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BOUTROS AL-BOUSTANI

(1819-83)

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Dominated by the Ottoman Turks since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Middle East experienced a genuine cultural renaissance from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, despite the upheavals which disturbed it during that period.² The renaissance was brought about by the links of trade, politics and culture between East and West, which, although they had existed for some time already, became really profitable only during the last century.

The pioneers of the cultural renaissance sought first of all to promote the use of Arabic as the national language, long-neglected by the Ottoman Turks, and to make it a suitable vehicle for communicating the new knowledge which underlay the technical and social progress of European countries. The desire to convey this knowledge to their peoples naturally impelled the pioneers to give the question of education special prominence in their activities, convinced as they were that the progress of the peoples of the Middle East would largely depend on the educational attainments of their citizens.

One of the pioneers who turned their attention to the problems of education is Boutros al-Boustani (Lebanon), who has rightly been called the 'Master' and 'Father of the Renaissance'.³ Although he left no specific works setting out his educational theories, they are nevertheless to be found in most of his published works which deal either with traditional education as provided by schools or with the broader education that comes from reading, travelling or membership of specialized associations. On the basis of these scattered ideas, it would seem possible to reconstruct al-Boustani's educational theories, too often neglected by researchers who have dwelt only on the patriotic, political, social and scientific aspects of his work.⁴

The place of education in al-Boustani's work

Education is the keynote of al-Boustani's work. Education is the instrument *par excellence* for forming the human mind and saving people from 'ignorance, the cause of all the evils afflicting the East'.⁵ It is the means whereby the seed of the idea of union is sown in young people's minds, so as to develop and prepare them for the task of building a united nation founded on strong principles which are resistant to religious passions.⁶ Finally, it is the only means of combating feudalism⁷ and bringing about technical and political changes in society by peaceful means.⁸ 'Master Boutros,' Michail Sawaya writes, 'acted throughout his life in response to an inner voice which repeatedly told him: you were born in this century to carry out reforms, to construct and to give'.⁹ For him, reforming, constructing and giving came together in education, which alone could help to reform society.

The source of al-Boustani's educational theories

It is impossible to arrive at any exact idea of a thinker's ideas without some knowledge of the social, political and cultural context in which he or she lived and wrote. We therefore think it useful, before going on to analyze al-Boustani's educational ideas, to recall the fact that the nineteenth century was a time of much agitation in the Middle East which shook the existing social, political, cultural and economic structures to their foundations.

Al-Boustani asked himself this question: Why do the citizens of one and the same country, 'who drink the same water, breathe the same air and speak the same language, kill and destroy one another?'.¹⁰ In his opinion, the cause of all these evils was ignorance, the source of discord and religious fanaticism, which made the citizens of a country 'easy playthings' in the hands of foreigners who sought to divide the nation so as insidiously to rule it.¹¹ Hence the need to educate the citizens in order to put an end to discord and found a nation whose strength lay precisely in its unity.¹²

Al-Boustani's educational theories are, then, the result of profound thinking about the general situation of the country, and they rest on a conception of what constitutes a nation or a society which he augmented and developed throughout his life.

He taught that human beings are social creatures who cannot live in isolation since they need other people in order to survive. People who live together in a community seek to form a government in order to ward off external and internal dangers. The government is elected by the people and must place itself at their service. The government draws its strength from the 'spirit of the age', i.e. the corpus of principles which direct the course of nations and which take their origin in the work of scholars, thinkers and national leaders. How is the government to interpret 'the spirit of the age'? This is a task for scholars, thinkers and the people at large. However, if the people are to carry out this task, on which their lives and prosperity depend, they must be educated.¹³

These views were the starting-point for all al-Boustani's work on social and national questions. He thought that the ultimate human aim was to found a nation. If the nation were to live and thrive, people must be 'enlightened' about all the principles which made a nation strong and worthy of respect, and this could not be achieved without education, which, as we have seen, is an integral part of al-Boustani's social philosophy.

al-Boustani's educational theories

In setting out his ideas, al-Boustani used not one, but several terms, depending on circumstances or the different shades of meaning that he wished to express. For example, when he spoke of people's education in general, he employed the term *Ta'alim*, which means 'teaching',¹⁴ but when he addressed himself to the nation to exhort it to widen its field of knowledge, he employed either the term *Tahsil al-'Ulum* (the learning of knowledge) or the term *Tatqif* (culture). And when addressing the élite, he often employed the expression *Nashr al-ma'arif* (to spread knowledge).¹⁵ However, in all these terms or expressions, which he employed on different occasions, the essence of his meaning was one and the same: to educate the citizen. The term *Tarbiyya*, which means 'education' or 'upbringing', is used by al-Boustani to refer exclusively to the activity exercised by parents in bringing up their children in the family.¹⁶ So we find that the terminology in which these pedagogical ideas are expressed is somewhat different from that which is current nowadays.

