

## EDITORIAL

### *On Educating From a Single Book*

IAN WINCHESTER  
*University of Calgary*

Most of us watched with horror on September 11, 2001 as the World Trade Center towers were hit by passenger airliners which exploded as gigantic bombs, toppling the towers which crashed to the ground with 4000 dead. We then saw the Pentagon hit by a recently fueled jetliner also killing all the passengers aboard and hundreds at work in the building. It transpired that a number of young men of Arabic origin, many from Saudi Arabia, who had been educated in terrorism by a group called Al Quaida, were responsible for the acts. Some, perhaps all, knew they were committing suicide before they hijacked the jets.

In the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have sometimes found ourselves cheering someone who selflessly flung themselves upon a bomb in order to save their friends or innocent bystanders, thereby giving up their own lives. It is to such acts of selflessness that the actions of the young men of September 11<sup>th</sup> are assimilated by many of the Muslim population of the world. It is not hard to be sympathetic with those, Muslims or not, who believe that the situation for the Palestinians is unconscionable. Nor is it hard to be sympathetic with those who think that it is terrible that people are starving in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in part because of an international blockade. But it is hard for us to understand how 19 or so men could deliberately hijack a jet and fly it into innocent civilians, killing thousands.

To our way of judgment this seems to us to be the opposite of a selfless act. Instead it seems to be at best horribly misguided, at worst the epitome of evil incarnate. How is it possible that such a perversion of human feeling for fellow humans could occur? It is certainly not that we do not have precedents. The Hitler era in Europe with its systematic slaughter of Jews, communists, and homosexuals provided many parallels of the lack of human feeling for fellow humans. Japanese prisoner of war camps provided another. American bombing of civilians in Vietnam another. And we can list many, Biafra and Kosovo perhaps standing for the rest.

In some respects the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the most developed, most democratic, most generous century in the history of the world. In other respects it was an era which gave incredible powers to the oppressors of the world. Military and spy machinery of unprecedented kinds meant that populations could be kept in fear and trembling without hope except from outside intervention. And outside intervention was circumscribed because of the capabilities of mass destruction which the century had unleashed, especially in the form of nuclear weapons.

As I write, the war in Afghanistan (by the Americans and their allies against the Taliban regime of Mullah Omar which has supported and given a safe haven to the Al Quaida terrorist network run by Osama Bin Laden and his deputies) is coming to a rapid close with much more loss of innocent civilian life than one would have hoped, but less than easily imaginable. The "war on terrorism" which the American and their allies are waging appears just to have begun.

### *A Failure of Education?*

We have to consider the horrifying wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their 21<sup>st</sup> century aftermath in which we are caught up, a failure of 20<sup>th</sup> century education. Surely the First World War, which destroyed the European empires, was not just a failure of alliances and checks and balances in Europe to maintain a peace. It was a time of whole populations, populations who had been educated by their nation states, spoiling for war. The brightest youth of Europe and its colonies, of Africa and Asia, of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, and Canada, and finally the United States were slaughtered in the horrific conditions of trench warfare and gas attacks on the fields of Belgium and France which 20<sup>th</sup> century technology made available for the first time. And they were slaughtered for patriotic reasons, with no thought to the wider good. The development of Nazi Germany may have been due, in large part, to the settlement of the First World War. But it would not have been possible if a whole population had not been willing to believe in national, linguistic, and racial superiority as the Nazi propaganda machine would have it. And that readiness to believe is surely a result of a certain kind of state-sponsored mass education, perhaps preceded by a certain kind of pre-school education in the homes.

One of the characteristics of the mass European educational system, which the 20<sup>th</sup> century made available for the first time in history to entire populations within nation states, was that it developed systematic glorification of its own nation state and taught hatred for others. Every European nation had grievances with other

European nations. And in history and literature classes in schools on the continent these grievances were aired and developed as running sores or open wounds. Neighboring states were portrayed as enemies and as the embodiment of evil. One's own history was glorified, especially one's own military and diplomatic history. Grievances were remembered and exaggerated (*je me souviens*). Kindnesses or commonalities denied or forgotten.

Just after Tiananmen Square in 1989, where innocent, idealistic children had been slaughtered by a fearful government which had been accused of widespread corruption by the Chinese students, I attended a large UNESCO gathering in Beijing which was to discuss the future of education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of our talk and worry, of course, was about what had gone wrong in China such that it engaged the army to murder its own children and youth not far from where we were meeting. But much of our talk was about what we could do for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to minimize the kind of horrors which the 20<sup>th</sup> century had brought.

One suggestion which made a great deal of sense was that history be taught from an international, not a national, perspective. Another and perhaps even more radical educational suggestion was that one's history be taught from the vantage point of one's neighbors or if that was too Christian, from the vantage point of one's enemies.

