Muslim philosophers toward early education and its role in the intellectual as well as ethical formation of individuals will be reviewed. Finally, the article will conclude with an appraisal of the teaching programmes in such pre-modern elementary schools as related to post-*kuttāb* career and the outlook of medieval Islam generally on how knowledge was to be evaluated and classified.

***katātib* in the Service of Rulership:**

Between al-Jāhīz and ibn Ḥazm al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868)

The writings of al-Jāhīz on primary education, particularly with regard to schoolmasters, are the earliest to reach us on the subject. Nor are we told, by the sources, of any earlier (lost) ones. His most relevant work, a treatise entitled *K. al-mu‘allimūn*, was preceded by earlier satirical writings on schoolmasters’ lack of proficiency.³⁴ In addition to Ibn Saḥnūn’s more detailed handbook on the subject, discussed shortly, the writings of al-Jāhīz on teaching children were followed by *K. al-‘ilm wa-l-ta‘līm* by Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), a Mu‘tazilī scholar and schoolmaster from Balkh who was dubbed ‘the second

³¹On the proper age for a child to start attending the *kuttāb*, see al-Kattānī, *Tarātib*, ii, pp. 201–202; M. ‘Aṭīyya al-Abṛāshī, *al-Tarbiya al-islāmiyya wa-flāsifatuhā*, 3rd edition (Cairo, 1976), pp. 187–188. Students were usually asked to leave the *kuttāb* at the age of puberty (around 13 or 14 years old), except for those who were outstandingly promising. See Rāshid Sa‘d al-Qaḥṭānī, *Awqāf al-sultān al-Ashraf Sha‘bān ‘alā al-ḥaramayn* (Riyadh, 1994), p. 97; *Hujjat Waqf al-sultān al-Ghūrī*, as cited by Sa‘īd ‘A. ‘Ashur, *al-Mujtama‘ al-miṣrī fi ‘aṣr salāḥ al-mamālīk*, 2nd revised edition (Cairo, 1992), p. 169; M. As‘ad Ṭālas, *al-tarbiya wa-l-ta‘līm fi al-islam* (Cairo, 2014), pp. 74–75; Shalabī, *Tarbiya islāmiyya*, pp. 201–203.

³²See Gilliot, “Introduction”, p. xxxiii.

³³Richard W. Bulliet, “The Age Structure of Medieval Islamic Education”, in *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, (ed.) Claude Gilliot (Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2012), pp. 39–51 (p. 51).

³⁴Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, (ed.) ‘Abd al-Salām M. Hārūn, 7th edition, 4 vols (Cairo, 1998) i, p. 248. See also other views of al-Jāhīz on the foolishness of schoolmasters in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-ḥamqā wa-l-mughaffalīn*, (ed.) ‘Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā (Beirut, 1990), pp. 149–152; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Abshīhī, *al-Mustatraf fi kul fann mustatraf*, (ed.) M. Khayr al-Ḥalabī, 5th edition (Beirut, 2008), pp. 691–692.

Jāḥiẓ'.³⁵ This, however, was preceded by three works, all bearing the title *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, one by the early Ṣūfī figure Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Tirmidhī, *alias* Abū Bakr al-Warrāq (d. 280/893), from Balkh;³⁶ another by ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad Abū ʿAlī al-Balkhī (d. 294/907), also from Balkh; and the third by Muḥammad b. Masʿūd al-ʿAyyāshī (d. ca. 320/932), a Shīʿī scholar from Samarqand. While the first of the latter three works does not address the subject of elementary education, the other two are missing. Many subsequent books were given the same title, *al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, but none of them tackles the topic of early education.³⁷ Together with comparable later books and book chapters, these works represent a unique Islamic literature *per se*, i.e. *ādāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim*. This early 'pedagogical' genre, which hones in on post-*kuttāb* education, has not been adequately discussed by relevant Western scholarship.³⁸

In view of the sublime intellectual impact of al-Jāḥiẓ in general, and his well-known liaison with the ʿAbbāsīd court, his thoughts on childhood pedagogy should be looked upon as a real and substantive indicator of a state-led strategy, and not simply a reflection of a certain theoretical sentiment (*infra*). Al-Jāḥiẓ was one of the most salient intellectual figures in his time and since. His manifold talents gained him fame and prestige, and he contributed regularly to the cultural activities at the Mirbad, a fêted marketplace and cultural hub in Baṣra that was instrumental in the modelling of Arabic culture in medieval times. He was also a regular participant in the intellectual discussions and polemics held at the lounges of the aristocrats in his time, where socio-political affairs were considered.³⁹ This privileged situation, as he states, brought upon him the enmities of envious provincials and ideological opponents, some of whom went so far as to destroy his books soon after publication.⁴⁰

Al-Jāḥiẓ was born in ca. 160/776 in the caliphate of the third ʿAbbāsīd caliph, al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85), and he died in the caliphate of al-Muhtadī (r. 255–6/869–70); he was thus a coeval of twelve ʿAbbāsīd caliphs. He was a chief Muʿtazilī theologian, who digested the works of many ancient Greek philosophers (most notably Aristotle), and he was an avant-garde theorist, a major litterateur and bibliophile and a pioneering humanist. In his time, the Muʿtazila group gained the backing of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate, particularly in the reigns of the caliphs al-Maʿmūn, al-Muʿtaṣim, and al-Wāthiq (198–232/813–47). Later, however, in the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61), they lost such backing to their Sunnī rivals, represented mainly by the Ḥanbalītes.⁴¹

Said to be of Abyssinian descent,⁴² al-Jāḥiẓ declared he was an Arab citizen: "I am a man from Kināna, who is a relative of the caliphate. I have been given, by them, the right of

³⁵On this book, see Gilliot, "Introduction", p. xlv. See also Ṭawṭaḥ, *Tarbiya*, pp. 131–132.

³⁶Abū Bakr al-Warrāq, *K. al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, (eds.) Rifʿat Fawzī and ʿAlī ʿA. Mazīd, 2nd edition (Cairo, 2001).

³⁷Examples are: *al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim* by Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965); *Akhḫāq al-ʿulamāʾ* by Abū Bakr al-Ājurī (d. 360/970); *al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim* by Aḥmad b. Abān al-Andalusī (d. 382/992); *al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim* by Ibn Sīda (Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mursī) (d. 458/1066). Apart from al-Ājurī's, all these works are missing.

³⁸See Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 90; id., "Principles of Teaching", pp. 72–73.

³⁹Günther, "Advice for Teachers", pp. 110–111; id., "Principles of Teaching", pp. 74–75.

⁴⁰Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 111.

⁴¹Günther, "Be Masters", p. 371 (nt. 9).

⁴²Ch. Pellat, "Al-Djāḥiẓ", in *EP*, ii (1991), pp. 385–387; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 110.

pre-emption, and they after all are my kith and kin".⁴³ He was a keen and a proud associate of the exclusive socio-political minority elite in his time. He is even said to have gained the greater part of his income from inscribing his literary works to people of wealth and power.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, al-Jāhīz is not known to have held any official or fixed post throughout his life of nearly a century. While in Baghdad, however, he held teaching and clerical responsibilities, but on an intermittent and temporary basis. For instance, he was assigned duties at the chancellery bureau (*dīwān al-rasā'il*) under al-Ma'mūn but lasted for only three days.⁴⁵ As such, al-Jāhīz was more of an *éminence grise*.

From the beginning, knowledge was the spine of the 'Abbāsīd civilisation, which was carefully carved out to lead the existing medieval world. The caliph al-Manṣūr established Baghdad in 762–4 and kept open its gates to every talent and skill, irrespective of race or religion. The thorough translation movement sponsored by the 'Abbāsīds brought to their court and kingdom multi-coloured experiences and paved the way for a dominant aura of knowledge, epitomised by the Grand Library of Baghdad, known as Bayt al-Ḥikma, 'House of Wisdom'. A certain type of knowledge, i.e. administration, was critically needed for the management of this vast *Pan-Islamica*. In this regard, the *katātib* were looked upon as an important breeding ground for future scribes, clerks and officials in the state registers (*dawāwīn*) and other governmental establishments. The Barmakīds, a non-Arab Asian family from the city of Balkh,⁴⁶ already set an example for how far knowledge would help to reach. The many privileges secured for an educated individual in those times, when the overwhelming majority of people was illiterate, can be inferred from the recurrent advice given to graduates by specialists against prospective temptations of various types: social, academic and financial. (*infra*).⁴⁷

Against this background, parents were understandably eager to get their children equipped with education as the decisive passport to success. This was added to the great divine blessings and rewards (*thawāb*) promised for parents should their children manage to learn the Qur'ān by heart.⁴⁸ Such convictions and the communal drift they created were partly echoed in how joyfully a *kuttāb* graduate was celebrated by his kin and the public. As the youngster grew up, this public recognition made itself felt in different ways and the motivation for it became more autogenic. From the early 'Abbāsīd period, *kuttāb* graduates were publicly acclaimed in celebrations having different names (e.g., *isrāfa*, *iqḷāba*, *takhrīja*),⁴⁹ with various particular customs and details in different Islamic regions.⁵⁰ In Baghdad, for example, the privileged boys paraded the streets in triumph on camels, while almonds were tossed to

⁴³Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Salām M. Hārūn, 4 vols (Cairo, 1964–79), iii, p. 128.

⁴⁴Pellat, "Al-Djāhīz", p. 385; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 111.

⁴⁵Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā': irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, (ed.) Iḥsān 'Abbās, 7 vols (Beirut, 1993), v, pp. 2101–22 (especially 2103); Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, (ed.) Riḍā Tajaddud, 10 vols (Tehran, 10 parts in 1, 1977), v, pp. 208–212; Pellat, "Al-Djāhīz", p. 385.

⁴⁶The Barmakīds were traditionally considered to be *majūsi* converts, but they were likely of Buddhist origin (associated with the Greek Bactrian Buddhist culture), although their exact provenance has always been shrouded in mystery. Some prefer to refer to them as an Iranian-Assyrian family.

⁴⁷See, for example, Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, ii, p. 122.

⁴⁸See Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 355.

⁴⁹The achievement of completing the memorisation of the Qur'ān, on the other hand, was called '*ḥidhāq*'. It is derived from the root *ḥadhaqa*, to 'master [something]'.⁵⁰

⁵⁰On these celebrations, see Goldziher, "Muslim Education", p. 204; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, ii, pp. 331–334; 'Āshur, *al-Mujtama' al-miṣrī*, p. 168–169.

them.⁵¹ One should not forget that there was no compulsion, in the literal sense, in this early educational context; teachers were not compelled to teach, apart from the obligation to make a living, nor were students compelled to receive education, apart from their parents' aspiration and persistence. This explains why the galvanising role of al-Jāhīz was required.

Al-Jāhīz stated that “according to the rulers’ command”, the children of their subjects should be taught such crafts as husbandry, carpentry, construction, goldsmithery, stitching, beadwork, dyeing and the different types of weaving. He expressly opined that the worthiness of a certain science to be taught is decided based on its prospective expediency for the ruler and his management of the state, including considerations of public need and economic development. Based on this pragmatic approach, in-depth study of grammar was considered redundant for mainstream education, as it distracted from probing the issues most crucial for the people and the regions, as he maintained. Similarly, al-Jāhīz considered the learning of *adab* and *belles-lettres* to be unnecessary luxuries,⁵² although he himself was one of the most outstanding *litterateurs* in early Islam. On the other hand, al-Jāhīz recommended that pupils should study *ḥisāb al-‘aqd* (finger reckoning) rather than *ḥisāb al-hind* (Indian calculus),⁵³ geometry and heavy study of area calculation. He insisted that in terms of arithmetic, pupils learn “what is required by the ruler’s secretariat and the scribes of the state registers”. He advised that perfecting arithmetic is more inevitable and rewarding than perfecting editing and calligraphy; he noted that it is tolerable to produce inelegant but rightly spelled handwriting, whereas the same ethos is not applicable for arithmetic and other quantitative forms of knowledge.⁵⁴

Al-Jāhīz also downplayed the importance of children being taught the books of Abū Ḥanīfā (d. 150/772), the venerated founder of what became one of the four canonical schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. He also shrugged off cambistry, despite acknowledging its value for learners’ familiarity with different currencies, but despite his generally utilitarian vision he did not encourage children to learn profitable careers for trade.⁵⁵ This was noted by Günther, but he did not analyse why al-Jāhīz thought in that way, apart from commenting that this harsh critique on merchants and moneychangers seems to “not to have been initially part of this educational treatise”.⁵⁶ Indeed, the passages on the two professions are integral to the treatise, as indicated by the substantive context and the fact that they appear in all of the versions that we have of it. Al-Jāhīz was trying here to turn juvenile learners away from trade which—thanks to a remarkably vigorous trading network on both regional and global levels—was presumably favoured by the new generations over working in the state administrative system.⁵⁷ This may explain why he elucidated, in a palpably exaggerated and ineffective way, to prove why the commercial success of the Qurayshī merchants, taken as an example by many at the time, would not be met by anyone else due to their unreachable superiority. After indicating the hazards of trade, al-Jāhīz warns

⁵¹ Goldziher, “Muslim Education”, p. 199.

⁵² Al-Jāhīz, [*Mīn*] *Kātib al-Mu‘allimīn*, in *Rasā’il al-Jāhīz*, iii, pp. 25–51 (pp. 32, 36, 38–39).

⁵³ For more details on these types of mathematics, see Gunther, “Advice for Teachers”, p. 123, n. 57.

⁵⁴ Al-Jāhīz *K. al-Mu‘allimīn*, p. 39. Al-Jāhīz also dedicated a separate chapter to the secrets of effective writing and authorship. See al-Jāhīz, *K. al-Mu‘allimīn*, p. 39–42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Gunther, “Advice for Teachers”, p. 116.

⁵⁷ Al-Jāhīz, *K. al-Mu‘allimīn*, p. 45.

parents: “Would it be pleasant for you to have your son ending up in the guise of Ṣāliḥ al-Zarāzrīshī, the manners of Ibn Bādām or the mind of Ibn Sāmīr?”⁵⁸ We are left in the dark as to who those people really were, but al-Jāḥiẓ’s unmistakably derogatory tone insinuates that they were well-known gauche money-grubbers in their day, whose very name could deter parents and young learners from embarking down the path of trading.

It should be noted here that al-Jāḥiẓ flourished, as a writer and a theorist, in what is occasionally referred to as ‘the second ‘Abbāsīd period’, which was marked by the gradual impotence of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate. Since the days of al-Wāthiq (r. 227–32/842–7) the caliphate had progressively ceded its sovereignty to Turkic vassals, some of whom began to establish quasi-independent kingdoms in different parts of the vast ‘Abbāsīd empire.⁵⁹ During the centuries preceding the Sack of Baghdad (656/1258) by the Mongols, there were some attempts to strengthen the central authority of the Caliphate, but in general, it remained a ceremonial relic in practical governance outside of Mesopotamia. One of the channels for the dissemination of the ‘Abbāsīd vision was the education system, which shored up public support and the loyalty of the nobility, particularly given the rising political power of the Turks. This treatise of al-Jāḥiẓ on schoolmasters had, in essence, a clear pro-caliphal propagandistic message. As an advocate of the ‘Abbāsīds, he also wrote a panegyric to propitiate the irascible Turkic generals and exalt among them those most loyal to the Caliphate. The treatise was entitled ‘*K. Faḍā’il al-atrāk: Risāla ilā al-Fatḥ b. Khāqān fī manāqib al-turk wa-‘āmmat jund al-khilāfa*’.⁶⁰ Al-Fatḥ b. Khaqān, referred to here, was a loyal vizier of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, who was later assassinated together with his lord by Turkic conspirators in 247/861.

Also in the same treatise, *K. al-mu‘allimīn*, al-Jāḥiẓ attempted to propagate, in a rather heavy-handed way, the service of the then stumbling and unpopular ‘Abbāsīd authority, which, above all, had become notorious for getting rid of enemies and suspects in vicious ways. Many notable officials, including viziers and chief scribes, were reportedly assassinated on various pretexts. Well-known examples include Abū Salama al-Khallāl (d. 132/750), Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī (d. 137/754), Ibn al-Muqaffā‘ (d. ca. 142/759), Abū Ayyūb al-Muryānī (d. 154/771), Ja‘far b. Yaḥyā b. Barmak (d. 187/803), and al-Faḍl b. Sahl (d. 202/818). Al-Jāḥiẓ, however, insists that there is definitely no higher rank than joining the ruler’s entourage:⁶¹ “Those who claim that the ruler’s associates are exposed to harm [more than others] should know that each traveller [for instance] is exposed to harm as well”. Attempting to discredit the public abhorrence of the perils of serving at the ruler’s macabre court, al-Jāḥiẓ went further to give examples for other relatively ‘more imperilled’ people, such as sailors and seafarers, island residents, desert roamers, carrion eaters, and wine addicts, *et alii*.⁶² He then stated:

The ruler’s associate, on the other hand, reaches the pinnacle in glory and prestige. The only blemish in his position emits from the ruler’s extremely high self-conceit (*sukr al-sultān*) and [thus insatiable] avidity for excessive exaltation. He [namely the ruler’s associate], however,

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 45–48.

⁵⁹Some, however, date the beginning of the ‘Abbasid decline from the time of provincial autonomy in the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd.

⁶⁰See *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ*, i, pp. 1–86; iii, pp. 161–220.

⁶¹Al-Jāḥiẓ, *K. al-Mu‘allimīn*, p. 45.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 48.

would surely revel in glory and cheerfulness and his experience, generally, would become established. His insight would become so perceptive as to know what would avail each territory, fix what is corrupted, straighten what is crooked and restore what is dilapidated.⁶³

Interestingly, al-Jāḥiẓ reconsidered many of these views at a later stage in his life, as expressed in an epistle entitled *Madḥ al-tijāra wa-dhamm ‘amal al-sulṭān* (Praising Trade and Dispraising the Ruler’s Service).⁶⁴ Towards the end of his life, al-Jāḥiẓ, a lifelong stalwart of political authority, realised that adulating authority was not necessarily worthwhile, and that his claim of a Qurayshī descent, and intellectual panegyrics on the ruling elite, had not sufficed to elevate him to their ranks. As reported by al-Jāḥiẓ himself, he was once recommended for the caliph al-Mutawakkil to educate some of his sons, but when the caliph saw him, he rebuffed the idea on account of al-Jāḥiẓ’s ugliness (*istabsha ‘manẓarā*); he ordered him a sum of money, and dismissed him.⁶⁵ It might be such nagging humiliations that ultimately convinced al-Jāḥiẓ to later express pride in his black race. He authored ‘*K. Fakhṛ al-sūdān ‘alā al-bīdān* (The Superiority of the Black Race to the White One)’. Some of the socio-political views he expressed in this latter work are believed to have foreboded (and perhaps inspired) the fierce and long-term Zanj Rebellion which broke out only six months after his death.

Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064)

The views of al-Jāḥiẓ on the exceptional advantages for educated individuals being among the ruler’s entourage were in clear contrast to the views of other classical pedagogues, such as al-Ghazālī and al-Zarnūjī, both of whom wrote mainly on higher education.⁶⁶ However, the ‘opposing’ tendency is best represented by Ibn Ḥazm, who advocated the idea in a fullest and a most determined capacity.⁶⁷ Living in the Umayyad rump caliphate of Cordoba, he was occasionally dubbed ‘the Jāḥiẓ of Al-Andalus’ on account of his literary finesse. Nevertheless, Ibn Ḥazm was generally a harsh critic of al-Jāḥiẓ, describing him as dissolute, devious and sarcastic.⁶⁸ Today, Ibn Ḥazm is widely acknowledged as the most prolific Muslim scholar after al-Ṭabarī.⁶⁹ As an eminent universalist, he wrote in a vast array of disciplines including theology (*kalām*), *fiqh*, history genealogy, poetry and philosophy. Unlike the hapless al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Ḥazm was appointed in his youth to the vizierate of the caliph of Cordoba, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Murtaḍī bi-Allāh (r. 409/1018), but then decided to quit politics and dedicate himself to knowledge and authorship. As stated by Arnaldez, “his experience as an adult of those in power or seeking power confirmed in him a mournful scepticism”, which is clearly echoed in most of his writings.⁷⁰ Detailing the proper course of study for children, as he sees it, Ibn Ḥazm states:

⁶³Al-Jāḥiẓ, *K. al-Mu‘allimūn*, p. 49.

⁶⁴See *Rasā‘il al-Jāḥiẓ*, iv, pp. 253–258. See also: i, pp. 3–14.

⁶⁵Pellat, “al-Djāḥiẓ”, p. 385.

⁶⁶Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, pp. 68–69; id., *Mīnhājī*, p. 92.

⁶⁷Ibn Ḥazm, *Risālat Marātib al-‘ulūm*, in *Rasā‘il ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī*, (ed.) Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 4 vols (Beirut, 1983), iv, pp. 59–90 (p. 65).

⁶⁸Ibn Ḥazm, *Fiṣal* (M. Ibrāhīm Naṣr and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Umayra eds.), v, p. 39.

⁶⁹Nonetheless, the literary oeuvre of the Ibn Ḥazm, himself a harsh critic, was bitterly criticised by Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī, who was not bashful to undertake this critique despite the former having once been the *shaykh* of his own father.

⁷⁰See R. Arnaldez, “Ibn Ḥazm”, *EF*, iii (1986), pp. 790–799.

It is incumbent on him who administers the children of his own or of others to start [educating them] once they are physically firm and could understand what is said to them and come up with replies to it—that usually happens at the age of five years or so.⁷¹ At that point, he should assign someone to teach them handwriting and the composition of words from letters [i.e. orthography]. When the boy⁷² is trained well on that, he would [be able to] read and study. The teachers should not content themselves with less than having the child’s alphabets written upright, clear, and making up correct words. If the handwriting were not in that tidy manner, it would only be read with great strain. Any exaggeration in ameliorating calligraphy, on the other hand, is not an advantage. It would, indeed, be a vehicle for being engaged with the ruler’s service, and so he [i.e. the boy] would waste his lifetime either in wronging people or filling out parchments with unjust writings and signatures, laden with lies and deception. In so doing, his lifetime would go in vain, his trade would surely fail, and he would feel the remorse when of no use. As such, his example would be that of a man who owns a lot of musk but did not use it to perfume [himself or others] or heal the souls with its odour and fragrance. [Instead,] he used it to perfume the beasts and pour it in the streets until it is exhausted uselessly. This is how learning handwriting should be [...].⁷³

Ibn Ḥazm’s criticism of the ruler’s fellowship (*ṣuḥbat al-sultān*), a recurrent idiom in the literature, continued in a more vigorous way in the following sections of the same treatise, where he attributed to caliphs generally such malevolent attributes as ignorance, the tendency to punish (*al-jahl wa-l-sab ‘iyya*) and impatience to acquire pleasures. He thus expressed pity for those educated people, particularly physicians, who would work at the courts of rulers, whose fellowship he calls “the most ominous calamity ever”.⁷⁴ The same view was also held by Muḥyī al-Dīn b. ‘Arabī.⁷⁵ Al-Zarnūjī also laid great emphasis on the importance for a scholar to be independent and impartial in his views, particularly religious ones.⁷⁶ A *ḥadīth* cited by al-Ghazālī and others to support this ‘moral’ stand is clearly apocryphal, but it nonetheless reflects a certain resentful religiosity: “the one who scruples not about what to learn will be afflicted, by God, with one of three calamities: to die in his youth; to be tied to rural districts (*rasāṭiq*); or to be afflicted with serving the rulers”.⁷⁷ According to the grand Mālikī authority, Khalīl b. Ishāq al-Jundī (d. ca. 757/1365), a schoolmaster ought not to teach penmanship to sons of tyrants or tax clerks, as they may use this in writing down unjust records.⁷⁸

⁷¹ According to al-Ghazālī, a parent should send his son to the teacher when he is four years, four months, and four days old: *Minhājī*, p. 76. Later scholars commented on this; see al-Kattānī, *Tarātib*, ii, p. 201.

⁷² The word *ghulam* or *ṣabiyy* (pl. *ṣibyān*) is commonly used in the literature to refer to *kuttāb* pupils.

⁷³ Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-‘ulūm*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

⁷⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Risāla fī kunh mā-lā budd li-l-murīd minh* (Cairo, 1910), pp. 48–49.

⁷⁶ Burhān al-Islām al-Zarnūjī, *Ta’līm al-muta’allim taṭīq al-ta’allum*, (ed.) Marwān Qabbānī (Beirut, 1981), p. 110. For a more detailed warning against ingratiating oneself with the rulers, see Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī, *Adab al-ṭalab wa-muntahā al-arab*, (ed.) ‘Abd Allāh b. Yaḥyā al-Surayḥī (Beirut, 2008), pp. 86–89.

⁷⁷ Al-Ghazālī: *Minhājī*, p. 92. The same *ḥadīth* is also mentioned by al-Zarnūjī, *Taṭīq al-ta’allum*, p. 126. In his epistle, *Ayyūhā al-walad*, al-Ghazālī warned students against association with, accepting gifts from, or even seeing the rulers. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ayyūhā al-walad*, (ed.) ‘Alī al-Qaradāghī, 4th edition (Beirut, 2010), pp. 144–145.

⁷⁸ Al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, p. 43.

Patronage and Surveillance

In the first three centuries of the Islamic calendar, the *waqf* system was not robust enough to maintain any systematic type of public education. This may explain why the contemporaries in this early period usually spoke of *katātib* and *ḥalaqāt* (or *ḥilaq*), ‘teaching circles’—rather than such higher-education institutions as madrasas or *khanqās*, for instance. It also explains why those who wrote on the *katātib* in the same period usually stressed the importance of continuing education (i.e. after the *kuttāb* stage). They also tended to address, usually at length, such issues as the legality of taking wages in return for teaching the Qur’ān in these *katātib*,⁷⁹ securing the funds needed for such logistics as hiring a learning-place (*kirā’ al-ḥānūt/al-maktab*), supplying inks, writing tablets and even fodder for the teacher’s mule.⁸⁰ This means that the educational process was mainly individually subsidised. This is not to say, however, that big-scale elementary educational projects did not exist in the first three centuries; in fact, they did, but they were neither corporate nor systematic, and usually failed to take root for more than a generation. We are told by al-Jahshayārī, for example, that Yaḥyā b. Khālīd al-Barmakī (d. 190/806), the notable vizier in the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd, established *katātib* for orphans.⁸¹

Later, the *waqf* system became an important engine of socio-economic development.⁸² It secured the funds for medieval Islamic educational schemes, including the *kuttāb*, and the education system thus became a better-oiled didactical device.⁸³ We know from Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217), for instance, that in Damascus, particularly in the premises of its grand mosque, boys received a fixed stipend (*jirāya ma’lūma*)⁸⁴ for their learning of the Qur’ān. The fact that well-off parents (*ahl al-jida*) did not allow their children to take it implies that such a maintenance payment was meant for indigent and disadvantaged pupils. Also in Damascus, a big *waqf* endowment was assigned to a large orphanage (*maḥḍara kabīra*) with the aim of covering the expenses needed for teaching wages, maintenance and raiment. Ibn Jubayr counted both practices as illustrations of the munificence of Muslim civilisation.⁸⁵ This was in the time of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who, Ibn Jubayr also noted, made the same arrangements for orphans in Egypt.⁸⁶ As in many other aspects, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was seemingly inspired in this by his master Nūr al-Dīn Zengī, who formerly established a multitude of *katātib* for orphans, and

⁷⁹On this particular topic see, Ibn Saḥnūn; *Ādāb al-mu’allimīn*, pp. 82–83; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qābisī, *al-Risāla al-mufaṣṣala li-ahwāl al-muta’allimīn wa-ahkām al-mu’allimīn wa-l-muta’allimīn*, (ed. and trans. into French) Aḥmad Khālīd (Tunis, 1986), pp. 98–125; Goldziher, “Muslim Education”, pp. 202–203; Günther, “Advice for Teachers”, pp. 108–109; Talas, *al-Tarbiya wa-l-ta’līm fī al-islām*, pp. 72–74.

⁸⁰See, for example, Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu’allimīn*, pp. 103–104; al-Qābisī, *Risāla mufaṣṣala*, pp. 144–145; Kadi, “Education in Islam”, p. 313.

⁸¹Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Jahshayārī, *K. al-Wuzarā’ wa-l-kuttāb*, (eds.) M. al-Saqqā, I. al-Ibyārī and ‘A. Shalabī (Cairo, 1938), p. 212.

⁸²The oldest surviving *waqf* deeds go back to the third/ninth century.

⁸³On the role of *waqfs* in maintaining the learning institutions in general in medieval Islam, see George Makdisi, “Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh-Century Baghdad”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24 (1961), pp. 1–56; Talal Al-Azem, “The Transmission of *Adab*: Educational Ideals and their Institutional Manifestations”, in *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses*, (eds.) Nadeem Memon and Mujaddad Zaman (New York, 2016), pp. 112–126 (p. 115).

⁸⁴The word ‘*ma’lūm*’ continued to be used, alone, to mean a *set* (lit. agreed or named) payment, wage, or price.

⁸⁵Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥlat Ibn Jubayr* (Beirut, 1964), p. 245. See also Semaan, “Education in Islam”, p. 195; Tritton, “Muslim Education”, p. 86.

⁸⁶Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla*, p. 27. See also Shalabī, *Tarbiya islāmiyya*, p. 298.

allotted to them learning allowances.⁸⁷ We learn from a relevant account by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 779/1377) that this situation in Damascus described by Ibn Jubayr continued to exist, in a strikingly similar way, for more than one and a half centuries.⁸⁸

One of those Muslim sovereigns who assigned handouts for *katātīb* pupils was the youthful Mamlūk sultan al-Ashraf Sha' bān (r. 764–78 / 1363–77), who dedicated a bountiful *waqf* to the maintenance of the two holy sanctuaries at Makka and Madina that included the teaching of local children. It is telling that the beneficiary *pupilli* were required, as expressly stated by the *waqf* deed itself, to supplicate God for the donor sultan,⁸⁹ an originally religious gesture that later assumed socio-political significance. Endowments for *kuttāb* education were likewise dispensed by emirs, high state officials and well-to-do philanthropists. For example, 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Bīṣānī, a most cherished vizier of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn who is best known as al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200), is reported to have dedicated *waqfs* to help the orphans receive basic learning in the *katātīb*.⁹⁰ There was also a curious type of *waqf* in Damascus related to child learning. Commonly known as '*waqf al-quḍāma*', this endowment was dedicated to the provision of a kind of sweet called *quḍāma* (lit. 'bites'). It was greatly loved by the children, who, on their way to the *kuttāb*, used to go to the *waqf* keeper and stuff their pockets with it, as a learning incentive.⁹¹ In the Mamlūk and Ottoman eras, particularly in Cairo, the *katātīb* were incorporated in one ensemble with civic charity stations for drinking water supply, normally fountains or troughs, known as *sabils*.⁹² Together, they were called *sabil-kuttābs*, insinuating that the right of receiving education is as fundamental as that of drinking water.

In the first three centuries, and in the absence of a *regular* governmental subsidy (*supra*), the *katātīb* were not directly administered by the state. It was not until the post of the *muḥtasib*, 'chief censor',⁹³ gained a better-defined and a more 'official' authority in the early 'Abbāsīd

⁸⁷ Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrīj al-kurūb fī akhbār Banī Ayyūb*, (eds.) Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl, Ḥasanayn M. Rabī' and Sa'īd 'A. 'Āshūr, 5 vols (Cairo, 1957), i, p. 284.

⁸⁸ See Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa al-musammāh 'tuḥfat al-nuḣḣār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa-'ajā'ib al-asfār*, 2 vols (Cairo, 1904), i, pp. 67, 75.

⁸⁹ See al-Qaḥṭānī, *Awqāf al-Ashraf Sha' bān*, p. 97, 119–120. See also *Hujjat Waqf Shāḥīm al-Ḥasanī al-Ṭawāshī*, as cited by Fāṭima M. al-Mubārakī, "Dawr al-muḥtasib fī al-hadd min zāhirat al-'unf fī al-katātīb fī al-Ḥijāz fī al-'aṣr al-mamlūkī wa-l-dawla al-su'ūdīyya al-thālitha", *Majallat Qiṭā' al-Dīrāsāt al-Insāniyya* 21 (2018), pp. 358–92 (p. 367). On this waqf deed (*hujja*), see also al-Mubārakī, "Dawr al-muḥtasib", pp. 384–385. On the role of *waqfs* in funding the educational institutions in the Mamlūk period, see Shalabī, *Tarbiya*, pp. 364–373. See also 'Āshur, *al-Mujtama' al-miṣrī*, p. 167.

⁹⁰ Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Rawḍatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn*, 2 vols (Cairo, 1870), ii, p. 241; 'Abd al-Qādir al-Nu'aymī, *al-Dāris fī tārikh al-madāris*, (ed.) Ja'far al-Ḥasanī, 2 vols (Damascus, 1948), i, p. 92.

⁹¹ Shawqī Abū Khaḥil, *al-Ḥaḍāra al-'arabiyya al-islāmiyya wa-mūjāz 'an al-ḥaḍārat al-sābiqa*, 2nd edn (Damascus, 2002), p. 459.

⁹² Caroline Williams, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide* (Cairo, 2002), p. 15; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic architecture in Cairo: An introduction* (Cairo, 1989), p. 16; id., "Sabīl: 2 As an Architectural Term", in *EF*, viii (1995), pp. 679–83; C. E. Bosworth, "Sabīl: 1 As a Religious Concept", viii (1995), p. 679; Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, 2014), p. 47.

⁹³ A post in medieval Islam that is fairly equivalent to the *agoranomos* ('market inspector') in Greek civilisation. See Jonathan Berkey, "The *Muḥtasibs* of Cairo Under the Mamluks: Towards an Understanding of an Islamic Institution", in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, (eds.) Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden, 2004), pp. 245–276; Kristen Stilt and M. Safa Saraçoğlu, "Hisba and Muhtasib", in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*, (eds) Anver M. Emon and Rumeah Ahmed (Oxford, 2018), pp. 327–355.

times that the *katātīb* received any official supervision.⁹⁴ Generally, the earliest educational activities in medieval Islam were “individual in nature and intellectual in expression”, as Günther puts it.⁹⁵ Later, educating orphans in particular was thought of as one of the ‘public rights’ and was thus monitored by the *muḥtasib* who, beside the policing system, was responsible for fulfilling such public rights (*istīfāʾ al-ḥuqūq al-ʿamma*). Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), the judge of Seville, referred to such pedagogical duties, in case parents were absent, as a responsibility of the state: “Once the child becomes aware, his patron—whether a parent, custodian, fosterer, or the *imām* [here to represent the state]—ought to indoctrinate in him faith, teach him writing and arithmetic [...]”.⁹⁶ This should discredit Landau’s argument that the *katātīb* were privately funded throughout the Middle Ages, and that “the state hardly intervened until well into the 19th century”.⁹⁷

Against this background, the teaching and breeding methods implemented in the *katātīb* were vetted periodically by the *muḥtasib*,⁹⁸ who stipulated that the schoolmaster should treat pupils benignly, and teach them the short *sūras* of the Qurʾān and the main religious beliefs, followed by the basics of arithmetic and composition.⁹⁹ This needed to be delivered in progressive stages so that the child could digest acquired knowledge.¹⁰⁰ Most of our information on public inspection of *katātīb* and other places of a public character, as well as different types of craftsmen and retailers, by the *muḥtasibs* in medieval Islam are taken from two main ‘insiders’: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī (d. ca. 590/1194) and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Bassām al-Muḥtasib (late sixth-early seventh centuries). Al-Shayzarī was the *qādī* of Tiberias and a shaykh as well as a private physician of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. He wrote his book *Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba* in response to a request, as he stated, by the *muḥtasib* in his time. Ibn Bassām, on the other hand, was himself a *muḥtasib* under the Ayyūbids—hence his epithet. His book bears the same title as that of al-Shayzarī and was greatly inspired by it. According to both informants, a *muḥtasib* had to make sure that children in the *kuttāb* did not take pleasure in reciting or listening to inappropriate poems by two particular bards: [al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad] Ibn Ḥajjāj (d. 391/1001) and [Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid al-Baghdādī] Ṣarīʿ al-Dilāʾ (d. 412/1021).¹⁰¹ Both poets were known for their

⁹⁴See Ṭalas, *al-Tarbiya wa-l-taʿlīm fī al-Islām*, pp. 60, 67. *Ḥisba*, however, is said to have appeared as early as the time of the caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

⁹⁵Günther, “Advice for Teachers”, p. 89.

⁹⁶Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī, *al-ʿAwāṣim min al-qawāsim fī taḥqīq mauwāqif al-ṣaḥāba baʿd waḥāt al-nabiyy ṣallā Allāh ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, (ed.) Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Beirut, 2010), p. 178.

⁹⁷Landau, “Kuttāb”, p. 568.

⁹⁸Al-Mubārakī, “Dawr al-Muḥtasib”, p. 372–376.

