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Teaching Classical Islamic Texts in Modern Settings: The In-Class Struggle

By: Prof. Eltigani Abdelgadir Hamid
College of Sharia- Qatar University
Professor of Political Thought

تدريس النصوص الإسلامية العتيقة في إطار حديث: الصراع داخل الصف

أ. د. التيجاني عبد القادر حامد

أستاذ الفكر السياسي

كلية الشريعة –جامعة قطر

Email: erahma@qu.edu.qa

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Abstract

An assumption is often made that there is a link between extremism and the study of some classical Islamic texts. This article examines that claim by exploring the influence of classical Islamic texts on the extreme behaviour of Muslim students. Analysing the journals of twelve American Muslim students, wherein they recorded their responses to selected authentic texts, this study unexpectedly finds that the active thinking of 60 percent of the students was not significantly stimulated after studying these texts. The 40 percent of students who were stimulated were those who had pre-existing knowledge and experiences developed within Western educational and intellectual traditions rather than Islamic traditions. Thus, it would appear that much of the contemporary criticism of classical texts is in fact misplaced—any text can work remarkably well given the proper methods of teaching and environment. Criticism, if any, should be levelled at the broader, specific political and/or intellectual ferment within which texts are positioned.

Keywords: Authentic Texts, extremism, madrassa, reading strategy

ملخص:

لقد صار من المعتاد بعد حوادث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر 2001 أن يفترض الكثيرون وجود علاقة وطيدة بين التطرف ودراسة النصوص الإسلامية العتيقة. حاولنا في هذا البحث أن نختبر بصورة عملية صحة هذا الافتراض. كان غرضنا من الاختبار أن ندرس ما عسى أن يوجد من تأثير لبعض النصوص الإسلامية على سلوك الطلاب المسلمين. وتحقيقاً لهذا الغرض قام الباحث (وهو أستاذ في الاسلاميات) باختيار "عينة" من الطلاب الأمريكيين الذين سجلوا معه لدراسة الماجستير في الدراسات الإسلامية (بلغ عددهم اثنا عشر طالباً). عرضت على كل منهم ثلاثة نصوص من التراث الاسلامي، وطلب منهم أن يقوموا، كل على حده، بقراءة متأنية لتلك النصوص وكتابة تعليق عليها يتضمن انطباعاته الشخصية وانتقاداته. كانت النتيجة غير المتوقعة أن 60% من تلك المجموعة لم يتأثر كثيرا بما قرأ؛ أما من تأثر بها (وهم 40%) فقد كانت لهم معارف سابقة وتجارب تعليمية تبلورت جميعها في إطار النظام التعليمي الغربي الحديث وتقاليد الغرب الفكرية. وبناء على هذا يمكن القول إن النقد الموجه للنصوص الإسلامية العتيقة نقد في غير مكانه، لأن أي نص يمكن أن يكون مؤثرا أو غير مؤثر بحسب المنهج المتبع في التدريس، وبحسب البيئة التعليمية والفكرية التي يتشكل في داخلها المتعلم. فاذا كان لابد من نقد فيجب ان يوجه للبيئة الأوسع؛ خاصة البيئة السياسية والفكرية، فهما يمثلا المناخ الذي تقتل فيه بعض النصوص ويبتعث بعضها من الموت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النصوص العتيقة، التطرف، المدارس الدينية، استراتيجية القراءة.

Introduction

An assumption that is often made in the wake of September 11 is that a link exists between extremism and the study of some classical Islamic texts. Western politicians, journalists, and intelligence experts have been quick to cite the impact of classical "Medieval" Islamic scholarship on the contemporary Islamic resurgence process, particularly the input mediated through Islamic *madrassas* (religious-based schools) and curriculum.[1]

[1] Since September 11, 2001 and the subsequent downfall of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the reference to "Islamic education" as a root cause for extremism has become a recurrent theme in Western politics and media. "The world must start thinking," said Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense, " about how to reduce the number of people who are becoming terrorists *through teachings in radical Islamic schools.*" (*The Washington Post*, Nov 3, 2003). For instance, see The Daily Telegraph, London, March 23, 2002, in which Pakistani Islamic schools were described as places where *zealots learn to hate the West*. For other lengthy coverage on Islamic education in various Muslim countries, see, for example, Castillo, 2001; *The Chronicle of Higher education*, July 11, 2003; Williams, 2002; and *The Washington Times*, Editorial, October 30, 2003.

