

# The Bible, the Koran, and General Education

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**Abstract** American universities have eliminated the required study of liberal and general education and removed from common learning the principal narratives of the historical development of civilization and what it means to be human. There is no consensus on the meaning of a college education or what college-educated individuals should know as a result of the undergraduate experience. Restoring the idea of general education and common learning is essential in the curriculum of the American university and in the modern global university. But what does this have to do with the Bible and the Koran? The two narratives are principal sources of general education and they are at the center of religious issues and conflicts worldwide. This paper describes: (1) the failure of general education in the American university, (2) the rationale for common learning in higher education, (3) the method of reading and study of great books and great ideas, (4) the need for Biblical and Koranic literacy, and (5) the Bible as the principal source book of general education.

**Keywords** Bible, Koran, General Education, Liberal Education, Common Learning, Great Books

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## 1. Introduction

On virtually every list of the greatest universities in the world, the majority of the top ten and the top one hundred are universities in the United States.[1] Leading American universities are regarded as the premier universities in the world just as the German universities were in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the top of the top is Harvard, the first institution of “higher” education founded in what is now the United States of America. Yet, Harry Lewis, a distinguished faculty member at Harvard for 32 years and Dean of Harvard College from 1995 to 2003, has censured the University and other leading American universities for ignoring education in his book entitled, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*. The book is a devastating critique of the general education curriculum at Harvard as aimless, soulless, hollow and disconnected. The “soul” of Harvard as reflected in the idea and purpose of general education has been lost, and Lewis has proposed a return to an educational ideal designed to lead students to become not only more knowledgeable but also better and wiser human beings. He lamented the Harvard faculty’s loss of nurturing their students. They had forgotten “to help them (students) grow up, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.”[2], p. xii. “I have almost never heard discussions among professors about making students better people.” (p. xiii.) “Few professors enter academia as a mission, a noble calling.” (p. 8). He indicated that moral guidance of students is unknown if not

disdained, and summarized his faculty critique by stating, “*It is safer to treat the student as a brain on a stick.*” (p. 100). It is ironic that Lewis deplored the loss of general education during the same period when Harvard and other American universities were growing to unparalleled prestige and prosperity. The book should be read by every individual in higher education, especially those in leadership positions. This paper describes the historical erosion of general education in the universities and offers proposals to return to “core” subjects and sources for common learning, including biblical and koranic literacy.

## 2. The Erosion of General Education

The liberal arts college has been a distinguishing feature of American higher education from the initiation of Harvard College in 1636. The liberal arts idea and model became incorporated into the later development of the American university under the rubric of “general education,”...*the term that has come to be accepted for those phases of nonspecialized and nonvocational learning which should be the common experience of all educated men and women.*”[3], p. 771. General education has been a uniquely American feature of higher education that has been absent in most university systems around the world. When the German model of the university emerged in the U.S. in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some advocates proposed that it be separate from the liberal arts colleges. Instead, it became superimposed on top of the liberal arts colleges with an exclusive focus on graduate and professional education and research. From its beginning, graduate and professional specialization has encroached upon general education, and after World War II the erosion process accelerated until the idea was no longer viable in most universities. Lewis’ most

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Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/edu>  
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severe critique of Harvard was that, *“The Enlightenment ideal of human liberty and the philosophy embedded in American democracy barely exist in the current Harvard curriculum.”*[2], p. 62.

A faculty committee of Harvard College published, in 1945, the report on “General Education in a Free Society” that was designed to help *“prevent another catastrophe like the one that had nearly destroyed the civilized world.”*[2], p.53. While the Report, known as the “Red Book” recommended that all students take common courses in **humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences**, the Report never realized its promise, and thirty years later, general education courses had become increasingly specialized and distant from ordinary citizens (p. 9).

In 1947, the Federal Government issued a Report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education summarizing the need for general education that stated, *“The crucial task of higher education today...is to provide a unified general education for American youth.”*[3], p. 771. That crucial task has never been realized or even attempted in most American universities.