⁹⁹ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Shayzarī, *Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, (ed.) al-Sayyid al-Bāzz al-ʿArīnī (Cairo, 1946), pp. 103–104; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāyat al-Rutba fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisba*, (ed.) Husām al-Dīn al-Samarrāʾī (Baghdad, 1968), pp. 161–162; Ibn al-Ikhwā (Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurashī), *Maʿālim al-qurba fī aḥkām al-ḥisba*, (eds.) Muḥammad M. Shaʿbān and Ṣiddīq A. al-Muṭayʾī (Cairo, 1976), pp. 260–262.

¹⁰⁰The same outlook on education as a gradual process was also called for by Ibn Saḥnūn and Ibn Sīnā. See A. K. Mirbabaev, “The Development of Education: *Maktab, Madrasa, Science and Pedagogy - Part One: The Islamic Lands and Their Culture*”, in *History of civilizations of Central Asia: Volume IV: The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century - Part Two: The Achievements*, (eds.) C. E. Bosworth and M. S. Asimov (Paris, 2000), pp. 31–43 (p. 34). On the importance of gradual advance in teaching, see Abū Bakr b. al-Sunnī, *Riyādat al-mutaʿallimīn*, (ed.) Niẓām M. Yaʿqūbī (Manama, 2015), p. 126; Sālik A. Maʿlūm, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī ʿind al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī*, 2nd edition (Damanhour, 1993), p. 208.

¹⁰¹See al-Shayzarī, *Nihāyat al-rutba*, pp. 103–105; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāyat al-rutba*, p. 162; Ibn al-Ikhwā, *Maʿālim al-qurba*, p. 262. See also Goldziher, “Muslim Education”, p. 201; A. Gilʿadi, “Individualism and Conformity in

dissolute poems and, more alarmingly, for anti-‘Abbāsīd affiliations. While the latter was in contact with Buyid and Fatimid rivals, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj formerly, as well as interestingly, acted as the *muḥtasib* of Baghdad in the vizierate of the Buyid Naṣīr al-Dīn b. Baqiyya (d. 367/978). Al-Shayzarī added to the list of banned poems eulogies dedicated by the [Shī‘ī] Rawāfīd bards to the Āl al-Bayt (particularly the ‘Alīds), who were the main political opponents of the ‘Abbāsīds. These, according to him, should be replaced with verses composed to praise the *ṣaḥābīs*—“so that it [i.e. the veneration of the latter] should be established in the hearts of the boys”, as he explained.¹⁰² It was also stipulated, just as we find in Talmudic instructions, that the teacher should be married.¹⁰³ Also speaking of the necessary features of a schoolmaster (*mu‘allim al-kuttāb*), the chief *qāḍī* in Damascus in the eighth/fourteenth century, Tājī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), states:

His faith (*‘aqīda*) must be sound; many boys have grown up having erroneous faiths because their schoolmasters were so. As such, the first thing parents should do is to examine the creed of the [prospective] teacher of their sons before they would check the soundness of his understanding of [religious] branches. [...] It is one of the rights of a schoolmaster not to teach the children anything before the Qur’ān and then *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (peace be upon him). He is advised, however, not to speak with them about theological issues (*‘aqā’id*). He would rather delay that until they are fully qualified for it. Then, he would indoctrinate them with the creed of the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*. It would be safer, though, if he could avoid that [complex] issue [...].¹⁰⁴

In this connection, the heading Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-‘Abdarī (d. 737/1336) uses for his chapter on primary education is also indicative: ‘A Chapter on Educating Children and Causing Them to Abide by the *Sharī‘a* Law (*qānūn al-sharī‘a*) and Renounce What is Beyond It, and the Best Regimen for That All’.¹⁰⁵ Below are a number of reports reflecting how crucial and rewarding the teaching of children was looked upon by early Muslim intellectual authorities. The same stance is recurrently expressed by modern affiliates of the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*, most particularly:

Jundub b. ‘Abd Allāh (d. ca. 70/690) reported: ‘We were juvenile boys (*ghilmān ḥazāwira*)¹⁰⁶ as the Prophet taught us faith (*īmān*) before the Qur’ān. When, later on, he taught us the Qur’ān, it consolidated our faith [...].¹⁰⁷

Ḥammād b. Zayd (d. 179/795) reported: “I was in the *kuttāb*, a young child with a forelock, when ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd (d. 144/761) [a chief Mu‘tazilī Qādirīte who was deemed a heretic by the *ahl al-sunna-wa-l-jamā‘a*] came and stood next to me. He asked: ‘O little boy (*ghulayyim*)! What do you think of *da‘wa* [i.e. who is meant by the call to Islam]?’ I replied: ‘the *da‘wa* is general [i.e. for all people], whereas the *minna*, ‘right guidance’, is private [i.e. only for those destined

Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education”, *Al-Qanṭara* 26 (2005), pp. 99–121 (pp. 116–117).

¹⁰² Al-Shayzarī, *Niyāyat al-rutba*, pp. 104–105.

¹⁰³ Ibn al-Ikhwa, *Ma‘ālim al-qurba*, p. 260; Goldziher, “Muslim Education”, p. 203.

¹⁰⁴ Tājī al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Mu‘īd al-ni‘am wa-mubīd al-niqam* (Beirut, 1986), p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Madkhal*, iv, pp. 295–299.

¹⁰⁶ *Ḥazāwira* is the plural of *ḥazāwira*.

¹⁰⁷ See Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, (ed.) M. Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, 2 vols (Cairo, n.d.), *ḥadīth* no. 61; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, (ed.) M. ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 3rd edition, 11 vols (Beirut, 2003), *ḥadīth* no. 5292.

to be guided to the truth]'. He yanked my forelock and said: 'They have taught you infidelity at an early age!'"¹⁰⁸ This is of course because the boy's reply acknowledges predestination, which was denied by the Qādiṭtes, who argued for (absolute) human free will.

'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Umar Rusta (d. 246/860) reported that he heard 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī (d. 198/814), a renowned Baṣran traditionist, interrogating one of the sons of Ja'far b. Sulaymān al-Hāshimī (d. 174/790), a cousin of the second 'Abbāsīd caliph Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, who once acted as a governor of Madina: "You know the many prejudices and differences in this town [i.e. Baṣra]. I could tolerate all that, apart from what I have been told about your involvement. It [i.e. this threatening situation] would still be manageable so long as it does not affect you [i.e. ruling class], but it would surely become taxing if it does". The boy said: "And what is that Abū Sa'īd [an epithet of Ibn Maḥdī]?" The latter replied: "I heard that you speak about God [i.e. His attributes] and describe and liken him [i.e. to His creation]". The boy admitted the rumours and started to speak about God's attributes until the *shaykh* interrupted him and explained the issue, and so the boy reconsidered his views."¹⁰⁹

Abū Hurayra is reported to have, on occasion, passed by the *katātib* and asked schoolmasters to gather the boys for him so that he should tell them about the prophecy on the coming of Jesus Christ prior to Doomsday.¹¹⁰

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) was reportedly delighted when told that during the burial procession of Ibn Ṭarrāḥ al-Jahmī, a leading figure in another refractory religious group (according to the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*), the boys were caused to shout: "Write to Mālik [the Warden of Hellfire according to Muslim angelology] that the fuelwood of Hell has just arrived".¹¹¹

'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥibbān (d. 305/917) reported that he found in one of his father's books, in the latter's own handwriting, 'Ibrāhīm b. Khuthym b. 'Irāk [a distrustful *ḥadīth* narrator] was here on the riverbank (*'alā al-sīb*) shouted at by the boys: "Dhū Kallās [a derisive epithet] is neither trustworthy nor reliable. He was a malicious man".¹¹²

Abū Bakr al-Mālikī (d. post 453/1061), a chronicler from Qayrawān, reported that a man from the eastern Muslim lands used to stand facing the *kuttāb* of the well-known schoolmaster, Abū Bakr Yaḥyā b. Khalfūn al-Harāwī (d. 347/958), and insult Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq and 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. In response, the schoolmaster agreed with his pupils to trick him into entering the *kuttāb*, whereupon they fell upon him in a surprise attack and put his feet in the *falaqa*, where he received painful bastinado.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸Ibn al-A'rābī, *K. al-Mu'jam*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Ḥusaynī, 3 vols (Dammam, 1997), ii, p. 485.

¹⁰⁹Al-Lalīkī, *Sharḥ uṣūl i'tiqād ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*, (ed.) Nash'at al-Miṣrī, 2 vols (Alexandria, 2001) i, pp. 445–446 (no. 932); Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'*, 10 vols (Beirut, 1996), ix, p. 8.

¹¹⁰Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, (ed.) M. 'Awāma, 26 vols (Jeddah, Dār al-Qibla, Beirut, 2006), *ḥadīth* no. 38677.

¹¹¹Abū Bakr b. Hārūn al-Khallāl, *al-Sunna*, (ed.) 'Aṭīyya al-Zahrānī, 7 vols, (Riyadh, 1989–99), v, p. 120 (no. 1768).

¹¹²Ibn 'Asākīr, *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām wa-akhbār muḥaddithihā wa-dhīkr quṭṭānihā al-'ulamā' min ghayr ahlīhā wa-uāridihā*, (ed.) Bashshār 'A. Ma'rūf, 17 vols (Beirut, 2001), vi, p. 575.

¹¹³Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyād al-nuḥūs fī ṭabaqāt 'ulamā' al-Qayrawān wa-lfīrīqiya wa-zuhhādihim wa-nussākihīm wa-siyar min akhbārihim wa-ḥadīth 'ilīhim wa-awṣāfihim*, (eds.) Bashīr al-Bakkūsh and M. al-'Arṭūṣī al-Maṭwī, 2nd edition, 2 vols (Beirut, 1994), ii, pp. 425–427.

The importance of the *katātib* and their dynamic role in the pre-modern Muslim societies is further highlighted when we know that Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī (d. 298/911), a major Ismā‘īlī missionary who paved the way for the establishment of the Fāṭimid caliphate in Tunisia, chose to introduce himself to the people of the Maghrebi Kutāma tribe as a schoolmaster. He said to them: “I am a man from Iraq who once served the ruler there [he most probably meant the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu‘tamīd (r. 256–79/870–92)], but I later realised that his service was not a good deed (*laysat min af‘āl al-birr*). Therefore, I quit and set up to make a living from a lawful source of money (*māl ḥalāl*). I knew of no better trade, to that end, than teaching the Qur’ān to primary-age pupils (*ta‘līm al-Qur’ān li-l-ṣibyān*)”. It was in the guise of a schoolmaster that Abū ‘Abd Allāh entered Qayrawān. He worked diligently there and soon, thanks to his exceptional rhetorical powers, influenced the boys, their parents, and the whole community, including the noblemen of Kutāma. He managed to convert scores of them to Shī‘ism and led them to conquer Ifrīqiya and depose the Aghlabids in 289–96/902–8.¹¹⁴

katātib and Medieval Muslim Intellectual Groups

Generally, the medieval Arabic writings of educational substance are quintessentially informed by a number of specific sources: (i) the Muslim scriptures, namely the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*; (ii) archetypes of the ancient Greek *paideia*,¹¹⁵ and (iii) and cultural practices of ancient Persia and pre-Islamic Arabia. In the meantime, the Islamic theory of education benefitted in the medieval times from channels of reciprocal cultural relations with the Jewish and Christian communities of the Near East. Two particulars need to be underscored here. First, unlike in antiquity where the pedagogical hypotheses were mainly of philosophical import, in medieval Islam these were profoundly grounded in religious precepts.¹¹⁶ Second, each of the above foreign add-ons was subjected to phases of careful refinement and refashioning to fit the general Muslim intellectual framework. This revisory process also varied according to each of the medieval Islamic tendencies, which all stressed the momentousness of children teaching.¹¹⁷ Points of unanimity between such tendencies focused majorly on aspects related to such pedagogical miens as progressive education, considering individual differences in the learners’ capabilities, equity between students, and avoidance of severe corporal punishment. In practice, however, schoolmasters did not follow a single pattern. For example, while some of them preferred to galvanize pupils’ potentials through incentives and inspiration, others tended to put them through the mill.

Occasionally, the alliances and antagonisms in the wider intellectual milieu found themselves expressed in the types of instruction given to schoolmasters and pupils (*infra*). We have already seen that al-Jāhīz warned against teaching children the books of Abū Ḥanīfa.

¹¹⁴Abū al-‘Abbās b. ‘Idhārī, *al-Bayān al-mughrib fī ikhtisār akhbār mulūk al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib*, (eds.) Bashshār ‘Awwād and Maḥmūd B. ‘Awwād, 4 vols (Tunis, [n.d.]), i, pp. 168–173.

¹¹⁵In ancient Greece, the term *paideia* was used to denote rearing and education of the Greek citizens.

¹¹⁶See Günther, “Principles of Teaching”, p. 72. See also id., “Be Masters”, p. 368.

¹¹⁷On such different intellectual groups and their influences on education, see Ḥasan ‘Abd al-‘Āl, *al-Tarbiya al-islāmiyya fī al-qarn al-rābi‘ al-hijrī* (Cairo, 1978), pp. 96–101; Bahiyy al-Dīn Zayyān, *al-Ghazālī wa-lamaḥāt ‘an al-ḥayā al-fikriyya al-islāmiyya* (Cairo, [n.d.]), pp. 3–30; Ma‘lūm, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī ‘ind al-Khaṭīb al-Baghādādī*, pp. 46–50.

Likewise, in advising pupils against specialising in multiple disciplines, he bitterly mocked al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī's (d. ca. 175/791) endeavour in this regard. Al-Jāhīz then comments: "He [i.e. al-Khalīl, in so doing] reached a level of ignorance so low that only with God's desertion one would reach it. May God neither deprive us of His guarding nor afflict us with His desertion".¹¹⁸ In other cases, particular books were recommended.¹¹⁹ After naming a number of trusted *ḥadīth* collections, Ibn al-'Arabī advises young students to be "careful about the books of the [so-called] pious and what belongs to admonition (*wa'z*), for they scrupled not to attribute to the Prophet fabricated *ḥadīths*—whether intentionally or unintentionally".¹²⁰

First: People of the Tradition (ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a)

The term '*ahl al-sunna*' is believed to have come into sight in tandem with the rise of the Ash'arī theological school, which was founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936) in the early fourth/tenth century. Ash'arism's success is mainly down to two particular reasons: the large number as well as agility of al-Ash'arī's disciples; and the caliph's al-Mutawakkil abandonment of the Mu'tazilī School.¹²¹ Alongside Ash'arism, the theological entity of Sunni Islam is represented by Māturīdism and the Athariyya School of theology. The latter, *per se*, is commonly referred to as Traditionalism. The doctrine of these theological schools is complemented, on the jurisprudential level, by pre-existing orthodox schools of *fiqh*, most notably the Ḥanafite, Mālikite, Shāfi'ite and Ḥanbalite. The *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*, usually (and literally) translated into English as 'the People of Tradition and Community', denotes those adhering to the Prophet's orthodoxy as embodied in the *consensus* of the 'revered' Muslim scholars.

Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn (d. 256/870)

The first Islamic scholar in this group to write on primary education was Ibn Saḥnūn, who wrote a treatise on *katātīb* under the title *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn* (*Rules of Conduct for Teachers*). It is a popular source for relevant scholarship in the recent years and is recurrently referred to as the first Islamic monograph on education in general. Indeed, this work of Ibn Saḥnūn, as far as pedagogy in the broader sense is concerned, is only preceded by a treatise of Imām Abū Ḥanīfa entitled *al-Ālim wa-l-muta'allim*.¹²² The latter, however, is of no use to the present study as it addresses learners at the post-*kuttāb* stage. Ibn Saḥnūn's treatise has been edited, translated and discussed several times,¹²³ but it was introduced to modern scholarship at a

¹¹⁸ Al-Jāhīz, *K. al-Mu'allimīn*, p. 44. See also Gunther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 116.

¹¹⁹ A good example is the list of books that Ibn al-'Arabī recommended as significant readings for 'boys': 'Awāsim (ed.) al-Khaṭīb, p. 178.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ See Abū Khalīl, *Ḥaḍāra*, p. 434.

¹²² *Al-Ālim wa-l-muta'allim: Riwāyat Abī Muqātil 'an Abī Ḥanīfa radiya Allāh 'anhumā*, (ed.) M. Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo, 1949). On this work see, Joseph Schacht, "An Early Murci'ite Treatise: The Kitāb al-Ālim wa-l-muta'allim", *Oriens*, 17 (1964), pp. 96–117; Günther, "Principles of Teaching", pp. 73–74.

¹²³ Gérard Lecomte, "Le livre des règles de conduite des maîtres d'école par Ibn Saḥnūn", *Revue des études Islamiques* 21 (1953), pp. 77–105; *Eğitim ve öğretim esasları: Ādābu'l-muallimīn*, (translation) M. Faruk Bayraktar (Istanbul, 1996); 'A. Shams al-Dīn, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī 'ind Ibn Saḥnūn wa-l-Qābisī*; S. M. Ismail, "Muhammad Ibn Saḥnūn: An Educationalist and a Faqīh", *Muslim Education Quarterly* 12 (1995), pp. 37–54.

relatively late date. The first Western writings on (primary) education mainly used *al-Madkhal* by Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī,¹²⁴ *K. al-mu‘allimūn* by al-Jāhiz, and later *al-Risāla Mufaṣṣala* by al-Qābiṣī, before coming to use Ibn Saḥnūn. Some of the earliest modern writings on Islamic medieval pedagogy referred to Ibn Saḥnūn’s work cursorily, and in a way insinuating that it was thought to be missing.

