Seeking Al Kindi

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (September 2022)

The Municipal Chemistry Lab, M. Gueldry, 1887

> *One must not be afraid of new ideas, no matter the source. And we must never fear the truth, even when it pains us.* —Al Kindi
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> *I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.* —Galileo Galilei

As a primary school teacher in Oman, I taught English, Maths and Science to grade 4 students, or nine- to ten-year-olds, who were, by this age, separated into classes by gender. The subjects were based on the English National Curriculum (somewhat approximate to US Common Core) and the first Science unit I taught was *Living Things*.

As always when teaching this unit, I first got the children to categorise living and non-living things. A discussion then followed about what all living things had in common. We then moved on to separating living things into plants and animals and from there into the main animal categories. I had to teach each lesson twice, once to the boys and then, in an adjoining building, again to the girls.

A couple of weeks after starting this Science unit, we had an open evening. This was an opportunity for parents to meet the teachers, look at some of the materials we would be using over the course of the year and ask questions.

Prior to the open evening, all educational materials had to be combed through and any offending images or references removed. For example, any pictures of pigs and the word 'pig' had to be removed, which resulted in tearing pages from Science and English language textbooks. There was some debate about why this had to be done. Eating pork is *haram* (forbidden) for Muslims but taking offence at seeing the word 'pig,' or a picture of one, was surely going too far. By logical conclusion, it would result in children growing into adults who had no idea what a pig looked like and surely confusion would arise as to what this word 'pig' referred to if they ever came across it.

Further food (no pun intended) for thought was provided by the Muslim holy text itself. The Koran forbids consumption of the flesh of swine but by doing so has to refer to pigs (how would

you forbid something if you cannot refer to it? I forbid you to eat that which I will not mention?) The school, purportedly following Ministry of Education instructions, was under obligation to remove the offending word from all texts. All texts that is, except the Koran. So children could read in the Koran that swine were haram but were not to know what a pig looked like. The Koran, being Islam's holy text and, for Muslims, literally the words of God, could not be defaced in any way whatsoever and so the offending word remained in that particular book.

One consequence of the respect demanded for this holy text was the immediate sacking of a colleague without explanation. We were told nothing at the time of her disappearance. She didn't turn up for work one day and we never saw her again. It was all kept very hush-hush. All I could later gather was that after getting fed up with the mess pupils kept leaving her classroom in, which she would always have to clean up herself, she warned children that as of that fateful day anything left behind after her lesson would be thrown in the bin. The boys, who would routinely fight and throw things at each other, including their textbooks, ignored her.

That afternoon, when school was over, the teacher, true to her word, threw everything left behind in the bin; this included a couple of Arabic textbooks. She was not impetuous enough to throw away any Korans, not that the children threw these, but somebody (a child? a cleaner?) reported what she had done and the decision was made to dismiss her immediately. Her offence? Although the textbooks weren't Korans, they contained a few passages of the Koran on some pages. It was deemed a serious enough insult to take action. She lost her job and was kicked out of the country but nobody was interested in how it was that these books, containing a few holy verses, came to be on the floor in the first place or, consequently, that the students used them as projectiles during lessons.

During the open evening, a parent approached me and stated

that I had been teaching the children about living things; which I confirmed. “But …” she continued, “You have been telling the children we are animals.” I confirmed this also and started explaining the exercise of categorization. “But why are you teaching this?” she retorted with dismay and frustration, “Our religion does not teach this thing.” I explained I was teaching science and couldn’t possibly comment on her religion. She became more frustrated, “But in our religion this is not true. You cannot teach this. Our religion teaches us there are three categories: plants, animals and humans. You are saying that humans are animals!” I automatically replied, “But we are,” which was met with raised eyebrows.

I further explained that this is how scientists categorise things and, as I was there to teach science, this is what I taught. If Islam taught something different that was for the religious teachers but I could not teach something contrary to scientific thought and practice in a Science class. Either the parents wanted me to teach science or they didn’t. The parent was not about to let this go and continued protesting, so I ended the conversation by saying I would clear up any confusion at the next lesson. I have no idea what she thought I was intending to do, as I had left it vague, but she seemed placated and left amicably.

At the beginning of the next Science lesson, I announced that I needed to clarify something. I explained a parent had informed me Islam taught there were three categories of living things and listed these on the board. “However,” I continued, “I am here to teach you science and this is how scientists categorize living things,” changing the categories on the board to what I had taught the previous lesson. “I think it important that I make this distinction clear.” And that was the end of the matter. It was never raised again.

Some weeks after the open evening, I had a few parents request the test paper for an upcoming test. When I explained seeing

the paper in advance would not test the children's knowledge and thinking ability but their ability to memorize, and so refused, they complained that I was putting their children at a disadvantage. When it was made clear no children would see the paper in advance and so nobody was disadvantaged, they complained it was not fair or not right. They were genuinely confused about how such a system could work.

This is a common problem in Middle Eastern countries that want Western teachers or a Western style education but only the parts they agree with. It is not understood that a Western education, whichever curriculum is chosen and whichever pedagogical approach one chooses to deliver it in, is holistic, of which an intrinsic part is inquiry; to question and ask *why?* This issue becomes immediately apparent when observing teachers from both parts of the world. Middle Eastern teachers tend to talk at children, getting them to memorise and learn the right answers to questions provided in advance. The Western approach is to apply powers of reasoning to solve unfamiliar problems.