The tangible policy implications for these assumptions are obvious. Reviewing these texts and scrutinizing curricula for offensive material have become some of the most urgent political demands in many countries[1]. Whether one believes the political agenda underlying these assumptions or not, there is little doubt that teaching certain works, be they militant or otherwise, through certain methods of instructions can shape students' views and attitudes.

Whether these attitudes remain within established, acceptable social norms and legal codes or extend beyond them remains an open question. This paper reports the initial findings of an experiment in which American Muslim graduate students read four *authentic* texts on Islamic thought and then reported their comprehension, impressions and critiques in reader's response journals. An *authentic* Islamic text is defined in this study as a text that was written in the Arabic language at least five centuries ago by a Muslim scholar for Muslim readers.

The Purpose of the Study:

The aim of this paper is to explore how Western Muslim students read and react to classical Islamic texts, the level of knowledge integration they achieve, and the extent to which that reading shapes their worldviews. Though the current study focuses on different types of contemporary readings from the past, it also seeks to use these readings as a medium for cross-cultural

[1] In the US, it is not an unusual practice for security and Federal agents to sometimes "swarm into an Islamic institute… over allegations that it promoted an intolerant brand of Islam", as *the Washington Post reported* on Friday, July 2, 2004. Two years earlier, the same security agents raided the GSISS (where this research was conducted) and confiscated administrative, student and faculty records. The school, however, was not disbanded, and no court ruling was issued against it.

dialogue in the classroom, as a learning stimulus, and as a means of enhancing reading strategies and aiding future curriculum planning.

Review of Research:

Little importance has been attached to empirically investigating the levels at which original Islamic material is integrated into learners' existing knowledge structure. Most policy makers and curriculum designers instruct education officials to curb the militant attitude that religious schools are, presumably, responsible for breeding. The simplest and easiest policy that education officials follow is to ask these religious schools to eliminate certain religious texts (e.g., Qur'anic verses related to Jihad or Jews) or to expand their instruction "in areas such as Math, Science and English."[1] These measures are intended to lead to a process of "modernizing" the religious schools. However, no policy-maker knows how, for instance, teaching Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises"[2] alongside Abu al-Hassan al-Ash'ari's "Refutation of Heretics"[3] might lead to modernization. However, it is at the theoretical level that the issue of "integration of knowledge" has received the least attention, and this concept has never been explored in great depth.

Many theorists agree that learning is based on experience and that "unless new learning is integrated with previous learning, the new may

[1] This is, in fact, one of the measures adopted by the government of Pervez Musharaf of Pakistan with encouragement from the US and other European countries. (See *the Washington Post*, July 14, 2002.)

[2] This work by Earnest Hemingway is included in the English Literature programme of Punjab University, Pakistan, and Islamist and secular faculty disagree about its inclusion. (See *Washington Post*, June 2, 2001.)

[3] Abu al-Hassan al-Ash'ari, the ninth-century Muslim theologian, is the founding father of the Ash'arite doctrine, which constitutes the basis of Sunnism. Most of his theological works have been included in madrasses curriculum for centuries.

be compartmentalized in an individual's mental program and even double classified. This can lead to confusion, anxiety, suppression of the new or the older learned material, cultural shock."[1] It has been according to these lines of thinking that most educators began to shift from the traditional format of instruction, in which the "emphasis has been on consumption of large quality of information, subject by subject." The underlying philosophy was that "this traditional format does not allow students to connect new and old ideas or to construct their own meaning of the information." The new instructional format includes the recommendation to integrate subject matter across disciplines in such a way that students confront themes that represent a "cluster of subjects" in which students can learn to inquire, associate, and synthesize across subjects."[2]

This process of removing the barriers between the otherwise autonomous disciplines and moving towards the integration of knowledge is not entirely alien or new to the Islamic world, as a quick review of the history of Islamic education or of the works of great Muslim scholars reveals. Most of those scholars—whether they were Mufasirun, philosophers, linguists or historians—studied religion and language together with astronomy, philosophy, politics, psychology and medicine. Those scholars were also aware of the role of knowledge in society. Their madrassas were always integrative, that is, open to all classes from different ethnicities and