The treatise was first published in 1931 by Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, a Tunisian historian.¹²⁵ This Arabic edition was later translated into French by Gérard Lecomte in 1953. It is only recently, however, that this leading pedagogical work has attracted adequate attention and been amply used, particularly by Günther.¹²⁶ As described by Lecomte, Ibn Saḥnūn’s treatise provides a number of interesting tableaux of the manners and customs of the *katātib*’s vivacious atmosphere in medieval times. It also gives an informative account of the different aspects related to the *kuttāb*, such as learning place, *khatma*, teaching fees, school weeks and vacations.¹²⁷

Belonging to the professional *adab* genre, this work of Ibn Saḥnūn, written in the form of a legal handbook, is designed to give jurisprudential directives as well as vocational instructions for people of the profession, i.e. schoolmasters. Mainly addressing underlying issues such as the teaching of the Qur’ān and associated school logistics, the first half of Ibn Saḥnūn’s work consists mainly of Prophetic traditions. The second half, on the other hand, tackles finer particulars pertinent to the educational process as such. It is mainly composed of juridical advice conveyed in a question-answer pattern, a classical motif in Muslim legal literature in medieval times. Most of the answers are given, partly orally, by Muḥammad’s father, Saḥnūn b. Sa‘īd al-Tanūkhī (d. 240/854–5), who at times refers the judgement back to Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) and his comrades.¹²⁸ Some were passed down, in writing, to Ibn Saḥnūn by Shajara b. ‘Īsā al-Ma‘āfirī (d. 262/875), the *qāḍī* of Tunis at that time.¹²⁹

As we shall see shortly, the handbook of Ibn Saḥnūn, whether in manuscript form or through later recensions and redactions, inspired all succeeding pedagogical works that were produced by scholars from the same tendency, i.e. *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama‘a*, down to the early modern period. In addition, the teaching programme and method described by Ibn Saḥnūn continued to exist, in more or less the same way, in North Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim lands until modern times.¹³⁰ This makes of Saḥnūn and his son, Muḥammad, two central characters in our discussion on primary education in medieval Islam. It is of interest to know that Saḥnūn himself started his intellectual career as a schoolmaster in a *kuttāb* in Qayrawān.¹³¹ His son, Muḥammad, on the other hand, attended the *kuttāb* in

¹²⁴Volume II of Ibn al-Ḥājj’s *Madkhal* includes a chapter (pp. 305–334) entitled “Faṣl fī Dhikr Ādāb al-Mu‘addib [A Chapter on the Rules of Conduct for the Schoolmaster]”, where he addresses the *mu‘addib al-sibyān* as such.

¹²⁵Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu‘allimūn mimīmā dawwana Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn ‘an abīh*, (ed.) Ḥasan Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (Tunis, 1931).

¹²⁶See, in particular, Günther, “Advice for Teachers”, pp. 92–110.

¹²⁷See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu‘allimūn*, pp. 94–137. For interesting scenes of the *kuttāb* classes, as depicted on (late) medieval Muslim earthenware and manuscripts, see Baer, “Muslim Teaching Institutions”, pp. 73–102.

¹²⁸Günther, “Advice for Teachers”, pp. 96–97; id., “Be Masters”, p. 370.

¹²⁹Gilliot, “Introduction”, p. xliii.

¹³⁰Lecomte, “Règles de conduite des maîtres d’école”, p. 81.

¹³¹M. Talbi, “Saḥnūn”, *EF*, viii (1995), pp. 843–845 (p. 844); Günther, “Advice for Teachers”, p. 92.

his childhood and was later a regular attendee at his father's teaching circles.¹³² He also travelled to the east for pilgrimage at the age of 33, where he came to associate with many intellectual figures in the Islamic eastern lands (i.e. Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Iraq).¹³³

The author, Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn, was one of the chief Mālikī doctors in his hometown Qayrawān and the western Islamic lands overall, including the Maghreb and Al-Andalus. He was also a prominent traditionist and a zealous chronicler. His father, Saḥnūn, was a more reputed and influential Islamic figure.¹³⁴ As described by M. Talbi, he was "one of the great architects of the exclusive supremacy of Sunnism in its Mālikī form throughout the Muslim West".¹³⁵ Saḥnūn and his son Muḥammad thrived under the Aghlabids (r. 184–296/800–909), a semi-independent dynasty who ruled in Ifrīqiya, 'the name for Tunisia in the classical Arabic sources'.¹³⁶ In their time, the capital Qayrawān developed into an important metropolis for Sunni Islam, represented chiefly by Mālikism, where much attention was given to the study of the Qur'ān and the Prophet's traditions. Throughout this period and afterwards, the intellectual relations with the eastern Islamic regions were vigorous.¹³⁷

The intellectual activities of Saḥnūn and his son also included pedagogical endeavours, which should be considered in the bigger picture in the Maghreb in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, where keen efforts were exerted to Islamise and Arabicise the Berber locals. The ever-lasting influence of Saḥnūn can still be seen in the Maghreb until today, not only in holding onto the Mālikī sect, but also in small details such as how fatalities are announced. The impact of his son, Muḥammad, were also voluminous. He is said to have authored around 200 books and treatises mostly centring on the methodical teaching of the Qur'ān and the Islamic tenets.¹³⁸ It is no wonder, seeing the colossal efforts of Muḥammad and his father and their profound impact on the city and its culture, that Qayrawān was referred to by contemporary chroniclers as 'Saḥnūnī'.¹³⁹

¹³²See Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* i, pp. 443–444; 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik wa-taqrīb al-masālik li-ma'rīfat al-ām madhhab Mālik*, (ed.) Muḥammad al-Ṭanjī, 2nd edition, 8 vols (Rabat, 1983), iv, pp. 204–205; Ismail, "Muḥammad Ibn Saḥnūn", p. 37.

¹³³Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* i, pp. 444–445; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", pp. 93–94.

¹³⁴On Saḥnūn, see Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-nufūs*, i, pp. 345–375; 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, pp. 45–88; Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, (eds.) Aḥmad al-Arna'ūt and Turkī Muṣṭafā, 29 vols (Beirut, 2000), xviii, pp. 158–159; Abū al-'Arab Muḥammad b. Tamīm and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥārith al-Khushanī, *Ṭabaqāt 'ulamā' Ifrīqiya*, (ed.) Muḥammad b. Shanab (Beirut, n.d.), pp. 101–104; Talbi, "Saḥnūn", pp. 843–845; Jonathan E. Brockopp, "Saḥnūn b. Sa'īd (d. 240/854)", in *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, (eds) O. Arabi, S. Spectorsky and D. Powers (Leiden, 2013), pp. 65–84.

¹³⁵Talbi, "Saḥnūn", p. 845. See also Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī, *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā'*, (ed.) Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut, 1970), pp. 156–157; 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, p. 51.

¹³⁶In Roman times, Tunisia was known as Africa. See Richard St. Barbe Baker, *Sahara Conquest* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 47.

¹³⁷For more details on Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn's biography and literary *oeuvre* in general, see Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-nufūs*, i, pp. 443–458; 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, pp. 204–221; Ibn Tamīm, *Ṭabaqāt*, pp. 1291–32; G. Lecomte, "Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn", in *EF*, vii (1993), p. 409; Ismail, "Muḥammad Ibn Saḥnūn", pp. 37–54; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", pp. 92–95; id., "Principles of Teaching", p. 76; Camilla Adang, "Intra- and Interreligious Controversies in 3rd/9th Century Qayrawān: The Polemics of Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 36 (2009), pp. 281–310.

¹³⁸See Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-nufūs*, i, p. 443; 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, p. 207; *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History – Volume 1 (600–900)*, (eds.) David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden, 2009), pp. 738–739; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 94.

¹³⁹Lecomte, "Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn", p. 409.

Unlike in the case of his eastern coeval, i.e. al-Jāḥiẓ, we have no historical evidence to argue for an oligarchical affiliation of Saḥnūn, who above all was best known for his uncompromising orthodoxy. Although at the age of 74 he was assigned the supreme place of duty in Ifrīqiya's judicial system by the emir Abū al-'Abbās Muḥammad b. al-Aghlab (r. 226–41/841–56), we could not think of Saḥnūn as an Aghlabid affiliate. He reportedly kept rejecting the post for a whole year, and it was not until when he got a pledge of honour by the emir not to interpose, even if members of the ruling family were involved, that Saḥnūn accepted the nomination.¹⁴⁰ After the latter's death, the post of the Mālikites' chief authority in the Maghreb was passed down to his son Muḥammad, who set out to stand against the rise of both Ḥanafī and Mu'tazilī agendas in North Africa. In this venture, Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn was backed by the Aghlabid regent and *de facto* governor Ibrāhīm (b. Aḥmad) II (r. 261–89/875–902).¹⁴¹ It is worthy of mention that when Ibn Saḥnūn passed away in 256/870, the *katātib* and schools in Qayrawān were closed in lamentation for his passing—a regular way of mourning the loss of prominent savants in the different Muslim regions in medieval times.¹⁴²

Just as we can learn from al-Jāḥiẓ's account of primary learning in the eastern Muslim lands in his time, Ibn Saḥnūn's handbook clearly indicates that the teaching of the Qur'ān, and its handmaiden subjects, was already in practice in the western Islamic lands well before the third/ninth century. This means that he and his father were not instituting a new praxis here. Through the *vademecum* in question, however, both scholars helped buttress that nascent learning scheme that was hitherto calling for clear-cut distinctions in terms of lawful ethics and practices. As indicated by the relevant somewhat lengthy discussions between the author and his informant father, there were still forensic doubts and vocational concerns related to such issues as the legality of receiving remuneration for teaching the Qur'ān, the place of teaching, egalitarian treatment of pupils and varieties of punishment. As explained previously, *katātib* until this point in Islamic history were not operating (at least fully) under state regulation and surveillance.

After Ibn Saḥnūn, the topic of education was dealt with by a number of works, such as *Riyāḍat al-muta'allim* by Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Zubayrī (d. 317/929),¹⁴³ a Ṣāfi'ī scholar from Baṣra, and *Riyāḍat al-muta'allimīn* by Abū Bakr b. al-Sunnī (d. 364/974). Although the latter mainly addresses students in the post-*kuttāb* stage, it also includes a subsection on children teaching (*ta'līm al-ṣibyān*).¹⁴⁴ Other relevant, yet now missing, works included: *Aḥkām al-mu'allimīn wa-l-muta'allimīn* by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (386/996);¹⁴⁵ *Talqīn*

¹⁴⁰Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, pp. 55–69 (especially, pp. 55–57); Ibn 'Idhārī, *Bayān*, i, pp. 150–151; Ibn Tamīm, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 102; Brockopp, "Saḥnūn b. Sa'īd", pp. 72–76 (especially p. 75). See also Abū Bakr al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-mufīṣ*, i, pp. 355–357; Talbi, "Saḥnūn", p. 844.

¹⁴¹See also 'Iyād b. Mūsā, *Tarīb al-madārik*, iv, pp. 212–215; Ibn Tamīm, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 131; Lecomte, "Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn", p. 409.

¹⁴²See al-Mālikī, *Riyāḍ al-mufīṣ* i, pp. 455–458; Lecomte, "Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn", p. 409; Günther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 94.

¹⁴³Although now missing, this work is referred to be al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, (ed.) Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and others, 29 vols (Beirut, 1981–88), xv, p. 58. See also Maḥmūd Qumbur, *Dirāsāt Tuwāthiyya fī al-tarbiya al-islāmiyya* (Doha, 1985), p. 17; Yaḥyā Ḥ. Murād, *Ādāb al-'ālim wa-l-muta'allim 'ind al-mufakkirīn al-muslimīn* (Beirut, 2003), p. 97; Gilliot, "Introduction", p. xlv.

¹⁴⁴See Abū Bakr b. al-Sunnī, *Riyāḍat al-muta'allimīn*, pp. 135–137.

¹⁴⁵It was mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 356. See also *Risāla ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (Mālik al-Ṣaḥḥūr)*, (ed.) Aḥmad M. al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (Cairo, 2005), pp. 15–16.

al-mu'allim by Abū 'Ubāda Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad (d. 388/),¹⁴⁶ and the five-volume *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn* by Ibn Maryūl (Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Affī) al-Qurṭubī (d. 420/1029).¹⁴⁷

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qābiṣī (d. 403/1012)

The next work, which fortunately survived, was written by al-Qābiṣī, who was comparable to Ibn Saḥnūn in many respects. He succeeded his cousin, the above Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, as the chief Mālikī authority in Qayrawān,¹⁴⁸ just as Ibn Saḥnūn succeeded his father in the same position. Entitled *al-Risāla al-mufaṣṣila li-aḥwāl al-muta'allimīn wa-aḥkām al-mu'allimīn wa-l-muta'allimīn*, al-Qābiṣī's work is greatly influenced by that of Ibn Saḥnūn, and both are legal treatises written by conservative religious pundits; many passages in the former are even quoted verbatim by the latter. Al-Qābiṣī also regularly cites 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb al-Sulamī (d. 238/853), a prominent Mālikī jurisconsult from Al-Andalus. The book of al-Qābiṣī, however, is a more comprehensive and a better-organised endeavour than Ibn Saḥnūn's treatise.¹⁴⁹ Like that of Ibn Saḥnūn, al-Qābiṣī's work was a mirror of the *status quo* in his society and time. The biggest asset of these two leading works, as such, is their account of the *actual* conditions of teaching in the *katātib* in the third–fourth/ninth–tenth centuries: such writings are not meant to give insight into desired ideal conditions with relation to pedagogy as one might see in, for example, Plato's *De Republica* or Rousseau's *Emile*.

The learning conditions and decorums described by Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābiṣī are strikingly similar to what we can find in later books such as *Jāmi' jawāmi' al-ikhtisār wa-l-tibyān fī-mā ya'riḍ li-l-mu'allimīn wa-'ābā' al-ṣibyān* by Aḥmad b. Abī Jumū'a al-Maghrawī (d. 920/1514);¹⁵⁰ *Tahrīr al-maqāl fī ādāb wa-aḥkām wa-fawā'id yaḥtāj ilayhā mu'ddībū al-aṭfāl* by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 973/1566); and *Risāla fī riyāḍat al-ṣibyān wa-ta'līmihim wa-ta'dībihim* by Shams al-Dīn al-Anbābī (d. 1313/1896), the grand imam of al-Azhar during the period 1882–96. These later books tend to repeat, albeit in a more detailed manner, many of the rules of conduct mentioned by earlier works. Was that a reason for or a result of the striking similarity between the *katātib* as described by Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābiṣī and afterwards? The evidence for such persistent similarity in the *katātib* methods and conditions can be found even in modern works such *al-Ayyām* by Taha Hussein and *Dreams of Trespass* by Fatima al-Mernissi, both of whom were taught the Qur'ān in the 1900s and 1940s, respectively, in much the same way as the pupils addressed by Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābiṣī.¹⁵¹ The same teaching methods continued to be applied, just in the same way, in the different Islamic regions down to recent times—as if a millennium had not elapsed.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶See Qumbur, *Dirāsāt Turāthiyya*, p. 18; Yaḥyā Murād, *Ādāb al-'ālim*, p. 97; Khalīl Ṭawṭaḥ, *al-tarbiya 'ind al-'arab*, p. 130 ff.

¹⁴⁷This book was mentioned by: Ibn Bashkuwāl, *al-Ṣila*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, 3 vols (Cairo, 1989), i, p. 75; Ismā'īl al-Baghdādī, *Idārah al-maknūn fī al-dhayl 'alā 'Kashf al-zunūn'*, 2 vols (Istanbul, 1945), i, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸See H. R. Idris, "Al-Qābiṣī", in *IE*, iv (1997), p. 341.

¹⁴⁹On the book of al-Qābiṣī, see Ibrahim Salama, *Bibliographie analytique et critique touchant la question de l'enseignement en Egypte depuis la période des mameluks jusq'à nos jours* (Caire, 1938).

¹⁵⁰(eds.) Aḥmad J. al-Badawī and Rābiḥ Bunār (Algiers, 1975).

¹⁵¹See Ṭāhā Husayn, *al-Ayyām* (Cairo, 2013), pp. 27ff.; Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a harem girlhood* (Reading, MA, 1995), p. 96. *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, iv, p. 671.

¹⁵²Cf. Sobhi Tawil, "Qur'ānic Education and Social Change in Northern Morocco: Perspectives from Chefchaouen", *Comparative Education Review* 50 (2006), pp. 496–517 (pp. 498, 503–505); Tahir Abbas, "Traditional and

In his monograph on primary education in Islam, which also comprises a critique of al-Qābīsī's above work, al-Ahwānī argues that such traditional teaching methods of the *katātib* led to the stagnation of Muslim intellectualism, after having been vigorous for four successive centuries (second–sixth/eighth–twelfth centuries). Generally, a scholar who in childhood received traditional teaching in the *kuttāb* and was imbued with conformist beliefs would be likely hesitant to discard such beliefs in favour of other thoughts, regardless of how significant or well-argued these might have been (especially if he was indoctrinated against the latter in his early education).¹⁵³ It is of interest to note that al-Ahwānī's book, where such critical views are presented, was commended by Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq, the grand imam of al-Azhar (1945–7) which is typically thought of as the main fortress of traditional religious education in Egypt and elsewhere in the eastern Islamic lands. It is worthy of mention, however, that Muḥammad 'Abduh and other reformist Azharītes and Islamic modernists, who first propounded this sentiment, themselves went through the traditional education process, and that did not stop them being such markedly original non-conformists. The same is true for all of the notable Persian scientists of the medieval period.

Teaching programmes according to the ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a

As described by the traditionalist tendency, the subjects in the *katātib* can be divided into three main categories: compulsory, elective and discouraged. The compulsory cluster included memorisation of the Qur'ān and learning the main duties of worship (*farā'id*), particularly *ṣalāh* and its prerequisites, as well as *du'ā'*.¹⁵⁴ The following are also ranked by Ibn Saḥnūn, al-Qābīsī *et alii* as compulsory subjects: reading; writing/penmanship (*kathb*); syntax (*i'rāb*) (most particularly of the Qur'ān); vocalisation (*tashkīl*); orthography; and correct recitation (*tarfīl*) of the Qur'ān. The optional subjects, on the other hand, included: arithmetic; handwriting/calligraphy; composition/correspondence; elocution; basics of Arabic language; comprehensive grammar; literatures and chronicles; virtuous (old) poetry that may also include uncommon patterns; and Islamic wisdom literature and hagiography.¹⁵⁵ The discouraged subjects included melodious recitation of the Qur'ān, *ḥisāb Abī Jād* [*ḥisāb*

Modern Muslim Education at the Core and Periphery: Enduring Challenge”, in *Handbook of Islamic Education*, (eds) H. Daun and R. Arjmand (Cham, 2018), pp. 1–12. Even the school supplies in the medieval *katātib*, such as the writing tablet and the *calamus*, remained strikingly the same. On the writing tools in the time of the Prophet and the *ṣaḥābīs*, see al-Kattānī, *Tarātib*, ii, pp. 166–168 (as well as the following references in this footnote). On *katātib* in the modern times, see Landau, “Maktab”, pp. 196–197; 'Abd al-Rahman al-Tijjānī, *al-Katātib al-qur'āniyya bi-Nadrūma min 1900 ilā 1977* (Algiers, 1983). 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. Duḥaysh, *al-Katātib fī al-Haramayn al-Sharīfayn wa-mā ḥawlihīmā* (Makka, 1986); 'Arif A. Ismā'īl, *Tārīkh nash'at al-ta'lim wa-intishārīh wa-tatawwurīh fī Ta'izz* (Ta'izz [?], 2018); A. Miṣbāḥ Sulḥaym, “Ḥayāt al-katātib wa-adabiyāt al-ta'lim al-dīnī fī Lībiyā”, *Majallat Uṣūl al-Dīn* 2 (2017), pp. 329–359. On the *katātib* under the Ottomans, see, for example, Muḥannad Mubayyidīn, “Mulāḥazāt ḥawl ta'lim al-ṣibyān fī madīnat Dimashq fī al-'ahd al-'uthmānī: 922–1337/1516–1918”, *al-Majalla al-Urduniyya li-l-Tārīkh wa-l-Āthār* 6 (2012), pp. 110–134; Mabrūk B. al-Da'dar, “al-Katātib: nash'atuhā wa-anmāṭuhā wa-atharuhā fī ta'allum wa-ta'lim al-qur'ān al-ka'fīm”, in *Fa'āliyyāt al-Mu'tamar al-Duwalī al-Thānī li-Tatwīr al-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyya* (Riyadh, [n.d.]).