The need for education

Education is a human necessity, since ‘any human being, as soon as he comes into the world, is entirely in the hands of other people. That being cannot provide for his own needs or understand what is happening around him without the help of other people. He is totally unable by himself to discern what is beneficial to him and what is harmful. If, at this stage, the human being is left to his or her own devices he will inevitably perish, since he has as yet insufficient physical strength to withstand the difficulties of life, and his intellectual capacities are still in darkness and unable to guide his steps.’¹⁷

He is concerned here, in other words, with the socialization of the child. However, such socialization can be achieved only by and within society itself. Thus, al-Boustani wholly rejects the possibility that a human being might attain knowledge by its own efforts, without the help of society, as has been taught by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tofayl in the twelfth century, in his philosophical tale *Hayy ben Yaqzan*.¹⁸

Learning

According to al-Boustani, the human being acquires knowledge gradually through imitation, experience and judgement. We acquire knowledge of the material world through our senses and our intellect, establish relationships between objects perceived by our senses and form concepts. Life in society teaches us about the customs of social life so that we can learn to conform to them. This learning process takes place under the supervision of society and through the personal effort that each human being makes in order to succeed in it. The predisposition to learn is not the same for all people: some are very quick to learn, while others are less so. What is the reason for this difference? It arises first of all from the particular make-up of the individual, whereby some are more disposed than others to acquire knowledge; it is also a consequence of the climate: some peoples are more gifted for the acquisition of knowledge than others; finally, it is to be explained by the socio-economic environment in which the person lives, so that children from a cultured background learn more easily than children from a disadvantaged background.

The conditions for learning

Certain conditions must be fulfilled if the process of learning is to achieve the results expected by society.

The first condition is that there must be both individual and social motivation. If there is no motivation, it is difficult for the human being to learn, since his or her intellectual capacities remain dormant. Human intelligence is prepared to exert itself only if the end that it pursues is likely to provide greater pleasure than the effort required. It is, therefore, motivation that must guide any kind of learning.

Second to motivation is the personal effort needed to acquire knowledge. Nothing can be achieved in life without sacrifice, and the acquisition of knowledge calls for the renunciation of any action that may stand in the way of acquiring it. In al-Boustani’s opinion, while knowledge and vice cannot be reconciled, knowledge and virtue are complementary, in that virtue is a necessary condition for human beings encouraging them to master knowledge and persevere in their efforts.

Freedom, whose essential function is to create a climate in which intelligence can flourish, is also a necessary condition for the acquisition of knowledge. If intelligence is enslaved, that despotism brings ignorance, because it kills motivation and effort.

The content of education

What should be learned? Al-Boustani did not define the content of education. On several occasions in his addresses and articles he exhorted his fellow citizens to learn all the ‘different kinds of knowledge required by the spirit of the age’.¹⁹ By this he meant all the accumulated knowledge available at that time. It was, moreover, in accordance with the same principles that he embarked on his project to compile an encyclopedia.

In the ‘Discourse on the Education of Women’, however, al-Boustani outlined the knowledge that women in particular should acquire. He claimed that women should know everything that would help them fulfil their social function with ease and make them worthy to take their place in a civilized society. Accordingly, he listed in order: religion, the mother-tongue, reading, writing, the science of bringing up children, domestic science, geography, history and arithmetic.

The brief outline indicates that he saw the content of education as essentially functional: individuals must learn everything they need in order to function properly as members of society.

The methods of learning

Methods for facilitating learning are many. Al-Boustani lists the following:

School. Al-Boustani founded the ‘National School’ in order to show how this institution should be used for the acquisition of knowledge. In organizing it he drew on both his experience and his convictions, as we shall see.

Talks and lectures are among the ‘major and best methods’ of transmitting knowledge. In his opinion, they are most effective when organized on a regular basis by clubs or cultural associations.²⁰ El-Boustani himself often made use of this method through the scientific associations he founded between 1847 and 1876,²¹ in his National School, where he called all the students together once a week in an assembly in order to give them advice and, finally, in the Evangelical Sunday School over which he presided for twenty years and where he preached every week.