[1] Mestenhuser, Josef A. "Concepts and Theories of Cultural Learning." In: *Culture, Learning and the Disciplines*, (Washington: National Association for Foreign Students Affairs,1988).
[2] See Moller Aleidine J., "Content-Based Foreign Language Instruction in the Middle School: An Experimental Learning approach," in Foreign Language Annals, Vol.27,No.4(Winter,1994), p.538

countries. Writing about Islamic education in central Asia in the 1930s, one researcher observed the following: "Having studied in Avar village with a sheilk who specialized in Fiqh the pupil (tilmiz) could continue his education, on the strength of a letter of recommendation, in a Kumyk or Darghinian village with a specialist in rhetoric, then move to another district to study tasawwuf, and to another teacher who taught grammar. Ethnic affiliations of the teacher and the pupil were of no importance."[1] This description is true not only of Central Asia but of nearly all Muslim regions, from central Asia to Africa. In these regions, the sheikh-scholar (the man-in-himself) has become not only a transmitter of information but also a role model for the young and old.

What is new, however, is the subsequent "segregation" of disciplines that occurred in Muslim educational institutions during the last two centuries when the Muslim world came under the control of European colonialism. In some Muslim countries, colonial education was designed to serve the urban children of wealthier families that were willing to associate with colonial regimes, whereas the "traditional" madrassas were neglected and left to the rural poor. It is no surprise that the curriculum shrank and, at times, was reduced to the rote learning of dogma that we observe in more than one Muslim country.[2] It is also not surprising that the role of the sheikh-scholar was relegated to salaried but poorly paid and half-educated teachers or, worse still, to young activist-preachers who

[1] Amirkhan Magomeddadaev, "Politicization of Islam in Daghestan: The Factors Behind it", *Central Asia and the Caucasus, Journal of Social and Political Studies*,Vol.3.No.21 (Sweden,2003),p. 44

[2] In some cases, many leading scholars and ulama were persecuted; in other cases, madrassas were razed; see, for example, Walid, Zaid, "How the Holy Warriors Learned to Hate," In: *The New York Times*, Op-Ed, June 18,2004 2004.

detest both traditional and modern education systems and seek to demolish their very foundations.

Research Questions:

The present study addressed the following research questions:

(1) Do students tend to link material provided in authentic texts to some of their own "pre-existing" knowledge and experiences (relevance)?

(2) What reading strategies do students use?

(3) Do students tend to read the texts through the eyes of an insider; that is, do they go beyond the text to understand the deeper cultural frameworks that these texts represent?

(4) In interpreting authentic texts, do students see and think for themselves or see only what they have been taught to see?

These questions may be considered in the following manner: Would the impressions of a student who majored in sociology, for instance, be significantly different from the impressions of another student who did not study that subject? Do students who have had religious experiences other than Islam read these texts differently? Answering these questions will of course indirectly touch on the impact of the wider educational, religious, and economic institutions on the subjects.

To obtain a unified testable statement about these questions, we transformed them into the following hypothesis:

1-the level of integration of knowledge will be determined not only by the content of the selected texts (curriculum design) but also by the pre-existing knowledge of the learners as well as by the philosophy and technique of teaching. Both pre-existing knowledge and teaching strategies are variables that have strong effects on the integration of knowledge. By the integration of knowledge, we mean the ability of a reader to inquire, associate, deconstruct, and synthesize across the mass of information he receives. Two corollaries stem from this hypothesis:

(a) Students studying social sciences or who have had experiences with other religions will respond differently than students who have not been exposed to such studies and experiences.

(b) Students who follow an appropriate reading strategy will be able to move "vertically" within the text and perceive its cultural implications, whereas a student who has no reading strategy will move "horizontally" over the text, collecting more information about the text or the author but unable to associate it with his own experiences or position the text within its own historical settings.

Subjects: Background Information

The subjects were twelve Muslim American students between twenty-two and fifty-two years of age studying full time at the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS) in Leesburg, Virginia. The school was founded in 1995 as an experiment in an innovative educational philosophy.[1] All the students were enrolled in an intensive

[1] The school's mission focuses on teaching classical Islamic sciences and modern social disciplines in an attempt to integrate, consolidate and build on the best of the 'traditional' and

MA programme that included courses on Hadith Sciences, Islamic Economics, Islamic Political Thought, Conflict Resolution, and Research Methodology. All the courses included presentations and readings on various aspects of Islamic Studies. All the subjects were studying Arabic as a second language, and most of them had a reasonable level of exposure to Arabic culture inside and outside the school context. Classes focused on discussions and critiques in the classroom and on writing research papers. All the students took a course (514-1275, Comparative Methods in Fiqh) taught by the investigator. As part of their regular course requirements, the participants were given four authentic texts and asked to keep a reader's response journal throughout their reading process. To make the content of these texts readily accessible to the subjects, a careful translation was provided together with some introductory notes about each author and his work.[1] The introductory notes, however, varied from one piece to another. The school offered no courses on reading strategies, discourse analysis or culture.