¹⁵³ Al-Ahwānī, *Tarbiya*, pp. 97–98.

¹⁵⁴ See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, pp. 75ff; al-Qābīsī, *Risāla muḥaṣṣila*, pp. 92ff; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, p. 957. This view was also held by al-Shāfi'ī. See Abū al-Barkāt al-Ghazzī, *al-Durr al-naḍīd fī adab al-muḥīd wa-l-muṣṭafīd*, (ed.) Abū Ya'qūb al-Miṣrī (Giza, 2009), p. 111.

¹⁵⁵ Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, p. 102; al-Qābīsī, *Risāla muḥaṣṣila*, pp. 113–114; al-Ghazālī: *Iḥyā'*, p. 956. See also Ṭālas, *al-Tarbiya wa-l-ta'lim fī al-Islām*, pp. 59–60.

al-jummal],¹⁵⁶ belles-lettres (adhering to the opinions of al-Jāhiz and al-Ghazālī on this, as explained previously),¹⁵⁷ and ribauld poetry (*infra*).

Notably, there was consensus on the fundamental importance of children's memorisation of the Qur'ān, in whole or at least in part, among the vast majority of medieval Muslim educationalists with divergent intellectual backgrounds, from conservative jurists to 'liberal' philosophers. The Qur'ān was taught in every *kuttāb* in the Muslim world. It is the case where theory and practice are identical. Teaching the Qur'ān to children would serve, according to a classical aphorism, thought for long to be a *ḥadīth*, as a buffer against God's wrath 'yuṭfi' u *ghaḍab Allāh*'.¹⁵⁸ According to another old report, on the authority of Thābit b. 'Ajlān al-Anṣārī, "[It happens that] while God is about to punish the people of the earth, He hears the children being taught the Qur'ān (*ḥikma*) and thus exonerates them all".¹⁵⁹ Also, an old axiom reads:

الصَّغَارُ فِي الْمَكَاتِبِ شُفَعَاءُ الْكِبَارِ ذَوِي الْمَعَايِبِ

The children at the *katātib* are intercessors for the iniquitous elderly.¹⁶⁰

High precision of memorisation was typically looked upon as the supreme criterion of success here.¹⁶¹ Usually, a boy was expected to memorise the whole of the Qur'ān, an achievement normally referred to as '*khatma* or *ḥadhqa* (also *ḥidhqa*)',¹⁶² but this was not a stipulation. Some parents satisfied themselves with part of it—based on the capability of their sons, as well as other conditions.¹⁶³ What was really stipulated in this context of learning by rote were the following standards: correct reading, fine recitation, accurate pausing, and most importantly taking all that knowledge by audition.

As guardians of the traditional tendency, Ibn Saḥnūn *et alii* wanted to have the new generations kept within the bounds of traditional Sunnī Islam, and memorisation of the Qur'ān was looked upon from this perspective. For Muslims, the Qur'ān is the ultimate source of knowledge and incentive for seeking it.¹⁶⁴ It is also the ultimate source of morals and ethics. In this context, traditionists tended to indicate the outstanding virtue of teaching and learning the Qur'ān. They cite mostly well-known Prophetic reports on the big reward pledged for those involved, including teachers, sponsors, pupils and parents.¹⁶⁵ The Qur'ān recitation was indeed "the backbone of Muslim education".¹⁶⁶ However, it should be noted that the Qur'ān was not emphasised solely due to its doctrinal and metaphysical importance in Islam; rather it was seen by many educators as an essential tool to mastery of the branches of Arabic

¹⁵⁶See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, pp. 134–135; al-Qābiṣī, *Risāla muḥaṣṣala*, pp. 118–119.

¹⁵⁷See *supra* as well as al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, p. 956.

¹⁵⁸Ibn Abī Zayd, *Risāla*, p. 16; al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, pp. 48–50.

¹⁵⁹See al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, (ed.) H. Saḥīm al-Dārānī, 4 vols (Riyadh, 2000), *ḥadīth* no. 3388.

¹⁶⁰Al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, p. 50.

¹⁶¹See Baiza, "Islamic Education", p. 5.

¹⁶²See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, pp. 94–99; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-ikhtisār*, pp. 17–25.

¹⁶³On the parts of the Qur'ān which were usually memorised by children, see al-Qaṣṭallānī, *Iḥṣān al-sānī li-sharḥ 'Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (ed.) M. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Khālīdī, 15 vols (Beirut, 2016), xi, pp. 309–310; Mubayyīḍīn, "Mulāḥazāt ḥawl ta'līm al-ṣibyān", pp. 121–122.

¹⁶⁴See, in this regard, Y. Mahnaz Faruqī, "Contributions of Islamic Scholars to the Scientific Enterprise", *International Education Journal* 7 (2006), pp. 391–399 (pp. 392–393).

¹⁶⁵Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, pp. 75–83. See also al-Ghazālī, *Minḥāj*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁶William Graham and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Reception", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, (ed.) Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 115–142 (p. 121)

language, and thus the key to the acquisition of all other forms of knowledge, including those considered ‘secular’ from a modern perspective; all of the celebrated polymaths and scientists extolled for creating the ‘Islamic Golden Age’ had themselves passed through this form of primary education as a precursor to their mathematical and scientific investigations. While this was the mainstream view among the educational establishment, it was not without its critics, as mentioned below.

Being chiefly of secular character, the optional subjects, on the other hand, represented an arena of real conflict between the different Islamic tendencies. According to the people of the tradition, learning of arithmetic, despite its obvious importance in sharpening the youngsters’ minds, comes only optionally—unless stipulated by parents (which reflects a large measure of parental control in such primary educational process). Also, the type of reading and writing in those *katātib* were primarily serviceable to the learning of the Qur’ān.¹⁶⁷ This tendency looked at education as largely a handmaiden of religion (*infra*). In the same vein, if preliminary knowledge of grammar and Arabic language was necessary to understand the Divine directives, a comprehensive study of any of them was thought of as being beyond the religious purposes and was thus inadvisable.¹⁶⁸

Second: An early critical approach

The above traditionalist approach, which clearly depended on rote learning,¹⁶⁹ prevailed in most of the Muslim regions and eras. It was criticised by only a very limited number of medieval Muslim scholars, most notably and *openly* Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī (d. 543/1148).¹⁷⁰ A majority of scholars, on the other hand, were either convinced or hesitant to criticise the conventional, Qur’ān-centred learning programme. Ibn al-‘Arabī was a greatly respected figure in medieval Islam. He was the chief Mālikī *qādī* in Al-Andalus. Originally from Seville (*supra*), in his youth he travelled to different parts of the Muslim world, including Syria, Iraq and Egypt, and took knowledge from the most eminent scholars of the time, including al-Ghazālī and al-Ṭurūshī (d. 520/1126). His father, in contrast, was a zealous student of Ibn Ḥazm.¹⁷¹

In his *Rihla*, as cited by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), Ibn al-‘Arabī insisted that Arabic language and poetry should be taught prior to any other type of knowledge, including the Qur’ān. This was reportedly the general method in Al-Andalus. According to him, it is

¹⁶⁷On how penmanship in particular was taught and practised in the *katātib*, see Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funun al-adab*, 18 vols, (Cairo, 1923–55[?]), ix, p. 216. See also Tritton, *Materials on Muslim Education*, p. 73; Baer, “Muslim Teaching Institutions”, p. 86.

¹⁶⁸Ibn Ḥazm did not recommend a thorough study of grammar, unless it was the learner’s plan to make it his career: *Marātib al-‘ulūm*, pp. 66–67. Surely, however, Ibn Ḥazm, like al-Jāhīz, was advising against high-level grammatical arcana, rather than the ‘preliminary knowledge of grammar and Arabic language’ that is here meant. Studying grammar as a formal discipline to understand language is like putting the cart before the horse in primary education, particularly in children’s native language, as they naturally learn from listening and repeating, particularly through engagement in stories and narratives. In this connection, see also Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Bayān faḍl ‘ilm al-salaf ‘alā ‘ilm al-khalaf*, (ed.) Muḥammad b. Nāsir al-‘Ajmī, 2nd edition (Riyadh, 1986), pp. 32, 40.

¹⁶⁹I will investigate this topic in detail in a forthcoming article provisionally entitled “Medieval Muslim *Katātib* between Independent Thinking and Rote Learning”.

¹⁷⁰See Gil’adi, “Individualism and Conformity”, pp. 104–105.

¹⁷¹On Ibn al-‘Arabī, see Sa’īd A’rāb, *Ma’a al-qādī Abī Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī* (Beirut, 1987), pp. 9–49; J. Robson, “Ibn al-‘Arabī”, in *IE*, iii (1986), p. 707.

necessary for a child to start with poetry and language, followed by arithmetic, before moving on to learn the Qur'ān, which, he reckons, would be easier after this introduction (i.e. preliminary teaching). Ibn al-'Arabī then laments: "How heedless the people of our lands are! [He could be here meaning all of the Muslim regions rather than just his homeland Al-Andalus]. They teach the child the Qur'ān at a very early age—he [thus] reads what he does not understand and devotes himself to an affair of less profitability for his early intellectual formation than others". According to Ibn al-'Arabī, this is to be followed by *uṣūl al-dīn*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, dialectics, and then *ḥadīth* along with its subordinate branches of knowledge.¹⁷²

In fairness to the traditionalist school, a proper knowledge of the Qur'ān according to them entails adequate familiarity with syntax and orthography. According to Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābisī, the teacher should not move pupils from one *sūra* to another unless they memorise the previous one along with its desinential inflexion and orthography, unless this latter condition is mitigated by parents.¹⁷³ While orthography is to ensure the holy text is transcribed and pronounced correctly, syntax and parsing are to help understand the meanings (commands, interdictions, etc.). In Arabic, *i'rāb* is particularly developed to help the readers and listeners distinguish the meanings, grasp the purport and identify the objectives of the speaker accordingly.¹⁷⁴ Al-Qābisī reported that ['Abd Allāh] Ibn Wahb (d. 197/812) urged people to learn Arabic language so as to straighten their tongue and hone their enunciation, elocution and rhetorical appeal. Ibn Wahb states: "He who reads a verse from the Qur'ān and takes it at face value would assuredly go astray".¹⁷⁵

Beside his *al-Riḥla* and *al-'Awāṣim min al-qawāṣim*, Ibn al-'Arabī's works on education included: *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, *Marāqī al-zulaf* (both of which are now missing), and *Alḥkām al-Qur'ān*. In the latter, he praises a method which he saw in a region that he called *al-diyār al-mukarrama* (most probably the Ḥijāz or the eastern Islamic lands in general),¹⁷⁶ according to which the memorisation of the Qur'ān was delayed (until the pupils' second decade of life),¹⁷⁷ until the child had been taught such basic types of knowledge as writing, arithmetic and Arabic language. A majority of parents in these lands would even postpone their son's memorisation of the Qur'ān until he had learned such sciences as *fiqh* and *ḥadīth*. Ibn al-'Arabī then comments:

I have seen with my own eyes neither an *imām* nor a *faqīh* who memorises the whole Qur'ān except two.¹⁷⁸ This is for you to know that what is meant [by deference] is its rules not letters, but the people's hearts nowadays, in contravention of the Prophet's command, are attached to letters to the detriment of rules. This [wrong practice], nevertheless, is an enforcement of

¹⁷²Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 355.

¹⁷³Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, p. 106; al-Qābisī, *Risāla muḥaṣṣala*, p. 133. See also al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, pp. 43, 50.

¹⁷⁴Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, (eds.) Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt and M. Shaykh Muṣṭafā, (Beirut, 2008), pp. 384–389.

¹⁷⁵Al-Qābisī, *Risāla Muḥaṣṣala*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁶See A'rāb, *Ma'a al-qāḍī Abī Bakr*, p. 160.

¹⁷⁷This is the range of age that he then recommended as a most suitable for the memorisation of the Qur'ān (*supra*).

¹⁷⁸It should be noted, in this connection, that only very few among the Prophet's Companions are reported to have memorised the whole of the Qur'ān in his time. See al-Kattānī, *Tarātib*, i, pp. 105–107. See also Shalabī, *Tarbiya*, pp. 50–51.

God's destiny, a realisation of the promise of His apostle, peace be upon him, a proof of his prophecy and an endorsement of his miracle. [This is in reference to a well-known *ḥadīth* foretelling this erroneous prioritisation in dealing with the holy text].¹⁷⁹

Mālik b. Anas did not encourage requiring children to start learning the Qur'ān at a very early age. He is even reported to have raised an objection (*ankara*) when told about a child who had memorised all of the Holy Book at the age of seven, which means he started the mission two years earlier—at the very least.¹⁸⁰ This stance of Mālik had to be rationalised by later Mālikī exponents. Ibn al-Minbar, for instance, ascribed it to one of two possibilities: either for fear that the child should pronounce the Qur'ānic text mistakenly, or that he would be deprived of the types of amusement (*lahvu*) that suit his age and are of key importance to the establishment of his personality. Muḥammad b. Rushd al-Jadd (d. 520/1126), the judge of Cordoba and grandfather of the renowned Averroes, on the other hand, explains that a memorisation of the whole Qur'ān at such an exceedingly early age could not normally be achieved without over-exerting the child.¹⁸¹ Those who argued against teaching the Qur'ān to children at a very early age included such early Sunni authorities as Sa'īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) and Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (d. 96/715).¹⁸²

Ibn Khaldūn, on his part, praised the above teaching programme of Ibn al-'Arabī, which he quoted and referred to as an exemplary method. Before that, however, he gives us a panoramic account of the teaching programmes at the *katātib* of the different Islamic regions. According to Ibn Khaldūn, basics of different types of knowledge were taught alongside the Qur'ān in the eastern Islamic lands, where handwriting/calligraphy was taught singlehandedly by specialised teachers. In the Maghreb,¹⁸³ however, the *kuttāb* learning revolved around the Qur'ān exclusively—students were also trained on accurate transcribing of the varied authorised readings of the Qur'ānic text. In Ibn Khaldūn's own homeland, i.e. Ifrīqiya, the curriculum was more assorted. Although the highest emphasis was laid upon learning the Qur'ān by heart and studying its variant readings, attention was also given to *ḥadīth*, in addition to handwriting and basic introductions to the different sciences. In Al-Andalus, the curriculum included, beside the Qur'ān, poetry, Arabic grammar and handwriting. Composition was also added to the teaching programme, and special attention was paid to calligraphy.¹⁸⁴ This means that, apart from some qualitative variances, the *katātib* in all the regions assigned priority to memorisation of the Qur'ān. Directly after this panoptic survey, Ibn Khaldūn praised the method of Ibn al-'Arabī but explained why it was difficult to apply it:

¹⁷⁹Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, iv, p. 349.

¹⁸⁰See al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, p. 50.

¹⁸¹See Ibn Rushd al-Jadd, *al-Bayān wa-l-taḥṣīl wa-l-sharḥ wa-l-tawjīh wa-l-ta'īl fī masā'il 'al-Mustakhrāja'*, (eds.) M. Ḥajjī and others, 2nd edition, 20 vols (Beirut, 1988), xviii, p. 287; al-Nafarāwī, *Fawākih*, i, p. 50; al-Kattānī, *Tarātib*, ii, p. 202.

¹⁸²See al-Qaṣṣāllānī, *Irshād al-sā'ī li-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari*, (ed.) M. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Khālidī, 15 vols (Beirut, 2016), xi, p. 309.

¹⁸³In medieval Arabic literature, 'the Maghreb' was usually used to refer to Algeria and Morocco as well as the Muslim communities of Sub-Saharan Africa. Sometimes, both Libya and Tunisia (i.e. all lands west of Egypt) were included.

¹⁸⁴Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddīma*, ii, pp. 353–355. Later, "some calligraphy and a smattering of arithmetic were added in some *katātib* in Turkey as well as in Iran, where also Islamic history and fragments of Persian poetry (e.g. from Sa'dī and Ḥāfiz) were occasionally included, from the 7th/13th century onwards [...]". Landau, "Kuttāb", p. 568.

It is certainly a good approach, but the actual practices (*'awā'id*) do not help adopt it. According to those practices, which are the ruling element here, the teaching of the Qur'ān is given precedence [over all other types of knowledge] for the blessings and rewards it would incur. It is also for fear of the bad manners that would cause the boy to quit education at such an early age and thus miss learning the Qur'ān [*in toto*], while so long as he is under the custody of his parents, he is under control (*munqādun li-l-hukm*). However, if he passed adulthood and shake off the yoke of coercion, the unruly winds of youthfulness might cast him upon the shores of idleness.¹⁸⁵ Therefore, they [i.e. his parents and the community], taking advantage of their control over the child, tend to teach him the Qur'ān lest he should miss it for the rest of his life. However, should certainty be attained regarding the child's continuing to seek knowledge and his willingness to receive education, then this method of Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī would definitely be more effective than what is adopted by the people in the east and the west [of the Muslim world], but this is the undisputed will of God.¹⁸⁶

The traditional method, criticised here by Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn, is that described by Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābīsī centuries ago. As an alternative to that memory-based learning, Ibn Khaldūn, in a clearly forward-thinking spirit, gave the principles of education an inevitable humanistic dimension.¹⁸⁷ He developed that conventional religious-oriented learning into a more comprehensive one that would better go along with his own theory on human *'umrān*, which investigates the diverse aspects of human life, such as sovereignty, earnings, crafts and sciences. In his elementary educational programme, the pupil is moved from reading and writing to arithmetic because of an important educational consideration: that arithmetic trains the mind and makes learnable the yet-to-learn sciences. It is the science of necessary and accurate relations: “[it is] clear facts and organised proofs, and so it usually leads to forming a bright mind that is trained on correctness”.¹⁸⁸ Through arithmetic, the child would learn what al-Ghazālī refers to in *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* as *'al-jaliyyāt wa-l-badḥiyyāt*—“*les évidences*”, according to Descartes' *Le Discours de la méthode*. There is also an ethical rationale for Ibn Khaldūn's giving arithmetic such precedence over other sciences and types of knowledge: that is, it helps the child take honesty as a life principle, especially if taught directly after reading and writing, followed by the memorisation of the Qur'ān (which would then be more beneficial). In Ibn Khaldūn's estimation, “He who commits himself to learning arithmetic first would get used to honesty, because it introduces him to the correctness of structures (*ṣiḥḥat al-mabānī*) and self-reflection. This would then become a method and he would get used to telling the truth [...]”.¹⁸⁹ This of course, while an interesting theory, is not an established fact for every learner or culture.