### 3. The Rationale for Common Learning

Since retiring from Harvard, Lewis has continued to chronicle the demise of general education and to call for a return to its “venerable and honorable notion.”[4], (See Dean’s Letter). He joined with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and led a national study of general education that resulted in a report issued in 2009. The study evaluated the undergraduate curricula at major colleges and universities to determine whether they required seven key subjects: **English Composition, literature, foreign language, U.S. government or history, economics, mathematics, and science.** *“What we found is alarming. Even as our students need broad-based skills and knowledge to succeed in the global marketplace, our colleges are failing to deliver...Not surprisingly, students are graduating with great gaps in their knowledge.”*[4]. Institutions in the study were ranked by criteria of whether they required the seven key subjects. Interestingly, the 19 institutions on the “A” list (those that best fulfilled the criteria) included public, private, military, Catholic, other Christian institutions, and a historically black college, but none of the most prestigious universities.<sup>1</sup> Lewis and ACTA have developed important tools to assess the viability of general education in American universities, but they were not the first to conduct national studies or recommend criteria for assessment.

<sup>1</sup> The 19 institutions on the “A” list include Baylor University, California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo, City University of New York-Brooklyn College, Gardner-Webb University, Kennesaw State University, Morehouse College, Pepperdine University, St. John’s College (MD), St. John’s College (NM), Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Thomas Aquinas College, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, United States Air Force Academy, United States Coast Guard Academy, United States Military Academy, University of Dallas, University of Georgia, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, University of Texas-San Antonio.

The term “disaster area” as a description of general education in the U.S., was the conclusion of a study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1977.[5], p. 33. Ernest Boyer, former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, former Commissioner of Education, and one of the last educational statesmen at the national level, reinforced the conclusion in a follow-up study in 1981, entitled, *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education.* *“We believe that conclusion (general education as a disaster area) remains valid today. Our examination of current practice certainly confirms it.”* (p. 33). They described the broader significance of the loss of common learning when they stated, *“On campus after campus, there is no agreement about the meaning of a college education.”* (p. 20).

In the late 1950’s, the field of “cultural studies” emerged in the hope of integrating and transforming the specialized disciplines in many leading universities[6], but after fifty years, most cultural studies scholars admitted *“...that cultural studies has no specific methodology or subject matter. The result is that cultural studies now means everything and nothing.”* (p. B10). It is long past time for universities to get their general education act together.

The study and criteria developed by ACTA were consistent with the findings and recommendations of the Carnegie Commission 30 years earlier, but Boyer and Levine articulated a much stronger rationale for general education. They included areas of study not identified by ACTA, and their list was not organized by academic discipline but by cross-disciplinary study areas (e.g. “SHARED PRODUCING AND CONSUMING: work and the meaning of vocation...”). They proposed six broad subject areas *“that we believe to be the proper concern of general education.”*[5], p. 35. A fundamental goal and rationale of their study was the same as that of Lewis and ACTA, i.e., to see *“the connectedness of things”* as described over sixty years earlier by Mark Van Doren in *Liberal Learning*:

*“The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. No human capacity is great enough to permit a vision of the world as simple, but if the educator does not aim at the vision no one else will, and the consequences are dire when no one does...The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning.”* (quoted in[5], p. 52).