Middle Eastern countries want to produce more scientists but many in the Arab world are under the misapprehension that science is a list of facts to be memorized, not wondering how those facts were discovered in the first place. The lack of inquiry is not limited to science. Questions around historical change and how societies develop or progress are almost unheard of. This is understandable if one is a *theist* but it does not engender non-divine explanations for events and so an ability, let alone a willingness, to improve the lot of society. It is resignation that all is in the hands of God, or *fate is fate* no matter how much you rail against it, giving rise to the ubiquitous *insha Allah—if God is willing* or *God willing*.

Many Omanis I met were friendly and open. In reference to their usually laid-back approach to life, a guidebook I read before living in the country described Omanis as the surfer

dudes of the Arabian Peninsula. But there seemed to be growing resentment amongst some of the young toward foreigners, resulting in a spate of air gun shootings by young Omani men. These were non-fatal, given the weapon used, but they could be very dangerous with potential for the loss of an eye.

All shootings I became aware of were directed against non-Western foreigners and settled with the payment of blood money by the shooters' families. However, reading some of the comments underneath online news articles reporting what had happened, there was clearly a lot of hatred expressed towards Westerners by some. Justifications for the shootings included claims foreigners were to blame for a lack of opportunities and jobs for Omanis. Given the targets were mostly Filipinos and Indians doing poorly paid work, which no Omani would dream of doing, in dehumanizing conditions, I could only conclude that the hateful language being expressed was using the *lack of jobs* argument as a veneer for what was thinly disguised bigotry towards foreigners or non-Muslims.

Although none of those shot whilst I was there were Europeans or Americans (or at least not the ones I was aware of), much of the bigotry was aimed at Westerners. Westerners are usually recruited to administrative and professional roles, for which there is a lack of suitably qualified and/or experienced locals. The government tries to 'Omanise' these positions every so often, by legislating quotas for locally recruited staff, but it doesn't work. The reason for recruiting Western staff in the first place is due to the recognition there are not enough, if any, suitably qualified candidates amongst the local population. But what is the reason for this dearth in the first place? Attitudes towards science and all other forms of knowledge being subordinate to religious prescript might go some way to providing an explanation.

There was a period in history when Muslim ruled lands provided an environment conducive to science qua rational inquiry. This is often referred to as the golden age of Islam, beginning in

the 8th century. Proponents like Irshad Manji see recapturing *ijtihad*, the spirit of open inquiry that gave rise to that golden age, as key to the potential of Islam sitting comfortably with rational inquiry, science and humanism. She has articulately drawn attention to some of the issues within Islam which do not fit well with secular, liberal societies and has made attempts at figuring out how to bridge that divide.

One does not have to agree with her prescriptions but the fact that Manji, and others like her, are willing to speak openly about these issues is surely a positive sign. As a consequence, she has received death threats and her book *The Trouble With Islam* has been banned in most Muslim countries.

Manji particularly highlights the inferior status of women in the Islamic world; usually valued as second-class citizens at best but in any analysis inferior to, and there to uphold, male honour, if not viewed merely as property. Objections to such assertions often claim misogynism in Muslim countries does not originate with the Islamic faith *per se* but has its roots in traditional patriarchal societies. Accordingly, Islam is not to blame for conceiving such views but societies' traditional attitudes of gender hierarchy.

Whatever the case, however, Islamic beliefs can be blamed for sustaining views of female inferiority. This inferiority is laid out explicitly in verse 4:34 of the Koran, setting out a man's superior status and his God given right to mete out physical punishment to his wife. Inheritance laws (verse 4:11); the lower value of female testimony (verse 2:282); and the onus on a woman to provide at least four witnesses to any claim of rape (verse 4:15) only serve to reinforce this inferior status.

Certain statistics underscore this. Of the bottom twenty-five countries in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Index 2020* (ranking 153 countries on gender parity in economic

participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment), twenty-two were Muslim majority. These are not necessarily the world's poorest countries. Comprising 16% of countries in the WEF list, three of them (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran) were among the world's top 16% richest countries (listed in terms of GDP by the International Monetary Fund in 2019). Similarly, the OECD's 2019 *Social Institutions and Gender Index* (SIGI), measuring discrimination against women in social institutions across 180 countries, included fourteen Muslim majority countries in the top twenty.

Belief in the inferiority of women and the misogyny which accompanies it can only be challenged through the rejection of religious prescript and the pursuit of humanistic rational inquiry. The 12th century polymath, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who was to have a big influence on the Scholastics in Europe, held progressive views of women; seeing them as equally capable to men in many areas if they were given the same opportunities.

Whether the issue under discussion be scientific endeavour, the pursuit of truth or equal rights, these ideas can only be given their due worth in the spirit of rational inquiry. Islam's golden age provided such a milieu in which Rushd could dare to express his ideas. But as with Christianity before it, intellectual advances, which gave rise to individuals such as Rushd, in the Islamic world later gave way to religious conformity and the silencing of awkward questions that free inquiry always generates. The 9th century scholar Al-Kindi is usually credited with beginning this spirit of inquiry, ushering in Islam's golden age. If science and rationalism are to flourish once again in the Muslim world, it desperately needs another Al-Kindi.

At the end of our Science unit on *Living Things* I could not help but ask for a show of hands on whether children felt the categories according to their religion were more convincing or

scientific categorization. Only one child put their hand up confidently for the scientific convention. One or two others raised their hands hesitantly but, upon seeing the rest of their classmates not doing so, lowered them. This was disappointing but I was not there to throw doubt upon Islamic teachings. I must admit, however, it gave me a small sense of satisfaction knowing there was at least one child, and possibly a few others, willing to consider explanations for things without recourse to religious dogma.

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Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in countries across the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain. His book *Bloody Liberals: How Politically Correct Ideas About Race, Education and Religion are Killing Liberalism* is available on Amazon.

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