In terms of the broader social strata of the students, we found that a few of them were average American citizens, but the majority were the sons and daughters of Asian immigrants who had benefited from the

'modern' sectors of a new academy. (See School of Islamic and Social Sciences, Graduate Catalog, 1997-1998, Leesburg, Virginia, p.1.) Shortly before conducting this research, the School joined (as an affiliate member) the Washington Theological Consortium, a major group of US Seminaries and Schools of Religion. This step towards inter-religion cooperation was due partially to the financial difficulties that GSISS was facing, but in addition to that, the concept of inter-religion understanding and cross-cultural dialogue was one of the major objectives on which the School was founded. Currently the School's name is Cordoba University, Herndon, Virginia.

[1] The translation of al-Muhasibi's and Ibn Hazm's works were taken from Arberry, A.J. 1964. The pieces on al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyya were translated by John Alden Williams (John Alden, Williams, Islam, (New York: George Braziller,1961).

American education[1] and economic systems. Gradually, those students began to feel uneasy about the "old" Islamic tradition, with which they were associated through their families, and the new American culture, with which they were associated either directly or through their classmates and co-workers.[2] It was this type of 'uneasiness' that initially brought these students to GSISS. They were searching for a new perspective that would satisfy their academic and professional requirements and would, at the same time, meet their perception of truly "Islamic knowledge".

The Authentic Texts:

The researcher selected four excerpts from the writings of renowned Muslim scholars who lived and worked in Baghdad of the Abbasids, Cordova of the eleventh century, and Damascus of the thirteenth century. The texts were chosen as representatives of various schools of thought, geographical regions, and historical settings, and they were intended to supplement the main parts of the course material. While reading and recording their impressions, the students were also provided with the following materials: relevant material that covered the origins of the schools of Islamic law and their development and offered an overview of current thinking in the field;

[1] Some researchers have claimed that many immigrant Muslims came to North America precisely because of the excellence of its educational system and that these immigrants are very concerned that their children receive this quality of education, which will enable those children to continue on to prestigious universities. See (Ferida, Shamma, "The Curriculum Challenge for Islamic Schools in America" in: Haque, Amber, ed., *Muslims and Islamization in North America: Problems and Prospects*, (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications,1999),p. 295

[2] See Fathi al-Malkawi, "The Future of Muslim Education in the United States: An Agenda for Research." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol.20.No.3&4, 2003

profiles of the four founders of the Islamic schools of law to show the interplay among a particular approach, a scholar and the real world; and action-oriented cases that posed action choices and provided role-playing activities (e.g., if you were in the place of the jurist, what would you do in a particular situation?) Furthermore, the students had already been exposed to aspects of Islamic culture through various courses ranging from Qura'nic and Hadith Studies to Islamic economy and politics. We assumed that these courses would serve as pre-reading tasks and prepare the students to thoroughly explore the selected texts.

The first text in the list is taken from al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d.243/857), the Sufi theologian of Baghdad. In it, he provides a brief insight into the 'trauma" and distress he experienced as a result of the divisions he observed within the Muslim community. In his own words, he relates how distraught he was, believing that there could be one true way to "salvation" in the "deep sea" of differences. In his search, al-Muhasibi searched a variety of sources of knowledge and gave a detailed, critical description of the men with whom he came into contact. He states that he could not find guidance from among all these groups of men. Turning to the Qur'an, the Sunna and the Ijma', he realized that it was the "pursuit of desire" that blinded men. Thus, he set out to expel desire from his being, and through that struggle, God opened his eyes and heart to a new knowledge that seemed completely clear. The piece concludes with the author clarifying that the people from whom he finally found guidance were the Sufis. Reading this piece at a philosophical level might lead a student to relate al-Muhasibi's quest for certainty to that of al-Ghazali

and Descartes, whereas reading the same text at the "physical" level might lead a student only to labelling al-Muhasibi as a straying Sufi.