A brief description of the subject areas follows with further discussion of the sixth, an area not listed by ACTA, but the one Boyer and Levine believed should be the “capstone” to common learning:

(1) SHARED USE OF SYMBOLS (language; also communication through music, dance, visual arts; language is the ‘glue’ of our social existence)

(2) SHARED MEMBERSHIP IN GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS (government, business, church, family, school, university)

(3) SHARED PRODUCING AND CONSUMING (work and the meaning of vocation; work and leisure related to

social status and human dignity; epitomizes interdependence; history is crucial)

(4) SHARED RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE (understand ordered, interdependent nature of the universe and elegant underlying patterns of the natural world; trial and error, observations, theories, testing)

(5) SHARED SENSE OF TIME (common heritage, what Edmund Burke termed 'a pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn'; focus on seminal ideas and events that have decisively shaped the course of history; convergence of social, religious, political, economic and intellectual forces; selection of cross-disciplinary themes)

(6) SHARED VALUES AND BELIEFS (laws, customs, traditions; how values are formed, transmitted, revised; focus on the role of political ideologies and religion in shaping convictions of individuals and societies throughout history; university itself is born of values, rooted in tradition; Bertrand Russell: *'Without civic morality communities perish, without personal morality their survival has no value.'* (above list from[5], p. 45.)

Sharing values and beliefs in a common learning experience includes the study of language, history, culture and religion, all of which suggest searching and discovering **connections** across disciplines and among ideas. According to Boyer, *"A study of the personal and social significance of shared values should be the capstone to common learning."* (p. 44). Discussion of values and beliefs should be part of the capstone experience' in any institution that claims to be global in scope and purpose.

It is here, according to Bartlett Giamatti, former President of Yale University, where the real world of the university exists in a free and ordered space. In his view, *"The academic part...is where values of all kinds are meant to collide, to contrast, to be tested, debated, disagreed about – freely, openly, civilly."*[7], p. 30. Thus, while values and beliefs may not be common in a multicultural setting, they can still be the object of common study and shared inquiry in the search for understanding. Giamatti stressed the crucial function of common learning and the principal characteristic that has distinguished American education at all levels from most other educational systems, that of critical thinking. Critical thinking can only take place where there is genuine freedom and openness in the context of "shared" inquiry.

In considering values, beliefs and critical thinking that have characterized American education, it is instructive to note the observations of a scholar from outside the American heritage. Acknowledging the greatness of the American experience, Fareed Zakaria claimed, *"Higher education is America's best industry"*[8], p.190, yet *"Everyone knows that the American school system is in crisis and that its students do particularly badly in science and math, year after year, in international rankings* (p. 191). He attributed the disconnect between lower and higher education to the fact that few students are educated to think critically. American education has been great because...*"it is much better at developing the critical faculties of the mind* (than other countries), *which is what you need to succeed in life."*

Critical thinking that leads to problem solving, ingenuity and creativity is a major reason *"why America produces so many entrepreneurs, inventors, and risk takers."* (p. 193). Thus, Zakaria viewed the development of critical thinking as a major contributor to the greatness of America. Critical thinking in all areas of study is one of the principal learning objectives of general education and depends on making connections across disciplines.

## 4. Great Books and Great Ideas

One tested approach to general education that ensures a common learning experience is the reading, study, and discussion of the same great books or writings. This "shared inquiry" approach promotes the development of new insights and understandings, connections across academic disciplines, and critical thinking. The study of great literature and great ideas was formalized in 1947 by two individuals from the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, who developed a method to respond to the decline of liberal education in the face of increasingly fragmented specialization. They initiated the Great Books Foundation, a text-based seminar program designed to offer a liberal education through reading and discussion of the writings of the world's great thinkers. They compiled a list of 100 primary texts that became known as the Great Books of the Western World, and developed a "syntopicon" of great ideas that accompanied publishing of the Great Books by the Encyclopedia Britannica. The Foundation has continued its development, extending its programs to younger readers in elementary and secondary schools and expanding its anthologies to include cultural and international writings beyond the Western tradition. It continues to focus on the development of critical thinking in the context of shared inquiry as evident in its current website:

*"We believe that critical thinking is a basic skill. We believe that reading and discussing the very best literature is the best way to teach reading and critical thinking, and that all students should have the opportunity to learn this way, equipped with the highest quality materials available."*[9].