In the present context, namely the great discontents in the Middle East, one example might be that Israeli Jews would be taught the history of Palestine from the vantage point of the Palestinians and the Palestinians the history of Israel from the vantage point of the Jews. Presumably the Iraqis would be taught history from the vantage point of the Iranians and Kuwaitis and vice-versa as well. There would be room for free discussion. But the vantage point of the aggrieved "other" would be the first consideration.

### ***The Fallacy of Teaching from a Single Text or Reading from a Single Book***

What such a suggestion is pointing to is that most of the time in our learning of all kinds we commit the fallacy of teaching from a single text or of learning from a single book. This is probably just as destructive intellectually in mathematics, biology or physics, in athletics or art and music, as it is in historical or religious education. In university education for the last 1000 years or so this has been the common practice at the undergraduate level. But socially, to teach from a single text in history is disastrous, if the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century experience is to be taken seriously. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have had, to take only two examples, *Mein Kampf* and *Mao's Little*

*Red Book*, both of which inspired whole peoples to concentrate on limited tasks over long periods of time with disastrous consequences for their people. These consequences were the Second World War leading to the unconditional surrender of Germany and the Great Leap Forward with its loss of 20 million Chinese to starvation and the total destruction for a generation of serious Chinese scholarship due to the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution.

When the single text is a holy book, considered the word of God on Earth, the problems may be multiplied many-fold. (It is of course arguable and has been argued that both *Mein Kampf* and the *Little Red Book* played a role in a kind of religious movement.) If a young Israeli reads only the Torah and a Christian Arab only the Gospels and a Muslim Arab only the Koran each would miss much of the good in one another's religious writings. In principle, a Muslim accepts both the Torah and the Gospels as divinely inspired and the Koran as a work to correct errors and to confirm the truths in the interpretation of both of these. But in practice, the concentration on a single book, and in the case of the concentration only on the Koran by those surrounding the atrocity of September 11th, has been disastrous both for the thousands of victims from 64 countries who were in the New York buildings at the time as well as for the Afghan people, the Taliban, and the Al Quaida network.

One of the dangers of reading only from single religious book, especially in the light of one's own local version of history, is that such a reading tends to confirm one's hatred of one's neighbours, especially when they have been the historical enemy. I am aware of the usefulness of the single book in making an entire people literate as, for example, Luther's German Bible did in Prussia, or as for example the Swedish translation of it which was used to make the entire Swedish population able to read Gothic script for government purposes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps something similar may have happened in the early days of Islam. One book is sometimes better than none. But it may also be a great danger in the hands of a powerful elite who control its interpretation and meaning.

Mohammed's revelations from God were always in the historical context of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in which he and his small band of followers were in intellectual conflict and often at war with their Arab neighbours, whether they were Jewish arabs, Christian arabs, or pagan arabs. So a considerable part of the text involves expostulation about the dangers of consorting with Jews, Christians, and pagans. A typical passage in 5:82 reads:

You will find that the most implacable of men in their enmity to the faithful are the Jews and the pagans, and the nearest in

affection to them are those who say: 'We are Christians.' That is because there are priests and monks among them; and because they are free from pride.

Or a slightly earlier passage in 5:51:

Believers, take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number. God does not guide the wrongdoers.

There is no danger for a modern reader coming across these passages provided such a reader understands them in their historical context. Clearly in an historical context they warn Mohammed's followers about the dangers of consorting with the enemy while you are still fighting them. But they are certainly not statements to be read as true for all Jews and all Christians through all time. The danger of the fallacy of teaching from a single book is that one takes these to be non-historical warnings. Thus even though the reference is clearly to the 7<sup>th</sup> century in the Arabian peninsula, it is taken by a reader today with no other learned acquaintance to mean that you cannot trust Jews and Christians today as well. Then one is in a situation of self-fulfilling prophecy where none was intended.

The above passage is shortly followed by the striking exhortation in 5:55 as:

Believers, do not seek the friendship of the infidels and those who were given the Book before you, who have made of your religion a jest and a pastime. Have fear of God, if you are true believers. When you call them to pray they treat their prayers as a jest and a pastime. This is because they are devoid of understanding.

Say: "People of the Book, it is not that you hate us only because we believe in God and in what has been revealed to us and to others before, and because most of you are evil-doers."

If one confined one's reading of the Koran to only these passages one might easily conclude that one's religion, if Islam, had nothing good to say about Jews and Christians and that they are always and forever implacable enemies.

But there are also numerous passages which are magnanimous and wise. Indeed, Muslims are permitted to marry Christian women, as the Prophet Mohammed himself did and as the King of Jordan has done in our own day, as well as the Aga Khan.