The second text, approximately 2,000 words in length, was taken from Ibn Hazm (d.1064), the Zahirite (literalist) of Cordova who has become famous for his critical treatises on jurisprudence and uncompromising legal positions. In this piece, the reader observes a different Ibn Hazm who does not write on Figh, as expected, but on his recollections of and reflections on his early youth. He laments the sorrows and miseries that he faced upon his flight from Cordova, which was seized and sacked in 1013. It is surprising to some readers that Ibn Hazm has also written on love and the art of courtship, as he did in this piece. Three elements of Ibn Hazm's life might strike the reader: that he, the renowned exponent of Islamic theology, was a descendent of a Christian family; that he was educated by women; and that he, the strict jurist, composed an entire book (the Ring of the Dove)[1] on the joys and sorrows of love. We do not know how readers who are new converts to Islam, who have experienced love, or who have suffered because of their political activism would respond to Ibn Hazm's views. We also do not know how "moralist" readers who have been repulsed by American popular culture would respond when they encounter elements of that culture in the work of a presumably strict Muslim jurist.

The third piece is written by al-Ghazli (d.1111), the brilliant Ash'arite scholar and Sufi who has been regarded by many as a 're-newer of Islam". Al-Ghazali served as a professor in the Nizamiyya madrassa of

[1] It is interesting to note that this work has become very popular in the West and has been translated into many European languages since the turn of the twentieth century. A large body of research on it in Arabic, English and French also exists. (See Abbas, Rasil ibn Hazam al-Andalusi, 1987).

Baghdad, teaching Shafi'I law and writing volumes on philosophy, logic and mysticism. This passage, approximately 3,500 words in length, is taken from his Ihya (The Revivification of the Religious Sciences). In it, al-Ghazali discusses the concept of love, but as in all his works, he seeks to unify and integrate the material with the eternal and to emphasize the importance of direct religious experience in contradistinction to the other jurists.

Like ibn Hazm before him, Ghazali specifies five causes of love, foremost among them self-love, beauty and good. However, unlike Ibn Hazm, Ghazali does not stop at external beauty, "which may be perceived by children and beasts." He urges the reader to go far beyond external beauty and look for deeper love, which is the special property of men of heart. It is here that Ghazali's original synthesis appears, where all types of love (from man's love for himself to his love of beauty and good) converge into the love of the absolutely good and beautiful, which is God. Only an incompetent reader could miss this central point that psychological, social, and material realities are all connected, through the heart of the believer, with a deeper inner reality. The last piece was written by Ibn Taimiyya (d.1328), the Hanbali scholar-activist who lived in Damascus of the Mamlukes and who exerted enormous intellectual efforts to oppose the speculative methods of the Ash'arites and philosophers as well as the un-orthodox practices of the Sufis (mystical fraternities) and who, consequently, spent parts of his stormy life in prisons in Cairo and Damascus. Understandably, the content and tone of this passage differ greatly from those of al-Ghazali and Ibn Hazm. The piece contains

samples of his strong views on law, theology and politics, views that earned him praise among modern revivalists movements and fundamentalist Salafi admirers and bitter blame among his Western detractors.[1] In this excerpt, he criticizes Sufis, including al-Ghazali, and attributes foreign invasion and internal corruption to the spread of their ideas.

What Do These Texts Convey?

To summarise the themes of these texts, the following points could be made. Though there is a tendency in all these texts (with the exception of the last one) to highlight personal experiences and self-examination, they are not entirely subjective or autobiographical. All the authors have donned the role of the social critic who seeks to question and discern the evil that lurks behind good appearances and attitudes. It is also fairly obvious from this reading list that all four authors are great "integrators" of knowledge. To them, being a religious scholar meant being a thorough inquirer into all aspects of the world with the intent of enriching one's soul. Two of the authors (Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyya) are readily quoted in contemporary Islamic discourse, notwithstanding the fact that they present different systems of ideas. One of our authors, Ibn Hazm, is less frequently quoted, but his system of thought is too important to be ignored. Putting him side by side with Ibn Taimiyya is not an accident. We wanted the students to notice the dynamics and developments of the inter-Islamist debates that Ibn Hazm's ideas generated and how he, by

[1] To see how members of the committee who wrote the 9/11 Report referred to the "long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam", which influenced Usama Bin Laden, and traced it back to Ibn Taimiyya, the founder of Wahhabism, and Sayyid Qutb. See *The US 9/11 Commission Report*. (USA: 2004), p.362.

attempting to invalidate the Hadith literature that appears to prohibit singing and music, has excited the anger of some Hanbalite jurists, particularly Ibn Taimiyya and his disciples (Ibn al-Qayyim).