Currently, much great literature is included in elective courses in most universities, but the idea of utilizing great books as an appropriate foundation for general education and common learning never materialized in higher education except in a few small liberal arts colleges. The concept was at odds with the educational establishment and prevailing educational theory in the mid-twentieth century. Hutchins and the Great Books idea were roundly criticized by John Dewey and other progressive educators who denied there was crossover or connections in academic disciplines and believed that science and its methods and results alone contributed to "human good", that scientific method presupposed the destruction of "old" knowledge before the new could be created. Dewey rejected moral principles derived from religion and insisted that science alone would lead to a new moral order. He and other progressives won the debate against Hutchins and Adler, and from the

mid-twentieth century there has been no consensus in higher education on what constitutes liberal education, general education, or common learning in the American university. The effects of Dewey's influence in higher education contributed to the rejection of the great books approach in most universities as a foundation for general education.

The idea of identifying and studying great books has expanded beyond the Great Books Foundation and new lists of great books have been proposed by numerous scholars. While each may contain some different books, the commonality of sources is remarkable. One series of lists with a slightly different criterion for inclusion has been prepared by Martin Seymour Smith (see *The Great Books List: A Progressive Exploration of the Great Books*[10]). Smith listed the "100 Most Influential Books Ever Written." The list included books from different cultures, but the majority were common to books listed by the Great Books Foundation and other lists of great books. The Bible, including Old Testament and New Testament readings, and the Koran, are on Smith's list of "most influential" and scholars in all cultures recognize that they are two of the most influential books in history.

At a time when religion is one of the most significant issues confronting our increasingly diverse global environments, it is an academic and political tragedy that the typical university graduate in the United States has little knowledge or understanding of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian heritage, the Koran or Arabic history. Because they have little, if any, knowledge of religion, typical graduates of American universities are impotent in understanding or addressing religious issues that confront the modern world.

Many current American university leaders, calling for renewal of general education and common learning (including Harry Lewis) have failed to recognize the study of religion as essential to understanding our own American heritage as well as the major issues and conflicts affecting our world. For example, Lewis's list of courses that should be required in all general education programs include American history and/or government, but it is impossible to understand American history or government without knowledge of the Bible and Judeo-Christian history. Likewise, it is impossible to understand Islam without knowledge of the Koran and Arabic history.

There is a consensus among current educational and political leaders in the U.S. that the general public is deficient in two critical understandings, (1) the American heritage and (2) the heritage of other cultures, especially those of Islamic countries. The lack of civic literacy among college and university students in the U.S. is one of the most alarming failures of our universities. David Boren, a Rhodes Scholar and former U.S. Senator and Governor of Oklahoma, who has been serving as President of the University of Oklahoma for the past thirteen years, stated in his recent book, *A Letter to America*, "...we do not even know our own history...Even at elite universities and colleges, the next generation of the best and brightest fails basic civic

literacy." [11], p. 9. Boren went on to state, "*We have developed a case of national amnesia about the ideas, values, and actions that made us great*" (p. 15). While decrying the lack of knowledge of the U.S. Constitution and other founding documents of American history, he said nothing about the lack of knowledge of the religious heritage of the country from which the founding documents emerged.

## 5. The Need for Biblical and Koranic Literacy

The study of religion and religious texts should be included in the general education curriculum because they contribute to understanding the basic issues facing the world in which all humans live, both locally and globally. At least one introductory course in World Religions should be a requirement in any general education program. Examples of religious questions and issues that need to be addressed include the role of humans on the planet, respect for the rights and needs of others, the value of love and friendships, concern for the poor, responsibility for the future of the globe, concern for the rights of children and the powerless, the preservation of diversity of cultures, and other questions about what it means to be human, knowledgeable, and wise.