The information media, such as national and foreign newspapers and specialized magazines, which help to acquaint readers with the most recent advances in the human sciences.

The last methods of learning consist of *travel* inside and outside the country and *correspondence* with scholars and research centres in order to keep abreast of the most recent discoveries and to request advice.

Theory into action: the national school

As we have already seen, al-Boustani’s life abounded in projects whose aim was to broaden and deepen the knowledge of his fellow citizens, but his most fruitful project by far in the furtherance of this aim was the National School, founded in 1863.²² What was the reason for this school, and why was it given this name?

Al-Boustani had personally witnessed the religious strife which occurred in Bar ash-Sham between 1840 and 1860 and which resulted in massacres among Christians, Druses and Muslims. Distressed by these events, which ‘were scattering families, tearing the country apart and destroying it’, in September 1860 he appealed to the citizens to ‘bury their differences and to awake and unite for the common benefit of the nation’.²³

This appeal was followed by ten more, all of which were intended to establish a national doctrine that would rescue his fellow citizens from religious fanaticism. Once his

appeals had been made, al-Boustani set himself the task of founding an institution which would embody his nationalist beliefs. In his opinion, education should be provided by the State, and should no longer be regarded as a duty of the Church towards the faithful, as had been decreed by the Maronite Synod meeting at Louaïré in 1736; it was necessary to separate Church and State.²⁴ Education would thus become national and would no longer be denominational. He was convinced that a school provided the most fertile ground for 'sowing the seeds of union and love in young people whose souls are still pure. The seeds will grow with these young souls, and it is the nation that will reap the harvest'.²⁵ He gave his National School the following motto: 'Patriotism is a part of faith'. The school was based on national principles and was open to all without distinction of race or creed. It differed in this respect from the other schools of the day, which were mostly denominational and reserved almost exclusively for the believers of the community that ran them. There were, for example, Maronite schools, Greek Catholic schools, Greek Orthodox schools, etc., in addition to the schools of the foreign missions of the Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Slav countries which were mouthpieces of propaganda for their countries of origin.

In the midst of this educational chaos, al-Boustani described his own creation in these words:

The 'National School' is located in one of the best quarters of Beirut; its buildings are among the finest in the city and the situation is a healthy one. The school is surrounded by extensive grounds, planted with leafy trees which provide an agreeable setting for the students' daily lives. [...]

The languages taught are Arabic, Turkish, French, English, Latin, Greek and any other language if it is requested by at least six students. [...]

The school welcomes students from all religions and all races without distinction. It respects their beliefs and compels no one to embrace a religion other than that of his parents.²⁶

This description emphasizes some aspects of the school, but omits others which are equally important and which are to be found in the school rules, drawn up by al-Boustani himself, and whose main points are as follows:²⁷

The school is not a denominational school, but a national and secular school that admits students of different religions and races without distinction or discrimination.

The school recruits its teaching staff from among qualified candidates, taking no account of their religion, race or nationality.

Within the school, the students, teachers and head teacher of the school and his family are on an equal footing; they eat the same food together at the same table.

The number of students in each class must not exceed the capacities of the teacher.

The subjects taught at the school must be in accordance with the 'spirit of the age.'

The school is universal in character and, as a rule, teaches any known language if requested by at least six students; but it pays special attention to the Arabic language, since this is the language of the country and since the success of the students in any field depends on it.

The school must enjoy complete independence.

These regulations highlight four of al-Boustani's key ideas:

1. Secularism: the school is no longer denominational, but secular, based on national principles accessible to all citizens, whether they be students or teachers.
2. Equality among all those belonging to the school: students, teachers and the head teacher enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations.
3. Freedom is essential in the quest for learning.
4. The teaching curriculum must answer the real needs of the country.

Commenting on the Rules, Youssef K. Khoury wrote:

Al-Boustani wished his school to be entirely national in character, so that the students attending it would not

feel like foreigners in their own country and so that they would benefit from the teaching which they received at school. Moreover, al-Boustani made a great effort to cultivate patriotism in the hearts of his students so that they would be loyal to their country and willing to sacrifice themselves for it if need be.²⁸

Al-Boustani kept to these rules throughout the period when his school was in operation, from 1863 to 1878. The school was indeed attended by pupils of different religions, races and nationalities. Besides the languages mentioned above, teaching was provided in the various fields of knowledge then known, such as arithmetic, geometry, history, geography, commerce, civil law, Islamic law, the physical sciences and medicine.²⁹ The school textbooks were compiled by al-Boustani himself or by the teachers. These textbooks were outstanding for their simplicity and clarity. In addition, al-Boustani gathered the students together once a week in an assembly for a debate on the subjects studied in the school or for guidance on matters of national and social importance.