Procedure:

The researcher met with the students in an introductory session to explain the purpose and content of the experiment. It was made clear to the students that the researcher was interested primarily in how they would make sense of what they read, their impressions while reading, and how they related personally to the text that they read. They were given the following recommended reading strategy: while reading the text, they should record new vocabulary, note the questions that occurred to them during the reading, give a brief synopses of the debate, give their general impressions of the text, reflect on why they felt the way that they did about particular issues, and reflect on how they related to the text.[1] The idea behind this reading strategy was to give the students some clues about how to read the texts and what to look for when reading. The students were informed about the course learning objectives—what they were expected to learn—and were allowed to proceed through the written material at their own pace. They were, however, instructed to submit their responses by a specific scheduled date. By asking the students to "summarize" these pieces, we wanted to determine whether they would be able to identify the important, central ideas and leave out what is

[1] I have borrowed these guidelines from Michael J. West & Richard Donato who attempted to incorporate folktales from Francophone West Africa into a college-level French literary and cultural studies course. See West and Donato, "Stories and Stances: Cross-Cultural Encounters with African Folktales.", *Foreign Language Annals*,Vol.28,No.3 (1995), p.392-405

unimportant. We also encouraged role-playing to emphasize that differences of opinion would not necessarily lead to intolerance or mistrust.

Data Analysis:

There was no one way to analyse the data produced in the students' journals. The students' entries differed in length, form and content. Our analysis began with a careful reading of the entries, and, based on that reading, we devised a coding system that consisted of the following categories:

1-Reading Strategy (RS):

This included entries in which students recorded new vocabulary, posed questions, and gave a meaningful summary of the texts;

2- No Reading Strategy (No-RS):

This included entries in which students failed to detect any new vocabulary, to pose real questions, or to give a meaningful summary of the texts;

3- Integration of Knowledge (IK)

This included entries in which students gave their general impressions about the texts and were able to relate their pre-existing knowledge to the texts that they were reading;

4- No Integration of Knowledge (No-IK)

This category included entries in which students failed to relate new material to pre-existing knowledge.

These categories are, of course, related to our research questions and hypotheses. We used this coding system to sort information in the twelve students' journals, and we then looked across the classified information to trace issues related to our questions.

Analysing the stances of our twelve students, we found the following results:

Seven students had followed a reading strategy, whereas five did not. Five students were able to relate most of the new information to their pre-existing knowledge and/or to achieve a remarkable level of integration of knowledge, whereas seven in the group were unable to do so.

Looking more closely at the five students who were able to relate and integrate, we found that four of them (80%) had studied social sciences[1] and that all of them (100%) had followed the suggested reading strategy.

From this brief attempt at comparison, it can be seen how one format and technique for teaching (e.g., imposing a reading strategy) determines the learning process. However, in focusing on the role of an appropriate reading strategy in determining integration of knowledge, we are not implying that other "conditioning" factors have no effect. In fact, reading strategies themselves are usually drawn from techniques and conventions established and developed by a community of competent readers and intellectuals. That is why styles and strategies of reading, and the

[1] We classified students who took courses on history, economics, politics, anthropology and business as having social science backgrounds, whereas students who studied engineering, computer sciences and physics were classified as having no social science background.

responses and positions that readers assume during their interactions with texts, have recently emerged as an independent, interdisciplinary field of their own.[1] In this section, it is not our intention to enter into a discussion of the theoretical aspects of discourse comprehension and readers' stances. Instead, we will use a modified replication of the format employed by some researchers. Studying stances towards cultural understanding and communication, West & Donato analysed and reported on the responses of eight American students who studied African folktales. To identify and categorize responses, the two researchers selected Hanvey's schema for describing levels of cross-cultural awareness.[2] According to Hanvey, an outsider's stance on an alien culture could be graded into three types: visitation, confrontation, and signification.[3] Harry Singer and Dan Donlan also argued that "readers can read texts at more than one level of interpretation." They reproduced and applied the "scale of profoundness" that Sargent, Huus, and Anderson[4] formulated. That scale has five levels, including the physical, where the reader is aware only of the physical actions of the character, and the mental, where he is aware of the physical actions and thoughts of the character. These two levels are remarkably different from the remaining three levels: the moral, where he employs ethical codes for evaluating actions; the psychological influences on characters' thinking and behaviour; and the philosophical, where he employs philosophical