¹⁸⁵See also Graham and Kermani, “Recitation”, p. 121; Tritton, “Muslim Education”, p. 85. Cf. Gil'adi, “Individualism and Conformity”, pp. 103–105. This thinking on the importance of teaching the children ‘useful knowledge’, particularly religious principles and good manners, before they would be assaulted by bad manners, is also theorised by Ibn Abī Zayd (*Risāla*, pp. 15–16); Ibn Sīnā (*K. al-Siyāsa*, p. 83); and al-Ghazālī (*Minhājī*, p. 76). Cf. the best habits a child should be instilled with according to Ibn al-Ḥājj (who also cites Ibn al-'Arabī's missing *Marāqī al-zulaf*): *Madkhal*, iv, pp. 295–299. See also Tritton, “Muslim Education”, pp. 82–83.

¹⁸⁶Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 355.

¹⁸⁷See Ahmed Khaled, “Caractère Génial du Système Educatif d'Ibn Khaldoun”, in *Revue Pédagogique* (1963).

¹⁸⁸Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 254.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*

It is quite interesting that Ibn Khaldūn praised Ibn al-‘Arabī’s stance and, unlike his predecessors and contemporaries in North Africa in particular, dared to criticise the traditional teaching method in the *katātib*, in spite of his affiliation to the judiciary system there and his well-known *fiqhī* and *Ṣūfī* predilections. Both scholars believed that learning such basic subjects as literacy and arithmetic should come before any other, including the Qur’ān, which was naturally seen, far and wide, as the backbone of Islamic education and intellectual culture taken together. Such revolutionary thoughts, as opposed to a dominant conventional learning environment, was unsurprisingly seen as subversive, and thus was rebuked by the conservative religious authorities in the time of Ibn Khaldūn. The resentful voices were led by Ibn ‘Arafā al-Warḡhammī (d. 803/1401), the chief *imām* of the Mālikītes in Tunisia at that time, who on different occasions vetoed Ibn Khaldūn’s appointment as the chief judge there, although their chronic antipathy to each other, and the general hostility towards Ibn Khaldūn among conservatives, was likely owing to his reputation as a turncoat and opportunist rather than due to the import of his theories on educational reform. The Ḥaḥṣīd sultan, Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad al-Mustanṣir (r. 772–96/1370–94), was stirred against him by conservatives, so he decided to leave for Egypt. The victory of Ibn ‘Arafā may symbolise the state rejection of the ‘Khaldūnian School’ and the intellectual turn that it would have promised.¹⁹⁰

Third: Medieval Muslim philosophers

This exploration of Ibn Khaldūn’s views on primary education needs to be related to how such an early stage of intellectual formation was looked upon by the medieval Muslim philosophers in general. It should be noted though that the above discussion has already exposed a part of the outlook of the medieval Muslim philosophical culture on the topic. This is because, in addition to Ibn Khaldūn, some of the above classical names, such as al-Jāhīz, Ibn Ḥazm, and al-Ghazālī, were partially philosophers, thanks to their intellectual make-up as polymaths. Their relevant views are discussed further in the following sections. Generally speaking, Muslim philosophers’ contribution to educational theory, particularly that relating to higher learning, was rich and varied, integrating Islamic core values and other rudiments from the ancient Arabian and Mesopotamian heritage, as well as substantial inputs from Greco-Roman cultures.¹⁹¹ Among those primarily defined as philosophers, few are known to have written on child learning. Furthermore, with the exception of Ibn Sīnā, their writings on the topic are markedly succinct—most likely due to an ultimate common concession that this early learning stage should be left to schoolmasters in the traditional *katātib*.

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā (Brethren of Purity) (ca. third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries)¹⁹²

On many occasions in their much commented-on compendium of epistles, *Rasā’il ikhwān al-ṣafā wa-khullān al-wafā*, the Brethren of Purity accentuated the importance of education

¹⁹⁰See M. Talbi, “Ibn Khaldūn”, in *EF*, iii (1986), pp. 825–831 (p. 827); Allen J. Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun: Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 60–96; Robert Brunschwig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Ḥaḥṣīdes des origines à la fin du XV^e siècle: Tome II* (Paris, 1947), pp. 391–392; al-Abrāshī, *Tarbiya islāmiyya*, p. 274–275.

¹⁹¹Gunther, “Be Masters”, p. 369. See also id, “Advice for Teachers”, p. 90.

¹⁹²The Brethren of Purity and their pedagogical approach have been discussed by a number of studies. See, for example, Louis Gardet, “Notion et principes de l’éducation dans la pensée arabo-musulmane”, *Revue des études islamiques* 44 (1976), pp. 1–16; ‘Abd al-Amīr Shams al-Dīn, *al-Falsafa al-tarbiwiyya ‘ind Ikhwān al-Ṣafā min khilāl*

to the moral constitution of young scholars. As seen by them, education is one certain way to instil individuals with essential morals and convictions. They nevertheless took no interest in educating children under the age of fifteen; this paradoxical indifference is understandable. As a secretive intellectual group, the Brethren of Purity tended to obfuscate their scholarship, cultivate a type of gnostic knowledge, and practice a somewhat esoteric academic life. Therefore, they contentedly left to schoolmasters that early learning stage, which, as was the custom, heavily relied on memorisation (*supra*). In this connection, they state:

When the boy perfects what was assigned to him in the *maktab* (a variant of *kuttāb*), he would no longer be in need for the [writing] tablet, the inkwell or the *calamus scriptorius*. This is because he used to use these to write and read so as to be able to learn off by heart such types of knowledge as the Qur'ān, chronicles, poems, grammar, linguistics, and others which the children usually memorise in the *maktab*.¹⁹³

The fraternity thus looked at rote learning in the *kuttāb* as an elemental 'loading' period upon which they could later build in the years to come, although children in the *kuttāb* imbibed lifetime concepts and traditions in addition to basic knowledge.

Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421/1030)

Ibn Miskawayh could be described as a Neoplatonist, whose surest impact on the Muslim thought was in the sphere of ethics, particularly meta-ethics. Like many other Muslim philosophers, Ibn Miskawayh, who also acted as a chancery official under the Iranian Buyid dynasty, did not adhere to a specific Greek philosopher or philosophical school. Rather, he was inspired by a multitude of these, most clearly Plato and Aristotle, as well as the Pythagorean, Alexandrian, and Persian schools. In his *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, which is taken to be the earliest comprehensive work in Islam on philosophical ethics,¹⁹⁴ Ibn Miskawayh concocted an 'Islamicate' opinion on education that is based on philosophy rather than religion. The chapter that he wrote on children's education is mainly based on a dubious ancient Greek philosopher referred to as Bryson,¹⁹⁵ who in turn could have quoted Plutarch.¹⁹⁶ This chapter, nonetheless, is of little importance to our discussion here as it is mainly about moral, rather than intellectual, education. There, however, Ibn Miskawayh advises that children should learn by heart moral chronicles and poems.¹⁹⁷

In the belief that ethical behaviours and sublime values are attainable through learning and practice, Ibn Miskawayh stressed the importance of early education.¹⁹⁸ He describes as the

rasā'ilihim, (Beirut, 1988). See also Liana Saif, "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's Religious Reform and Magic: Beyond the Isma'ili Hypothesis", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30 (2019), pp. 34–68.

¹⁹³ *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā wa-khullān al-wafā*, (ed.) Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, 4 vols (Cairo, 1928), iii, p. 60.

¹⁹⁴ For English translation, see Constantine K. Zurayk, *The Refinement of Character* (Beirut, 1968). On the educational effect of Ibn Miskawayh and his work, see Günther, "Principles of Teaching", pp. 80–82; Nadia Jamal al-Din, "Miskawayh (A.H. 320–421/A.D. 932–1030)", *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 24 (1994), pp. 131–152.

¹⁹⁵ On his, see Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, p. 288 (n. 1).

¹⁹⁶ See Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, pp. 288–95. Al-Ghazālī's subchapter on educating children is clearly informed by this chapter of Ibn Miskawayh. See al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, pp. 955–958.

¹⁹⁷ Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, p. 290.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 289–291.

“ultimate fortunate” (*al-sa’īd al-kāmil*) one who is imbued with the ethics of *sharī’a* and trained on its functions and conditions in childhood. Such a seeker of knowledge would then study the books of ethics, until they and their associated merits were established, by dint of proofs, in the self. Next, he would learn arithmetic and geometry until he was accustomed to telling the truth and using evidence correctly.¹⁹⁹ After that preparatory stage, as Ibn Miskawayh maintains, a learner would forge ahead, steadily, with studying the various sciences.²⁰⁰

Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037)

The writings of Ibn Sīnā (Latinised as Avicenna) stand out as the fullest and the most insightful contributions by a Muslim philosopher on child education. Ibn Sīnā was a notable exponent of ancient Greek (particularly Aristotelian) *sapientia*. Born in a hamlet known as Afshona in the vicinity of Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan, Ibn Sīnā lived and flourished in Iranian metropolises, particularly Isfahan and Hamadan, and is never known to have departed the eastern Muslim regions. As a remarkable polymath, his multiple writings covered a wide span of topics in many fields such as philosophy, medicine, geometry, astronomy, theology, art and didactics.²⁰¹ Like other sons of high-ranking state officials and well-to-do families, Ibn Sīnā was taught and coached by private tutors (*mu’addibūn*), but as a pedagogue, he was not enthusiastic about that type of individual tutoring.²⁰² This luckily made his writings of significance to our discussion on public elementary education.

In his *Kitāb al-Siyāsa*, Ibn Sīnā advises that when the boy’s senses and mental abilities become ready for learning by audition (*talqīm*), typically at the age of six according to him,²⁰³ he should be taught the Qur’ān, the alphabets and the precepts of religion. The boy should then be taught *rajaz*, followed by poems. As far as the latter is concerned, he should start with those about the virtue of civility, praising knowledge and criticising ignorance, defaming absurdity, and extolling the virtue of dutifulness to parents, doing favours, honouring guests, and other noble comportments.²⁰⁴ The same outlook on the type of poem worthy of being taught to youngsters was also adopted by Ibn Miskawayh, who warned parents against letting their children recite dissolute verses,²⁰⁵ as found in the poems of some

¹⁹⁹The concept that learning arithmetic and geometry makes people truthful though may seem esoteric to the modern reader. However, it is certainly an interesting philosophical concept. Mathematics ultimately deals with a simulacrum of reality (i.e. a conceit or lie) rather than reality itself.

²⁰⁰Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, pp. 282–283.

²⁰¹He is said to have authored some 450 works. On Ibn Sīnā’s life and intellectual venture, See, among others, Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works*, 2nd revised edition (Leiden, 2014); William E. Gohlman, *The life of Ibn Sina: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation* (Albany, 1974).

²⁰²See Ibn Sīnā, *K. al-Siyāsa*, pp. 7–12; Mirbabaev, “Development of Education”, p. 34; Gil’adi, “Individualism and Conformity”, p. 115.

²⁰³Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn b. Sīnā, *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb*, (ed.) M. Amīn al-Ḍannāwī, 3 vols (Beirut, 1999), i, p. 220. See also Mirbabaev, “Development of Education”, p. 34; Günther, “Be Masters”, pp. 378–379. According to one *ḥadīth* quoted by al-Ghazālī, education, or rather disciplining (*ta’dīb*), should begin once the child is six years of age: *Iḥyā’*, p. 681. See also Goldziher, “Muslim Education”, p. 200. According to Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī, a child should be sent to the *maktab* when he is seven years old—not before: *Madkhal*, ii, pp. 315–316. See also Tritton, “Muslim Education”, p. 82.

²⁰⁴Ibn Sīnā, *Siyāsa*, p. 84. See also Tritton, “Muslim Education”, p. 83; Shams al-Dīn, *al-Madhhab al-tarbau’i ‘ind Ibn Sīnā*, pp. 134–135; Günther, “Be Masters”, p. 380.

²⁰⁵Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, p. 290. The same thing was stressed by al-Ghazālī: *Iḥyā’*, p. 956.

ubiquitous pre-Islamic bards, most particularly Imru' al-Qays (d. ca. 544 AD) and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyanī (d. ca. 604 AD). Ibn Miskawayh reminded parents that in the future their children would be courtiers of princes, and other monarchical figures who would usually ask them to recite such poems and perhaps compose in a similar strain.²⁰⁶ It is indicative that 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib (d. ca. 83/702) did not allow his children's instructor to recite, while with them, the poems of 'Urwa b. al-Ward (d. ca. 607 AD), in particular, lest they should be tempted to leave homeland and search for a better fortune elsewhere.

Ibn Sīnā advises that when the boy is done with learning the Qur'an and the basics of Arabic language, he should contemplate the path he would wish for his career and choose his subjects accordingly. Therefore, for a career of a scribe, as he exemplified, a boy ought to study language, composition, elocution and dialectics. He should also be taught arithmetic and be allowed to enter the state register (*ḍuwān*) for internship, with especial attention being given to handwriting. If another career or academic specialisation is coveted, then the boy should be trained on it (more on Ibn Sīnā's approach on the post-*kuttāb* career is discussed shortly). He adds:

The teacher of the boy, on the other hand, ought to be wise, religious, acquainted with ethical as well as intellectual schooling, solemn, sober-sided, void of levity and absurdity, neither trite nor loquacious, while with the boys, neither grumpy nor rigid. Rather, he should be affable and astute, gallant, clean and impartial. He should have served noble people and be aware of what among the princely manners they would be proud of, and what among the habits of the rabble they would be criticized for. He should have been accustomed to the etiquettes of social intercourse, conversation and companionship.²⁰⁷

The Teaching Programmes and the Dilemma of Epistemology

It is only in light of a number of particular aspects that an adequate understanding of the above teaching programmes and their substantive discrepancies can be approached. Beside the foremost need to establish and nurture an Arabo-Islamic socio-cultural identity, these aspects are: (i) the administrative needs of the state; (ii) the inveterate disagreements between the different intellectual tendencies in the Muslim communities; (iii) the types of academic and/or vocational career in the post-*kuttāb* stage;²⁰⁸ and (iv) how the different types of knowledge were defined, valued and classified accordingly.²⁰⁹ While the first two aspects

²⁰⁶See Goldziher, "Muslim Education", p. 201.

²⁰⁷Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-Siyāsa*, pp. 84–85. See also Mirbabaev, "Development of Education", p. 34; Günther, "Be Masters", p. 380; Tritton, "Muslim Education", p. 83.

²⁰⁸On post-*kuttāb* education in Baghdad, for example, see Makdisi, "Muslim Institutions", pp. 1–56.

²⁰⁹For the range of scholars' writings on how knowledge was appraised and classified in medieval Islamic times, see L. A. Bsoul, *Medieval Islamic World: An Intellectual History of Science and Politics* (New York, 2018); Omar A. Qureshi, "Disciplinary and Islamic Education", in *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses*, (eds.) Nadeem Memon and Mujaddad Zaman (New York, 2016), pp. 94–111; Thomas F. Glick, Steven Livesey and Faith Wallis, *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 2014); Peter E. Pormann, *Islamic Medical and Scientific Tradition* (London, 2011); Howard R. Turner, *Science in Medieval Islam: An Illustrated Introduction* (Austin, 2010); Muzaffar Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science* (Petaling Jaya, 2009); Wim Raven and Anna Akasoy (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages: Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation, in Honour of Hans Daiber* (Leiden, 2008); J. P. Hogendijk, and Abdelhamid I. Šabra (eds.), *The Enterprise of Science in Islam: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (Basingstoke, 2001); Richard Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge, 1999); Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science* 2nd edition (Cambridge, 1998); Fadlou Shehadi, *Philosophies of Music in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 1995); 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Daffā' and John J. Stroyls,

have been dealt with earlier in this article, we will try, in what follows, to provide insights into the last two, which, in view of their organic relationship, need to be handled together in one subsection.

Generally, the copious medieval Muslim literature on knowledge (*‘ilm*) and the countless academic instructions given by pundits to teachers and students, particularly in the higher education stage, are indicative of a fervent scientific movement in the medieval Islamic world. However, there was a markedly notorious, even if understandable, disagreement between the different intellectual groups on how knowledge would be classified. According to Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (463/1071), a chief Mālikī jurisconsult in Al-Andalus (Lisbon), the branches of knowledge are categorised, in every nation, into three main tiers of prioritisation and status: high, middle and low. The first cluster consists exclusively of theology and religious sciences, which ought to be based on divine revelation, whereas the second includes indispensable ‘secular’ sciences, such as medicine and engineering. The third group comprises crafts and ‘utilitarian’ callings such as dressmaking and calligraphy²¹⁰ as well as horse riding and swimming.²¹¹ In a similar fashion, al-Ghazālī divides knowledge, from an exclusively Islamic legal perspective, into two types. The first type of knowledge, according to him, includes the sciences whose study is *farḍ ‘ayn* (i.e. an individual obligation on every single Muslim *per se*), which are the Islamic religious sciences. The least satisfactory amount of that knowledge, as al-Ghazālī explains, is what would lead one to true faith and fulfillment of religious duties.²¹² The second type comprises the sciences whose studying is *farḍ kifāya* (i.e. a communal obligation, where a minimum number of people must study them as an indispensable requirement for people’s lives and the survival of society), such as medicine and arithmetic—beside in-depth Islamic knowledge.²¹³ A more classical dialectic in medieval Islamic culture is that relating to the duality of rational knowledge (*‘ulūm ‘aqliyya*) versus traditional, literally transmitted, knowledge (*‘ulūm naqliyya*). Also known as *‘ulūm al-awā’il* (*infra*), the former rely on observation and deduction, and include such sciences as mathematics, physics and astronomy. The latter, on the other hand, are mainly based on revelation and its traditional interpretations and include the likes of Qur’ān exegesis, *ḥadīth* studies, *fiqh* and *kalām*.²¹⁴

Studies on the Exact Science in Medieval Islam (New York, 1984); S. Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1968); Iḥsān ‘Abbaṣ, “Taṣnīf al-‘ulūm ‘ind al-‘arab”, *al-Mausim al-Thaqāfi li-Majma‘ al-Lughā al-‘Arabiyya* 1 (1983), pp. 67–99; Jalāl M. Mūsā, “Taṣnīf al-‘ulūm ‘ind al-‘ulamā’ al-muslimīn”, *al-Muslim al-Mu‘āṣir* 11 (1984), pp. 11–29; ‘Iṣmāt Naṣṣār, *Taṣnīf al-‘ulūm fī al-fālsafā al-islāmīyya* (Cairo, 2014).