Study of the Bible and the Koran should not preclude the study of other religions or religious texts, but there is an urgent and worldwide need for understanding the primary sources and development of these three great faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three religions have connecting origins and millions of adherents around the world, and the Bible and the Koran are principal sourcebooks of the religions. National and world leaders have recognized that the lack of religious literacy has often contributed to regional, national and global conflicts. A strong case can be made that the Holocaust of World War II was due in part to the lack of understanding and appreciation of Jewish literacy in the German universities.

The lack of religious literacy among national and government leaders has been evident for many years (In 1994, the Center for Strategic and International Studies published *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*), and Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State suggested it was purposeful to not include religion in diplomatic discussions, "*Historically, the conventional wisdom among American negotiators for the Middle East has been that the less talk about God the better.*" [12], p. 141. However, since September 11, 2001, religion has become a major global issue in strategic policy discussions. Albright recognized before 9/11 her need to know more about Islam; "*In meeting after meeting, I found myself scrawling on a notepad, 'Learn more about Islam.'*" (p. 110), and she concluded that, "*to lead internationally, American policy-makers must learn as much as possible about religion, and then incorporate that knowledge in their strategies.*" (pgs. 73-74). In the American university, however, there is no expectation of religious literacy in Judaism, Christianity, Islam or other religions among graduates who will take

positions of influence in global environments. Without knowledge of the history and development of the three religions, there will continue to be a dearth of informed discussion and communication across cultures and nations.

Tony Blair, another highly visible political leader and former Prime Minister of Great Britain, recognizing the lack of religious understanding in the modern world, has committed his post-political life to addressing religious faith in the international public square. To encourage and stimulate cross-cultural dialogue and discussion of religious faith, he initiated in 2007 the Tony Blair Faith Foundation with the following statement: *"You cannot understand the modern world unless you understand the importance of religious faith. Faith motivates, galvanizes, organizes, and integrates millions upon millions of people."*[13]. The Foundation has initiated a number of programs and activities designed to *"educate, inform, and develop understanding about the different faiths and between them."*[13]. They include the development of a global network of universities with a principal focus on faith and globalization, and in 2008, the Foundation and Yale University jointly developed a multi-disciplinary course on inter-relationships between faith and globalization.

One major purpose of the Foundation is to show from the world's major religions how faith is a powerful force for good in the modern world. But what of those who believe that religion is the source of problems and not solutions? Albright warned of the "dark side" of religion when she stated, *"Religion is perhaps the single largest influence in shaping the human conscience, and yet it is also a source of conflict and hate."*[12] p. 64. This was a recognition that religion does not always lead to peace and the common good, but it reinforces the need for religious literacy and understanding and a place where these issues can be discussed respectfully and civilly in a free and open environment. That place should be the university.

It is clear there is a great need for religious literacy and understanding in the modern world of education and politics, and the Tony Blair Foundation was initiated to address the need. The discussions initiated by the Foundation are addressing precisely the types of questions that should be addressed in the "capstone" experience of general education as envisioned by Boyer and Levine. This is especially critical in issues that address Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it is also the reason why the Bible should be a principal sourcebook of general education programs.

## 6. Biblical Literacy: The Principal Sourcebook of General Education

The Bible contains the principal sourcebook of Judaism and Christianity. The religion of the Jews is based on the Torah, the Talmud and the Old Testament. The New Testament reflects Christianity as an "offshoot" of Jewish religion. Whether Jesus is viewed as a prophet, an impostor, or the messianic fulfillment of prophecy, his followers (Christians) have been "grafted in" to Jewish roots.[14],

(Rom: 11:17ff) The Koran, appearing seven centuries after the time of Jesus may not be described as an "offshoot" of the Judeo/Christian biblical heritage, but while there are significant differences between the religions, they emanated from the same biblical story.

There are persuasive reasons why the Bible should be a principal sourcebook of general education. It is a narrative of the world and a treasure trove of history describing better than any other source the Judeo/Christian heritage and its influence on the development of civilization. The Bible is the book from which many other great books are rooted. To ignore or dismiss the Bible, reflects a narrow-minded and anti-intellectual view of higher education.