According to evidence from many sources, the school was a great success and was respected by many important people of the day, for three main reasons:

1. Al-Boustani wanted those attending his school to be a cross-section of the nation. The pupils, in spite of their different religious and educational backgrounds, were to be brothers belonging to a single nation. The differences between them would have no influence on their studies nor on their life in society, since they would be the élite of the nation.
2. His qualified staff, including the earliest pioneers of the renaissance, enjoyed great prestige among the population.
3. Finally, the content of the curriculum was directly geared to the real needs of society.

The originality of the National School resided in the fact that it was the only school to be based on a national doctrine with secular principles at a time when religious and foreign schools (from the Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Slav countries) were being set up in the country and corrupting young people's minds with their frank propaganda. It had a major impact on the education system in Lebanon, since it provided a model for a number of national schools that were founded to counteract the religious and foreign schools.

Also worthy of our attention today are the various pedagogical standards which were set out in the rules and which are still valid: staff/student ratios; equality between the teaching staff and the students with a view to creating a family atmosphere in the school; planning of curricula in accordance with the real needs of society.

The significance of al-Boustani's educational theories is that they continue to be a source of inspiration for the Lebanon and for all the people's of the Arab Middle East. A century after his death, which occurred in 1883, the peoples of this region, and especially the Lebanese people, feel that they could have avoided or overcome many of the problems with which they have been beset since the 1950s if they had remained faithful to al-Boustani's ideals. Whenever national reform is mentioned, al-Boustani's educational theories come to mind. As al-Boustani himself frequently repeated in his speeches and writings, any national reform necessarily includes educational reform: education is the light that shines into people's minds, chasing away the shadows of ignorance, the source of so many evils still afflicting us today.

Notes

1. *Khalil Abou Rjaili (Lebanon)*. Adviser on educational planning to the Ministry of National Education of Lebanon; director of socio-economic research at the Lebanese Institute for Economic and Social Development; former professor in the Department of Educational Sciences of the University of St. Joseph (1978-1988). Author of: *L'école subventionnée au Liban: origines, structure et rôle* [The Subsidized School in Lebanon: Origins, Structure, and Role]; *Social Background and School Success in Lebanon*;