²¹⁰In some Muslim cultures, however, calligraphy evolved to a kind of spiritual pursuit.

²¹¹Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr al-Andalusī, *Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlīh*, ed. Abū al-Ashbāl al-Zuhayrī, 2 vols (Dammam, 1994), ii, pp. 788–790.

²¹²Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, pp. 22–23.

²¹³See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, pp. 21–52; id., *al-Risāla al-laduniyya*, (Cairo, 1910), pp. 5–7, 15–23; id., *Mīzān al-‘amal*, pp. 349–360; See also an interesting chapter by al-Ghazālī on “what the public think are among meritorious sciences but they are not”: *Iḥyā’*, pp. 38–41; id., *K. Fātīḥat al-‘ulūm* (Cairo, 1904), pp. 35–47. On al-Ghazālī’s classification of knowledge and its seekers, see Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 181–220; Günther, “Principles of Teaching”, p. 84; Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *‘Ādab al-‘ālim wa-l-muta‘allim wa-l-muftī wa-l-mustafīd wa-faḍl ‘ālib al-‘ilm*, (Tanta, 1987), pp. 23–28. See also al-Ghazālī, *Durr*, pp. 90–115; ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ b. Mūsā al-‘Almawī, *al-Mu‘īd fī ‘ādab al-muftīd wa-l-mustafīd*, (ed.) Aḥmad ‘Ubayd (Damascus, 1931), pp. 20–25; Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Āmilī, *Munyat al-murīd fī ‘ādab al-muftīd wa-l-mustafīd*, (ed.) Riḍā al-Mukhtārī (Qom, 1988), pp. 365–83; Aḥmad ‘A. ‘Aṭīyya, “Taṣnīf al-‘ulūm ‘ind al-Ghazālī”, *al-Mawrid* 18 (1989), pp. 66–83.

²¹⁴See, for example, Jane H. Murphy, “Islamic Knowledge Systems: Circulation, Rationality, and Politics”, in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, (ed.) Armando Salvatore and others (Hoboken, NJ, 2018), pp. 479–498.

Based on vocational considerations, however, al-Jāhīz remarks that the sciences most suitable for kings are genealogy, chronicles and general *fiqh*, whereas those for merchants are arithmetic and writing; the science best fitting warriors is war literature that could be found in works on *maghāzī* and *siyar*.²¹⁵ That being said, the most thorough discussion on the sciences in medieval Islam is perhaps that written by Ibn Khaldūn, who describes their scopes, terminologies, practicality and religious legality.²¹⁶

After the *kuttāb* stage, Ibn Sīnā advises students' mentors to decide the former's future vocation (*ṣinā'a*), and in turn the subjects as well as skills that this would require, based not on the social rank which students belong to or yearn for, but on such key elements as age, compatibility, passion, aptitude and inborn character.²¹⁷ As such, Ibn Sīnā adopted an educational philosophy that helps create a most rounded alumnus, as it takes into account the multiple talents and sides of the student's *persona*. In a sense, this is reminiscent of what is referred to in the modern pedagogical trends as the head, heart and hands (HHH) learning theory.²¹⁸ Literally taking '*ṣinā'a*' to mean a manual craft, Mirbabaev argues: "in the second stage of schooling, which Ibn Sīnā called the period of specialisation, pupils should, in his view, begin to acquire manual skills [...]. Ibn Sīnā's own preference was for the teaching of crafts [...]"²¹⁹ Unlike *ṣan'a*, however, *ṣinā'a* has a primary meaning of any field of knowledge (*kullu 'ilmⁱⁿ aw fann*) one would practice until attaining mastery, after which one could turn to a profession—crafts are included in this model, but are not singled out.²²⁰ This is made clearer by the context of Ibn Sīnā's relevant passages, which, while referring to state secretary, accounting, engineering and medicine as illustrative examples, make no mention of *manual* crafts as technically defined. In any case, the reformist views of Ibn Sīnā, like those of Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn (*supra*), are ably forward-looking and human-centred, even by modern-day standards. However, in medieval times they remained popular only in limited scholastic circles, and scarcely found their way to full application in actual practice.

The above taxonomies and their foundations, as well as the other common issues of disciplinary, changed course according to place and time.²²¹ Equally changeable were the community's need for each of the sciences, and their relative importance in relation to contextual needs. It is interesting to note that in *K. al-Shifā'*, Ibn Sīnā divided knowledge into practical and theoretical, but unlike in modern classifications, which are inevitably based on our perception of how today's world operates (particularly as embedded in post-modern Western cultural assumptions), he included in the former group such disciplines as ethics,

²¹⁵ Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, iii, p. 374.

²¹⁶ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, pp. 171–352. See, in particular, how he classified the branches of science: *Muqaddima*, ii, pp. 171–172, 351–352. See also Yūsuf 'Addār, "Wāqi'iyyat taṣnīf al-'ulūm 'ind Ibn Khaldūn wa-madā ibrāzih li-l takāmul baynahā", *Majallat al-Buḥūth al-'Ilmiyya wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya* 7 (2015), pp. 43–65; Zaynab Riḍwān, "Taṣnīf al-'ulūm 'ind 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn", *al-Majalla al-Ijtīmā'iyya al-Qawmiyya* 40 (1983), pp. 131–173.

²¹⁷ See Ibn Sīnā, *Siyāsa*, pp. 86–88. See also Tritton, "Muslim Education", pp. 83–84.

²¹⁸ Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Laṭīf, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī 'ind Ibn Sīnā* (Damascus, 2009), p. 103.

²¹⁹ Mirbabaev, "Development of Education", p. 35.

²²⁰ *Al-Mu'jam al-wasīf*, (eds.) Sh. 'A. 'Aṭīyya and others, 4th edition. (Cairo, 2004), pp. 525–526. See also Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān*, iv, p. 2508.

²²¹ See, for example, al-Jīṭālī, *Qanāṭir*, i, pp. 86–90; al-Ghazzī, *Durr*, pp. 90–115. See also Rifā'a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *al-Murshid al-amīn li-l banāt wa-l-banīn*, (ed.) Munā A. Abū Zayd (Cairo, 2012), pp. 153–175, 187–191.

economics and politics.²²² In the latter group, he listed sciences such as mathematics, physics and metaphysics. In his *Ta'lim al-muta'allim*, al-Zarnūjī gives priority to the so-called '*ilm al-hāl*', which denotes the type(s) of knowledge one would need to handle one's own day-to-day conditions and circumstances. Al-Zarnūjī, just as many other traditional scholars, particularly Ṣūfīs down to the beginning of the fourteenth century AH, tended to use the term to mainly denote religious sciences (the Ṣūfīs used it to designate the conditions of the heart in particular). The term itself is, nonetheless, remarkably interesting and would be practical to comply with the progress that would have occurred to the people's cultural life in every time and place.²²³

If the fullest appraisal of the sciences in medieval Islam is due to Ibn Khaldūn, that which Ibn Ḥazm presented in his *Marātib al-'ulūm* is surely the most interesting. Written as a response to his students' inquiries about the sciences most worthy of studying, the treatise is also the most relevant to our discussion—especially in that he gives such appraisal while detailing the learning programme he would recommend for children and young learners.²²⁴ Ibn Ḥazm's discussion gives insights into how sciences were ranked in the fifth/eleventh century and the reasons behind such ranking.²²⁵ According to him, there are seven divisions of knowledge in each nation, place and time. The first three, which differed from one nation to another, are those related to religion, history and language. The four remaining sciences, however, are universal: astronomy or astrology (*'ilm al-nujūm*), mathematics, medicine and philosophy. He then rated the different sciences based on their worthiness of being learned.²²⁶

Ibn Ḥazm started his treatise theorising that the continuity of a certain science is determined based on the continuity of the community's need for it. This is why, in his view, some ancient 'sciences' are still in use while others are not. Among the former group, Ibn Ḥazm gave priority to those on which other sciences are based and then the next most fundamental and so on.²²⁷ According to him, the latter group includes magic and music,²²⁸ calling those claiming knowledge of any of such pseudo-sciences in his time as either naïve or superstitious. It is worth noting that, according to common belief, the so-called '*ilm al-siḥr wa-l-talṣamāt* 'talismanic magic',²²⁹ referred to here by Ibn Ḥazm, was first introduced to the Andalusians by Maslama al-Majrīfī (d. 398/1007), who interpreted and summarised the ancient books on the subject. Al-Majrīfī was also criticised by Abū

²²²Ibn Sīna, *Kitāb al-Shifā'*, (eds.) Georges Qanawātī, Maḥmūd al-Khuḍayrī and Fu'ād al-Ahwānī (Cairo, 1952), pp. 12–16. See also Eugene A. Myers, *Arabic Thought and the Western World in the Golden Age of Islam* (New York, 1964), p. 33.

²²³See also '*ilm al-'āla* vs. '*ilm al-ghāya*. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 351.

²²⁴Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, pp. 61–90. For more on Ibn Ḥazm's outlook on the types of knowledge, see also his *al-Taqrīb li-hadd al-manṭiq*, (ed.) A. Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut, 2003), pp. 145–150; id., *al-Talkhūs li-uwjūh al-Takhḥīs*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Turkumānī (Göteborg, 2003).

²²⁵On Ibn Ḥazm and his conception of the sciences, see Anwar G. Chejne, *Ibn Ḥazm* (Chicago, 1982); Ḥusayn Mu'nis, "Taṣnīf al-'ulūm kamā yarāh ibn Ḥazm", *al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya* 13 (1966), pp. 263–265; Sālim Yafūt, "Taṣnīf al-'ulūm ladā Ibn Ḥazm", *Majallat Kulliyat al-Ādāb wa-l-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya bi-Jāmi'at Muḥammad al-Khāmis* 9 (1982), pp. 53–91.

²²⁶Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, pp. 78–89.

²²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 62.

²²⁸Here, he means particular types of music, which people in his time believed could turn a coward into a hero and a miser into a generous individual. Also, the perceived hypnotic effect of certain types of Indian music was a subject of controversy among Indian Muslim scholars.

²²⁹It was also criticised by al-Ghazālī: *Iḥyā'*, i, p. 24.

Bakr b. al-‘Arabī who, warning pupils against some popular ‘misleading’ informants, states: “They speak of so and so al-Tulayṭilī, so and so al-Majrīfī, and Ibn Mughīth—may God neither spare his soul nor make him reach his goal”. Ibn al-‘Arabī insisted that if a boy took knowledge from such authors, he would surely fall behind.²³⁰ That said, Maslama al-Majrīfī, Latinised as Methilem, was indeed a leading astronomer and alchemist, who is also believed to have written on celestial magic.²³¹ He was pioneering in using mercury (II) oxide that was elemental for the later experiments of Joseph Priestley and Antoine Lavoisier in the eighteenth century.

Equally devious, according to Ibn Ḥazm, were those practising alchemy (*‘ilm al-kīmīyā*—sometimes referred to as *khīmīyā* or *‘ilm al-ṣan‘a*)²³² for they added to the above negative practices, i.e. of those learning magic, other more immoral ones, such as consuming other people’s wealth unlawfully, and producing counterfeit coins.²³³ Ibn Ḥazm gave alchemy a lower grade than magic and music because of an interesting consideration; the two other so-called ‘sciences’, while totally vanished in his own day as he confirmed (*‘adima wa-n-qaṭa‘a albatta*), once existed for ages. Alchemy, on the other hand, “which they claim could transmute the chemical elements of [base] metals [into noble ones] is still a nonentity that never existed, and a myth that never occurred even for one hour—because it is [physically] impossible to convert a type into another”.²³⁴ This practice, against which the young learners are warned by Ibn Ḥazm, was originally a classical antique one known as *chrysopoieia*, which according to common thoughts was only achievable through a mythical catalyst known as the philosophers’ stone (*lapis philosophorum*). This and other comparable praxes, where science was intermingled with folkloric practices, incited avarice among young learners. Like other scholars in medieval Islam, Ibn Ḥazm was particularly critical of such allurements. He commented in a satirical tone: “There is, indeed, no difference [in terms of impossibility] between transmuting copper into gold or gold into copper and converting a man into a donkey or a donkey into a man. The same is applicable to all other elements and species as it is entirely impossible [*munṭani‘ albatta*]”.²³⁵

Of course, Ibn Ḥazm was not the only critic of alchemy in and beyond the Muslim world, despite earlier momentous efforts led by Jābir b. Ḥayyān, Latinised as Geber (d. 199/815),²³⁶ to impart to ancient esoteric alchemical practices a scientific character. However uninformed it may seem in today’s academic ethos, this opinion of Ibn Ḥazm is not totally without foundation—his contention being that alchemy, at least to his knowledge, never existed. Nor was it verified by experiment-based evidence. It was for the same reasons that Ibn Ḥazm and others²³⁷ denounced astrology, which he deemed unqualified to

²³⁰Abū Bakr b. ‘Arabī, *al-‘Awāṣim min al-qawāṣim*, (ed.) M. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣāliḥ (Cairo, 2008), p. 353.

²³¹*Chāyat al-ḥakīm* (or *Picatrix*), a well-known book on the subject, is said to be written by him. This attribution, however, is a matter of much debate.

²³²Abū Khalīl, *Ḥaḍāra*, p. 520.

²³³On what was really meant by ‘*kīmīyā*’ in medieval Islamic practices, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, pp. 310–319.

²³⁴Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-‘ulūm*, pp. 61–62.

²³⁵*Ibid.*

²³⁶Geber was a leading universalist whose scientific *oeuvre* was later recognised and highly praised by many modern academic authorities including the eminent French polymath, Gustave Le Bon.

²³⁷See, for example, al-Zarnūjī, *Tarīq al-ta‘allum*, pp. 63–64.

be counted as an evidence-based science (*'ilm burhān*).²³⁸ He accordingly advised *curious* students against learning it. At this historical stage, the term *'ilm al-nujūm*²³⁹ was used to refer to astronomy and astrology interchangeably.²⁴⁰ Later, as time went by, the distinction between the two became more visible. Abū al-Barakāt al-Ghazzī (d. 984/1576), for instance, refers to the latter as *tanjīm*, equivalent to divination or soothsaying. He argued that its learning, together with that of magic, philosophy (that is still thought of by some as inimical to the Islamic concepts),²⁴¹ jugglery or sleight of hand (*sha'badha*), and natural sciences (*'ulūm al-ṭabā'i'iyīn*),²⁴² are religiously prohibited according to the majority of Muslim scholars (*jumhūr*).²⁴³

According to the teaching programme recommended by Ibn Ḥazm, the pupils should start with learning literacy, i.e. reading and writing, which should also involve the memorisation of the Qur'ān. Then they would be moved to grammar and linguistics. As he explains, if a pupil does not manage to acquire that fundamental knowledge, he would struggle in the other (more complicated) sciences. Ibn Ḥazm also suggests that the study of linguistics should be interlaced with poetry, particularly the decent verses by such *ṣahābīs* as Ḥassān b. Thābit (d. ca. 54/674), whose sobriquet was 'the Prophet's bard', Ka'b b. Mālik (d. 51/671) and 'Abd Allāh b. Rawāḥa (d. 8/629), as well as the 'Abbāsīd poet Ṣāliḥ b. 'Abd al-Quddūs. Pupils, however, should avoid other 'inappropriate' types of poem, on which he expounded.²⁴⁴ Although Ibn Ḥazm cannot be thought of as a typical traditionalist,²⁴⁵ his advised elementary teaching programme is massively comparable to that suggested by affiliates of the traditional tendency. The differences are only incidental. As we saw above, while the call to avoid indecent poem is universal, those against whose poems students were warned differed from time to time. Although at some point in his literary career Ibn Ḥazm attained great proficiency in poetry, he advised the young knowledge-seekers not to pay much attention to it—as he later came to consider that it was not an appropriate or beneficial path to take.²⁴⁶

For a more complete idea of Ibn Ḥazm, his suggested teaching programme, and the scholastic drift he represents here, we need to look at the subjects that he recommends for the next educational stage, which, while given in the same previous context of addressing early learning in general, clearly denote the learning phase following the *kuttāb* (even if directly). Ibn Ḥazm advises students to move on to study mathematics (*'ilm al-'adad*),²⁴⁷ including arithmetic (*arithmāḥīqī*) and area calculation, followed by deliberate study of 'Euclid's

²³⁸Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, pp. 69–72.

²³⁹Some earlier texts used the term *'ilm al-najm*'. See Ibn al-Sunnī, *Riyāḍat al-muta'allimīn*, pp. 330–333.

²⁴⁰See Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, p. 80; Ibn Rajab, *Faḍl 'ilm al-salaf*, pp. 32–39. See also E. S. Kennedy, *Astronomy and Astrology in the Medieval Islamic World* (Aldershot, 1998); G. A. Saliba, *History of Arabic Astronomy: Planetary Theory during the Golden Age of Islam* (New York, 1994). On astronomy and astronomical timekeeping in medieval Islam, see Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science*, pp. 54–62.

²⁴¹On religion, philosophy and the sciences in Islam, see Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 79–82, 137.

²⁴²On natural sciences in Islam, see Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 97–99, 139–140.

²⁴³Al-Ghazzī, *Durr*, p. 115.

²⁴⁴Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, p. 67.

²⁴⁵See Arnaldez, "Ibn Ḥazm", pp. 790–799.

²⁴⁶Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, p. 69.