The Bible is recognized as one of the major influences in shaping Western intellectual culture, yet its influence has not been confined to the West. It has had great influence on cultures worldwide while its message has transcended cultures and resisted cultural dominance. It is a "world" book and a "modern" book that has been translated into more languages than any other in spite of attempts in history from both civil and ecclesiastical authorities to ban vernacular translations. The translated Scriptures have transcended cultures and provided freedom from authorities that would use language, education and religion to insure cultural uniformity.

A leading Indian Christian intellectual, Vishal Mangalwadi, claimed that Bible translators like Wycliffe (1330-1384), Tyndale (1492-1536) and Luther (1483-1546) were revolutionaries who were *"transforming Europe's thousand-year-old civilization from medieval to modern. They were revolutionaries who sought to make the pope's authority subject to the Word of God."*[15], p. 138. Because of the work of these and other translators, the Bible has been described as the *"single most powerful force in the emergence of Western civilization."* (p. xvii) Bible translators have continued to carry the language of the Bible to tribes and peoples throughout the world and far beyond the West. Lamin Sanneh argued that Christianity belongs to all cultures and *"is not intrinsically a religion of cultural uniformity."*[16] p. 130. *"Christianity is the religion of over two thousand different language groups in the world. More people pray and worship in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion in the world. Furthermore, Christianity has been the impulse behind the creation of more dictionaries and grammars of the world's languages than any other force in history."* (p. 69). Language is the "glue" of social existence and a critical dimension of general education. While language and education of the poor and illiterate have often been suppressed in numerous cultures historically, translators have opened the Bible worldwide to cultures in their own vernacular languages.

Even in modern times, language development and Bible translation have often been hindered and obstructed by elites in government, education and religion. Western civilization has been trashed unfairly in the modern American university and with it, the Bible. University elites have denigrated and suppressed Bible translation by accusing translators of

conspiring with Western imperialist motivations to destroy indigenous cultures. An appalling example is the book by Colby and Dennett (1995) entitled, *Thy Will Be Done, The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil*. The book was dishonest and unfair to biblical translation and Christian missions in Latin America with its claim that the Wycliffe Bible Translators conspired with the Rockefeller conglomerate to destroy indigenous cultures. The 960-page tome never established a conspiracy or even a link between Nelson Rockefeller and the WBT, but it was generally supported by the higher education establishment as an example of “cultural imperialism”[17]. Thus an organization that has done more worldwide than any other to preserve and enrich native cultures through language development and biblical translation was thwarted by intellectual elites.

Another compelling reason why the Bible should be a principal sourcebook for general education programs goes back to the original purpose and history of what is now the modern university. The earliest universities grew out of the Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the biblical narrative served as the foundation of all learning. Notions of freedom and truth pervaded these institutions, and the words of Jesus, “*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*”[14] (John 8:32), became hallmarks of higher education and were engraved into the buildings of many colonial colleges and universities even into the twentieth century. It is not an exaggeration to state that human freedom and the search for truth as it is generally accepted today grew out of the Christian church. The biblical narrative was the generally accepted story of the world in the universities well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S.

## 7. Concluding Statement

In these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American universities are generally acknowledged as the greatest in the world. They are enjoying unprecedented prestige and prosperity, and their leaders view the need for more autonomy and more money as the only serious impediments to continued growth and progress. (See the results of the Futures Project,[18]). What is the profit, however, if they lose their “soul”. The arrogance evident in the great American Universities is eerily similar to that of the German universities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “cut-flower” institutions that had severed many of their historic roots. By giving up the idea of general education and common learning that leads to “connections” with peoples, languages, cultures, disciplines and history, modern universities risk the loss of their historical role of searching for truth and what it means to be human. General education should provide preparation for and commencement of a life of learning about life itself and the depth and breadth of understanding of the “connected” world in which we live.

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