One magnanimous passage occurs early on in the Koran, where Jews and Christians are referred to as they often are in the Koran as "the People of the Book." It reads as follows in 2:109:

Many among the People of the Book wish, through envy, to lead you back to unbelief, now that you have embraced the Faith and

the truth has been made plain to them. Forgive them and bear with them until God make known His will. God has power over all things.

And a little later in 2:115 in a passage that Jews and Christians might take seriously today:

The Jews say the Christians are misguided, and the Christians say it is the Jews who are misguided. Yet they both read the Scriptures. And the ignorant say the same of both. God will judge their disputes on the day of Resurrection.

And as for taking Christian and Jewish women in marriage, 5:5 exhorts:

Lawful to you are the believing women and the free women from among those who were given the Book before you, provided that you give them their dowries and live in honour with them, neither committing fornication nor taking them as mistresses.

In fact the Prophet's Christian bride would not convert to Islam so he lived with her as his concubine.

But more characteristic of the tone of the Mohammed's revelations concerning the People of the Book in his own day are passages such as 3:110 which reads:

Had the People of the Book accepted the Faith, it would surely have been better for them. Some are true believers, but most of them are evil-doers. If they harm you, they can cause you but a slight hurt; and if they fight against you they will turn their backs and run away. Then there shall be none to help them. Ignominy shall attend them wherever they are found, unless they make a covenant with God or with man. They have incurred the wrath of God and have been utterly humbled: because they disbelieved God's revelations and slew the prophets unjustly; and because they were rebels and transgressors.

But even this is followed by a magnanimous passage (3:113):

Yet they are not all alike. There are among the People of the Book some upright men who all night long recite the revelations of God and worship Him; who believe in God and the Last Day; who enjoin justice and forbid evil and vie with one another in Good works. These are righteous men: whatever good they do its reward shall not be denied them. God knows the righteous.

A reader of the Koran who knew nothing other than this one divine Book, but who concentrated on passages such as those cited above while excluding 3:113, could hardly be faulted if he came away with the impression that the Jews and Christians were the implacable enemies of the Prophet. Or if he concluded that the Jews and Christians were, as Bin Laden appears to believe, the implacable enemies of all Muslims today. Yet clearly the Prophet's revelations of God's word were relative to the particular time and place that God

through his angel spoke to Mohammed. And his revelations on the topic were not single valued.

The Taliban, or Students (of the Koran, of course) who have formed until recently the generally unrecognized government of Afghanistan, are a religious educational movement originating in Pakistan which exhorts the faithful to study only the Koran and to take what it says with complete literalness and as if the context were still the 7<sup>th</sup> century of our common era. They represent a good example of the fallacy of the single book. Although Mohammed exhorted his faithful to read the whole book, the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden appear to concentrate on certain passages to the exclusion of others. They are ahistorical in their readings in much the way that Jewish and Christian fundamentalists are or appear to be. But an ahistorical reading is only possible to those who have read little and ignored history. And what little they have read they have read badly.

The consequences of their fallacy achieving power has been the incredible increase in the sufferings of the Afghan people, perhaps the women most of all. From a single passage in the Koran 33:29 ("Wives of the Prophet ... Stay in your homes and do not display your finery as women used to do in the days of ignorance") in which the Prophet appears to be referring to the wisdom of keeping his own eleven or so wives indoors for fear that they may be in danger by those visiting the Mosque in whose environs he and his household lived, the Taliban ordered all women to stay home and to cover themselves completely in a burka. Schools for women were closed and for boys, schooling was restricted to the study of the Koran. Something has gone very wrong here.

It is as if, because a Gospel describes Mary, Jesus' mother, as a virgin (interpreted as not having had sexual relations with a man as opposed to the common usage that she was just a young unmarried woman or the medical usage meaning that she has not yet had a child) a Christian religious movement declared that all women must henceforth be virgins in the first sense and remain so all their lives on pain of death, presumably while awaiting the imminent day of judgment and resurrection. We are not without such religious sects in North America who interpret their sacred book equally arbitrarily.

### *Educating in a Multicultural, Multinational Context*

We are probably a long way from the possibility that the United Nations directs our various national educational schemes in order to promote world peace and harmony by taking seriously the injunction to teach history from a world vantage point or at least from the vantage point of one's neighbors, enemies, and friends. To do so

would require the use of many books and sources. It would require that thinking about one's neighbors would have to be carried on with goodwill and with understanding, or at least a serious attempt at understanding from the vantage point of many sources, many texts, and many explanations. Until we begin to achieve this generally we are unlikely to have one world without the kinds of terrible strife, agitation, misunderstanding, and horror that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was and the 21<sup>st</sup> century promises to be, a world we should be proud to carry to other planets somewhere in the universe which support intelligent life.

*Ian Winchester, Editor*