²⁴⁷On the mathematical sciences in Islam, see Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 137–139; Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science*, pp. 48–54; J. L. Berggren, *Episodes in the Mathematics of Medieval Islam* (New York, 2014).

book',²⁴⁸ which he praises as an outstanding masterpiece that made understandable many cosmological mysteries concerning areas, dimensions and centres, as well as the rotation of the earth and the orbits of celestial objects.²⁴⁹ As seen by Ibn Ḥazm, himself regarded as one of the first scholars to speak of a spherical Earth,²⁵⁰ the erudition in Euclid's book would definitely introduce students to many secrets of the universe and its infinity and that, in turn, would establish their belief in God. One of the books Ibn Ḥazm strongly recommends for students is *Almagest* (by Ptolemy), which, as he explains, is critical for the knowledge of eclipses, latitudes and longitudes, timings, changes in day and night lengths, lunar station and shining stars (*darānī*).²⁵¹

Ibn Ḥazm also recommends a thorough study of area calculation and surveying, given their huge benefit for vital daily-life applications, such as water supply, lifting operations, construction engineering and machine manufacturing.²⁵² He then advises a neophyte to learn logic in order to acquaint himself with such dialectical instruments as premises, presuppositions and conclusions, thus enabling differentiation between demonstration (*burhān*) and obfuscation (*shaghab* or *tashghīb*). According to Ibn Ḥazm, a student should also consider learning such crucial sciences as physics, meteorology, [chemical] element composition, mineralogy, zoology, botany and biology (or the 'science of species', as he calls it). A student is also advised to study anatomy "to realise the perfection of God's creation" and, particularly as a pastime, read books of history so as to learn religious and moral lessons.²⁵³

There are two main points to consider here. First, multidisciplinary was an established value in medieval Islamic educational culture. The result was a multitude of reputed polymaths. In addition to Ibn Ḥazm, al-Ghazālī advises students, in a clearly forward-thinking spirit, to have a decent share of every useful discipline (*fann*). According to him, this *tafan-nun*, 'multidisciplinary', is essential for the making of a rounded scholar.²⁵⁴ There were, however, objections to this approach. As already seen, al-Jāhīz, for instance, advised students against specialising in more than one discipline, although he himself wrote on a variety of topics. It was in that context that he mocked al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (*supra*): "A man would be doing well in one or two disciplines and thus thinks he would not apply his erudition to anything without success".²⁵⁵ This may explain why Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī, after detailing his suggested multifarious learning programme, comments:

He [i.e. the student] should not wonder: "When shall I learn all this?", as he is not required to reach the pinnacle [in each of these sciences]. Such an attainment is only achieved by special people. Nevertheless, each sensible person should learn a part of each of such sciences and not

²⁴⁸Most probably, Ibn Ḥazm is here referring to *Phaenomena*, a pioneering treatise by Euclid on spherical astronomy. The compendiums circulating in the medieval period, however, were actually greatly expanded and enhanced interpretations of ancient classical works.

²⁴⁹On the study of cosmology, cosmogony and cosmography in medieval Islam, see Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science*, pp. 33 ff.

²⁵⁰See his chapter on "Maṭlab bayān kurawīyyat al-ard [Entry on Demonstrating the Sphericity of the Earth]". Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fī al-mīlāl wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-nihāl*, (eds.) M. Ibrāhīm Naṣr and 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayra, 2nd, 5 vols (Beirut, 1996), ii, pp. 241–255.

²⁵¹Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, p. 69.

²⁵²*Ibid.* See also Donald R. Hill, *Islamic Science and Engineering* (Edinburgh, 1993).

²⁵³Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, pp. 72–73.

²⁵⁴Al-Ghazālī, *Mīnḥāj*, pp. 86–7. See also id., *Mīzān al-'amal*, p. 348.

²⁵⁵Al-Jāhīz, *K. al-Mu'allimīn*, p. 44. See also Gunther, "Advice for Teachers", p. 116.

specialise in one alone. He then would be a human in what he knows and a beast in what he does not. [...] He should not listen to those saying to him: “You would then be weak in each science if you did so. You would rather specialise in one science”, because this is the saying of an ignorant person.²⁵⁶

While a keen proponent of multidisciplinary, Ibn al-‘Arabī advised that no two sciences should be taught simultaneously, unless the student is capable to do so in terms of both comprehension and diligence.²⁵⁷ It is also reported that the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān gave similar advice to the *mu’addib*, ‘tutor’, of his sons: “Do not move them from one science to another, before they would assimilate the former; the congestion of words in the ear surely impedes comprehension”.²⁵⁸

Second, Ibn Ḥazm’s appraisal of the sciences and, in turn, suggested learning programme, in spite of a clear diversification, are deeply grounded in a religious context. He dedicates quite a big space in his treatise at issue to make the case that religious sciences, particularly Islamic religious sciences (‘*ilm al-sharī‘a*’), are the most valuable and indispensable among all sciences.²⁵⁹ This opinion of Ibn Ḥazm represents the prevailing current of thought in medieval Islam.²⁶⁰ Trying to convince the young learners of the same stance, he recurrently labelled as “irrational” the dedication of considerable effort to a sort of knowledge that is only beneficial in this *short* life—hence ‘*ulūm al-dunyā*’, ‘the sciences of this life’ (also ‘*ulūm al-awā’il*’, ‘the sciences of the ancients’).²⁶¹ The dichotomy between ‘*ulūm al-dunyā*’ and ‘*ulūm al-dīn*’ (secular vs. religious, or sacred vs. profane),²⁶² while a common divisor in many of the world’s cultures, has had a marked impact in the Islamic intellectual venture. In Islam, particularly in the formative period, the dues of Caesar were technically inseparable from those of God; every activity, no matter how significant, assumed a religious character.

Therefore, some of the sciences that are normally included in the ‘*ulūm al-dunyā*’ constellation could be moved to that of ‘*ulūm al-dīn*’ and vice versa, based on certain parameters. For example, mathematics, which is typically classified as one of the former, could be thought of as belonging to the latter because of its inevitable uses in such religious duties as *mawārith*, ‘the allocation of wills, inheritances’, the division of legal entitlements, and other types of *mu‘āmalāt*, ‘transactions’. As such, many medieval Muslim legalists looked at arithmetic as an inevitable handmaiden of *fiqh al-mu‘āmalāt*, ‘laws pertaining to human dealing and intercourses’, one of two main divisions of Islamic law,²⁶³ rating its learning as a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*). In that religion-centred lexicon, nonetheless, thorough study of

²⁵⁶Ibn al-‘Arabī, *‘Awāṣim* (ed.) al-Khaṭīb, p. 179.

²⁵⁷Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ii, p. 355.

²⁵⁸Al-Balādhurī, *Jumal min ansāb al-ashraf*, (eds.) Suhayl Zakkār and Riyāḍ Ziriklī, 13 vols (Beirut, 1996), vii, p. 207.

²⁵⁹Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-‘ulūm*, pp. 73–76, 78ff.

²⁶⁰See al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, i, pp. 24–28; al-Zarnūjī: *Tarīq al-ta‘allum*, pp. 64–65.

²⁶¹Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-‘ulūm*, pp. 63, 83. The same meaning is also conveyed by al-Zarnūjī: *Tarīq al-ta‘allum*, p. 68.

²⁶²On the sacred and profane in Islamic law as well as the rights of God and those of humans, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Shari‘ah”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, (eds.) John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin (New York, 2013), pp. 7–26 (esp. pp. 16–19).

²⁶³The other division is *fiqh al-‘ibādāt*, ‘laws dealing with matters of ritual’.

mathematics for beyond-religious purposes, including the polishing of minds, is deemed supererogatory according to al-Ghazālī, and wasteful according to Ibn Rajab.²⁶⁴ In the same vein, practicing medicine, engineering and physics could all be regarded religious undertakings if done in the intention (*niyya*) of helping the nation and buttressing the religion. On the other hand, some of the religious sciences can be deemed secular, as they help facilitate the people's lives and transactions. It is in this understanding that al-Ghazālī, for example, interestingly included Islamic *fiqh* in the cluster of the '*ulūm al-dunyā*.²⁶⁵

The Qur'ān calls upon believers to look at the 'book of nature' so as to realize the greatness of the One and only God, and to use its sources for the benefit of the people. As such, Muslim scholars in the 'golden era' studied nature in the context of the Qur'ān, as a blueprint for the relationship between mankind and the universe. Prompted to deepen their perception of the divine, scholars set out to examine the different natural phenomena. The result was a rich and multifaceted scientific venture in a multitude of fields, including medicine, chemistry, physics, mathematics, geography and astronomy. The latter three, in particular, were indispensable for maintaining Islamic rituals and observances.²⁶⁶ In 1927, George Sarton stated: "From the second half of the eighth to the end of the eleventh century, Arabic was the scientific and the progressive language of mankind [...]"²⁶⁷ Throughout that period, learning constituted the foundation of a religio-humanistic enterprise where priority was given to cultural advancement and scholastic endeavour.

That being said, the wisest route for students to take, in Ibn Ḥazm's judgment, was to dedicate their efforts to studying the sciences in a way that would lead to salvation (*khalās*).²⁶⁸ In this regard, he gave students a prescription of how to religionise those sciences which are not inherently religious by definition. As he maintains, sciences such as '*ilm al-'adad* (reckoning), '*ilm al-hay'a*'²⁶⁹ (the science of the figure of the heavens), which is a subdivision of astronomy, and logic, however helpful in realising the essence of things, would be rewarding only if leading to a better knowledge of the Maker. Otherwise, a learner of such sciences would be worthy of being called "inquisitive and ill-advised".²⁷⁰ Some went so far as not to recommend the study of natural sciences in the belief that this could harm the people's faith.²⁷¹ Of course, such stances seem censorial and obstructive. However, they should also be considered in view of, among other things, the equivocal practices of those involved in such 'protosciences'; some prefer to refer to them as *natural philosophy* rather than *science*.²⁷² For instance, alchemy, as mentioned above, combined early attempts of applying scientific experimental method with mystical hermetic

²⁶⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, p. 24; Ibn Rajab, *Faḍl 'ilm al-salaf*, p. 41. See also Gerhard Endress, "Mathematics and Philosophy in Medieval Islam", in *The Enterprise of Science in Islam: New Perspectives*, (eds.) J. P. Hogendijk, and Abdelhamid I. Šabra (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 121–176.

²⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, pp. 25–26.

²⁶⁶ See, for example, David A. King, *Astronomy in the Service of Islam* (Aldershot, 1993); id., *In Synchrony with the Heavens, Volume 1 Call of the Muezzin* (Leiden, 2004).

²⁶⁷ George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, Volume 1 (Washington, 1927), p. 17.

²⁶⁸ Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, pp. 64–65. The same meaning is found in his '*Mudāwāt al-nufūs*' treatise. See *Rasā'il ibn Ḥazm*, i, p. 344.

²⁶⁹ On '*ilm al-hay'a*', see Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science*, p. 12.

²⁷⁰ Ibn Ḥazm, *Marātib al-'ulūm*, p. 75.

²⁷¹ See, for example, al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, p. 31.

²⁷² See Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science*, pp. 24–27.

approaches. Furthermore, the main inquiries of many alchemists in Antiquity and the Middle Ages included, beside *chrysopoia*, the pursuit of a so-called ‘elixir of immortality’, ‘philosophers’ stone’, ‘red sulphur’, a cure-all or ‘*panacea*’, and an assumed universal solvent known as ‘*alkahest*’ (perhaps derived from the Arabic *Alkali*).

There are of course parallels, sometimes more dramatic ones, in a multitude of nations and cultures. In the West, a systematic teaching of natural sciences started only with the Renaissance. In earlier times, laboratory experiments, which are the basis for discovering the secrets and laws of natural and applied sciences, were eclipsed by the mystery, agnosticism and superstition attached to them by some, such as early chemistry’s association with alchemy and even witchcraft. As a result, such early experiments were occasionally attacked by the common people. Roger Bacon (d. ca. 691/1292), for instance, was accused of practicing sorcery and seeking ‘forbidden knowledge’.²⁷³ His experiments reportedly ultimately led to being placed under house arrest.²⁷⁴ It was not until the efforts of, among others, Francis Bacon (d. 1626) and René Descartes (d. 1650) and the appearance of the experimental method in the West, as fuelled by reformist calls to look into the secrets of the universe, that a real progressive departure was made. There were indeed earlier attempts in this direction by al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥaytham, best known in the West as Alhazen.²⁷⁵ Nowadays, the importance of such subjects as natural sciences and mathematics is too glaring as to need no justification.

Conclusion

In medieval Islam, educating children was a matter of crucial importance on the personal and societal levels. It was looked upon by both the state and the different religio-intellectual groups as a great opportunity for investment in the minds, as well as loyalty, of new generations. The *kuttāb* was the *sine qua non* in this regard. Alongside its general pedagogical utility in disseminating literacy, numeracy and other forms of elementary education, it played myriad socio-political roles. For the state, it was an efficient tool in the mega-scale process of the Islamisation and Arabisation of conquered territories. Besides, its graduates were needed to continually feed the massive state administrative apparatus with future layers of scribes and clerks. On certain occasions, such graduates were also important for tipping the scales in particular political and sectarian contests. This latter function was also eyed by the conflicting religious and intellectual groups, who were generally desperate to multiply their associates and publicise their agendas.

Generally, the noted importance attached to elementary education in the medieval Islamic societies made itself felt by the involvement, on both theoretical and practical levels, of some main architects of the Islamic intellectual venture. As we have seen, the greater part

²⁷³It is worthy of mention that Roger Bacon recurrently relied on Ibn Sīnā to interpret Aristotle.

²⁷⁴See Paul Sidelko, “The Condemnation of Roger Bacon”, *Journal of Medieval History* 22 (1996), pp. 69–81; Lynn Thorndike, “The True Roger Bacon”, *The American Historical Review* 21 (1916), pp. 237–257, 468–480. Cf. Michael H. Shank, *Galileo Goes to Jail, and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); David Lindberg, “Medieval Science and Its Religious Context”, *Osiris*, 10 (1995), pp. 60–79.

²⁷⁵See A. I. Sabra, “Ibn al-Ḥaytham’s Revolutionary Project in Optics: The Achievement and the Obstacle”, in *The Enterprise of Science in Islam: New Perspectives*, (eds.) J. P. Hogendijk, and Abdelhamid I. Şabra (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 85–118.

of the above views on the topic were forged by ubiquitous Muslim theorists, such as al-Jāhīz, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Ḥazm, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Khaldūn, who represented a variety of popular cultural approaches in Islamic history. We also have many writings by eminent philosophers, *ṣūfīs*, jurists, pedagogues, litterateurs, chief judges and, at a later stage, grand imams of al-Azhar. A majority of such writings, however, were promulgated by ‘traditional’ religious authorities, who naturally cultivated and promoted traditional teaching methods. Reservations about such methods were expressed by a number of theorists. While some undertook this briefly, others expounded elaborate critiques, such as Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Khaldūn, who expressed detailed and well-argued views that countered the by-then popular traditional rote learning. But these views remained mainly confined to theory.

In practice, the *katātib*, down to modern times, were operated mainly by rank-and-file clerical affiliates of the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*. What were the reasons for this moribund situation? Unlike Ṣūfī orders, *mutakallimūn* and Muslim philosophers, the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a* managed to mastermind a type of intellectual discourse that was as digestible as appealing to the public—hence the ‘People of Tradition and Community’. The other groups, on the flip side, developed a type of sophisticated and sometimes even coded elite scholarship that was difficult to understand by the populace—let alone their offspring. As such, they did not succeed in devising the right didactic formula for this early, albeit very critical, learning stage, and ended up leaving it to traditional schoolmasters altogether in the hope that they should take their turn at a later stage. They also sought to prevent ‘unauthorised’ access to their elitist sphere. The common theme of most forms of knowledge in the medieval period was concealment and gradual initiation, in the intellectual world as much as in trade guilds. People had to *seek* knowledge, implying an act of will; according to *ḥadīth*, seeking knowledge (*ṭalab al-‘ilm*) was incumbent on every Muslim—male and female, as part of the mystical and holistic journey through life, not the modern vision of state provision of ‘*ilm* in textbooks and drilling for examinations.

The populace, on their part, tended to think that they were not generally of concern or relevance to the intellectual production of such groups, and so felt indifferent, sometimes even intimidated by the latter’s intellectual culture. The *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*, on the other hand, adopted a type of populist piety that resonated with the populace. It was as hortatory as spiritual. Hence, while laden with dos and don’ts, it proselytised hope in this life and promised heavenly rewards in the hereafter. The public were also placated by the fact that almost every judgment in that discourse assumed a divine prerogative, being ascribed to either God or His Messenger.

At a time when certain philosophers snubbed the teaching of children, considering their age and mental abilities to be unfitting for the composite knowledge that they circulated, traditionalists were already there sowing the seeds of their dogma in just the right place and time. It then blossomed and became literally ‘in the public eye’. When children grew up and came to know about the frantic polemics and disputes between the different intellectual groups, it was not surprising that most of them took the side of their earliest masters. For some, this had to do with such psycho-ethical aspects as familiarity and loyalty. For others, it was the most compelling and safest route—as indoctrinated. While not necessarily involved, at least directly, in such intellectual fights, the populace comprised a crucial factor

in swinging the balance in favour of one faction or the other. Some thinkers believed it would not be an issue if their views and intellectual contribution did not appeal to the public, but this aloofness from the realities of public opinion could have devastating impacts on them personally. The public made Ibn Rushd suffer, whereas they bolstered al-Ghazālī and made him a hero. In addition, it was their children who would make future scholars, and if they did not militate for the manifesto of one intellectual group, they could quite possibly do so against it.

In the high medieval period (1000–1250 CE), many Muslim scholars saw cherished parts of the Muslim empire being captured by the Crusaders, with major Islamic shrines seized and converted to a variety of other building types. In the late medieval period (1250–1500 CE), they saw the movement of the Mongol hordes towards the Muslim lands and their capturing and ruining of vast parts of it, including Baghdad, the capital of the ‘Abbāsid empire. These hard situations posed many threats and raised many questions related to culture and identity. In such times of suffering, foreboding and misgiving, people, particularly those of tradition, tended to cling to the old school that represented days of glory and supremacy. Some trusted to the past (or rather their memory of it) indiscriminately, disregarding changes dictated by subsequent milieux. Scholars in this group recommended traditional knowledge to students rather than new trends. In days of turmoil, seeking recourse in fundamental tenets is a human proclivity, but that requires an alert and methodical intellectual demeanour. Otherwise, there is the danger of slipping into a civilisational retreat, especially that such ‘fundamentalist’ didactical calls, most particularly in the early modern Islamic history, were made in a quint-essentially reactive context. They led to creating a lingering intellectual predicament that put (primary) education in fixed cultural constructs, which the nation would not be able to change for centuries to come.

That being said, the teaching methods and programmes theorised or described by Ibn Saḥnūn *et alii* should be understood in light of the needs and requirements of the communities in which they lived. Their writings were rather realistic than idealistic, with the main objective being to help Muslim children prepare for the social life of their time, a foremost aim of education past and present. This was done by indicating the types of knowledge that they would need to flourish in a religion-centred community. Also, such writings focused on educating the children of the ordinary Muslim people, not the elite. In this context, one of their main contributions was the well-defended call for compulsory education, which of course differed from that of the modern era.

ESSAM AYYAD
Qatar University
essamayyad@gmail.com