- Education in Lebanon: Realities and Hardships; Appraisal of the Lebanese Wars* (in Arabic).
2. These included the wars of Al-Jazzar, the Pasha of Acre, at the beginning of the century; the military expedition of Mohamad 'Ali, Governor of Egypt (1830-40); the massacre of Christians by Druses and Muslims (1840 and 1860); the peasant revolt at Kisrawan, led by Tanios Shahin (1858).
 3. Al-Boustani was born in the village of Dibbiyya in the Shuf, in January 1819. He received his primary education in the village school, where he attracted the attention of his teacher, Father Mikhail al-Boustani, by his keen intelligence. The latter recommended him to the Bishop of Sidon and Bayt ad-Din, 'Abdullah al-Boustani, who sent him at the age of 11 to the school at 'Ayn Warqa, the most famous school of that period, to continue his studies there. He spent ten years there and learned several foreign languages, including French, Italian and English. In Beirut he came into contact with the American Protestant missionaries with whom he worked closely until his death in May 1883. In the social, national and political spheres, he founded associations with a view to forming a national élite and launched a series of appeals for unity in his magazine *Nafir Suriya*. In the educational field, he initially taught in the schools of the Protestant missionaries at 'Ubey before founding his own National School on secular principles. At the same time, he compiled and published several school textbooks and dictionaries. In the cultural and scientific fields, he published a fortnightly review, two daily newspapers and an encyclopedia, the first in Arabic, although it remained unfinished. In addition to these activities, he began work, together with Ali Smith of the American Mission, on a translation of the Bible, which also remained unfinished.
 4. See, for example, the following publications in Arabic: Fouad Ephrem al-Boustani, [The Master Boutros al-Boustani], Beirut, Institut des Lettres Orientales, 1950 (Série Al-Rawai'); Michail Sawaya, [The Master Boutros al-Boustani], Beirut, Publications de la librairie al-Boustani, 1963; Jean Daï, [The Master Boutros al-Boustani], Beirut, Publications de la Revue Fikr, 1981; Youssef K. El-Khoury, [The Master Boutros al-Boustani], an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the American University of Beirut.
 5. This was the precept of all the writers of the Renaissance, quoted by Z.K. Lyvine, [Modern Social and Political Thought in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt], Beirut, Dar ibn Khaldun, 1978, p. 78. [In Arabic]
 6. Michail Sawaya, op. cit., p. 78
 7. Loutsky, [Modern History of the Arab Countries], 8th ed., Beirut, 1985, p. 167. [In Arabic]
 8. Z.K. Lyvine, op. cit., p. 13.
 9. Michail Sawaya, op. cit., p. 33.
 10. Boutros el-Boustany, *Nafir Suriya*, no. 1, 29 October 1860.
 11. Ibid., no. 9, 14 January 1861.
 12. Ibid.
 13. These views are expressed in the articles in *Al-Jinan*, a review founded by al-Boustani on 1 January 1870. The analysis of the content of this magazine is by L. Zulundig, quoted by Z.K. Lyvine, op. cit., p. 69-70.
 14. See Boutros al-Boustani, [Discourse on the education of women], 14 December 1849, in *Actes de l'Association syrienne*, Beirut, 1852.
 15. See Boutros al-Boustani, [Discourse on science among the Arabs (Introduction)], 15 February 1859.
 16. Boutros al-Boustani, [Discourse on the education of women], op. cit.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibn Tofayl (1100-85), an Arab scholar from Andalusia, born in the province of Granada (Spain), who died in Marrakech (Morocco). He devoted his life to medicine, mathematics, philosophy and poetry. Among his philosophical works is the philosophical tale *Hayy ben Yaqzan*, in which Ibn Tofayl attempts to reconcile philosophy with religion. Hayy, alone on a desert island, manages by his own efforts and through his own intellectual capabilities to acquire all knowledge.
 19. Boutros al-Boustani, [Discourse on Society and a Comparison of Arab and Foreign Customs], Beirut, Imprimerie Al-Ma'arif, 1869. [In Arabic]
 20. Boutros al-Boustani, [Discourse on science among the Arabs], op. cit.
 21. Al-Boustani helped to found three scientific associations: the Syrian Association (1847-52); the Syrian Scientific Association (1868); and the Secret Association (1875). He was their true 'spiritual father', who directed their activities towards national ends: the independence of the country, free speech, the opening of schools, etc. It was to these associations that he delivered addresses, notably on the education of women (1849) and on science among the Arabs (1859).
 22. See Fouad Ephrem al-Boustani, *The Master Boutros al-Boustani*, 2nd ed., Beirut, 1952, p. 75. (Série Al Rawai' series, no. 22)
 23. Boutros al-Boustani, *Nafir Suriya*, op. cit., no. 1, 29 September 1860.
 24. Ibid., no. 10, 22 February 1861.
 25. Cf. Fouad Ephrem al-Boustani, op. cit., p. 76.

26. Report written by al-Boustani and published in his review *Al-Jinan*, Vol. 4, 1873, p. 62.
27. See *Al-Jinan*, Vol. 4, 1873, p. 62, and Jean Daï, op. cit., p. 43-49.
28. Youssef K. El-Khoury, op. cit., p. 53.
29. Cf. Michail Sawaya, op. cit., p. 37.

Al-boustani's works on education

- 'Discourse on Education Given at the National School.' In: *Al-Jinan* (Beirut), no. 3, 1870.
- 'The National School.' In: *Al-Jinan* (Beirut), no. 18, 1873.
- 'Discourse on Science among the Arabs', Beirut, 15 February 1859.
- 'Discourse on the Education of Women', given in 1849 at the meeting of members of the Syrian Association and published in the *Actes de l'Association syrienne*, Beirut, 1852.
- 'Discourse on Social Life', Beirut, 1869.
- Boutros al-Boustani. *Textes choisis*. With a commentary by Fouad Ephrem al-Boustani. Beirut, Publications de l'Institut des Lettres Orientales, 1950. (Collection Al Rawai')
- The writings and speeches of Boutros el-Boustani, either in published or manuscript form, are preserved in the 'Yafeth' Library at the American University of Beirut and available to readers and researchers.

Selected writings about al-Boustani

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