[1] For a useful review of studies of discourse analysis, see Teun A. Van Dijk & Walter Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*, Orlando, Florida: Academic Press, Inc.1983, pp.1-3.
[2] West and Donato, Op. cit., p.392-405
[3] Hanvey, R., "Cross-Cultural Awareness." In: Smith, E. C. And Luce. L.F.(eds.) *Towards Internationalism: Readings in Cross-Cultural Communication*, (Rowley, MA: Newbury House,1979)
[4] Snderson,1977

truths to subsume a story.[1] Disregarding details, we may bring these two systems together and thus arrive at and apply the following three levels of reading: the level of physical visitation, mental confrontation, and genuine intellectual analysis and signification.

Level 1: The Level of Physical Visitation

This is the level of superficial understanding and stereotypes, where the reader relates to the text only as a "bizarre" or "exotic" experience. We found examples of this type in Amal's essay.[2] Responding to the section on al-Ghazali, she wrote:

"*I liked the reading, some of it I was familiar with. It was comforting to read about something that I had heard about before. I did not really have any questions while reading this paper."* However, *"having no questions*" could mean either that the student is identifying herself entirely with the author or that she does not know how to process the material. In both cases, we think that the student failed to respond appropriately to the text. Responding to the piece on Ibn Hazm, the same student wrote the following: "*I guess my major question was really what was this reading really all about. I needed more time to read it over and over again to come up with a better understanding of it. I think I would also need to read "the Ring of the Dove" to get a better understanding also. I did not know the meaning of: la dolce vita and la jeunesse doree, I was not able to make an analysis of the poetry either, smile.*"

[1] Harry Singer, and Dan Donlan, *Reading and Learning from Texts* (New Jersey, Lawrence: Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1989), p. 114

[2] For the sake of confidentiality, this and all other names of the students mentioned in this article are fictitious.

This is yet another obvious case of a failure to construct an interpretation of the text. The participant could benefit neither from the suggested reading strategy nor from the class instruction, the two devices that were expected to activate her resources and enable her to interact with the text and construct its meaning. Considering her age (she was the oldest in the class), religious experience (she was a new convert to Islam), and professional background (she was a retired medical staff), one can hardly conclude that her knowledge of the world was so inadequate that she could not pose a single question about a text that she read. It is possible that this student had implicit assumptions and expectations about the meaning of the text. She might have assumed that she could comprehend the text only if she understood the explicit meanings of the words and phrases. However, "the meaning of the passage is not exclusively in the text," as many researchers would argue.[1] Understanding a text involves not only the processing and interpretation of external data but also the activation and use of internal cognitive information.[2] The other part of the problem pertains to the student's expectations. Like many other readers, she might have formed some pre-conceived, established expectations about what constitutes standard Islamic knowledge, predominantly derived from what she perceived as reliable, authentic authors and sources. Since Ibn Hazm is straying from that perception, she could not find a match between her expectations and the text-presented knowledge, and she began to lose confidence in the text or even in the

[1] Graesser, Arthur C and Clark, Leslie, "*Structures and Procedures of implicit Knowledge*,"(Norwood: New, Jersey:1985), p.14

[2] Singer, Henery, and Donlan, Dan", *Reading and Learning from Text*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers,1989), pp. 116-117

author himself. However, confidence between author and reader is essential to acceptance, as researchers have noticed.[1] She could hardly see how a passage on love and poetry fit in a "serious" work of Figh. Hence, she was likely unable to understand the text because she had already lost confidence in the author. She was not alone in that inability. The comments of more than three students were similar. One noted that "*Ibn Hazm was a surprise to me.*" A student who took a position similar to that of Amal wrote, "*I can imagine other scholars writing this book, but not Ibn Hazm.*" A third student wrote that "*I only knew of Ibn Hazm as being part of the Zahiri school. I had assumed that his writings were all on religion related topics.*"[2] The implication of this statement is that "love" is not a religion-related topic and that it should not be included in serious religious studies.

As if anticipating such negative reactions, another student, Jessica, who read the text at a deeper level, wrote: "*This piece ends with a discussion of one of his works, the Ring of the Dove. I feel almost that it would be repetitive to point out that today we would gasp to see "respected" lawyers engaged in such work; we have compartmentalized all sciences and all of reality, and frankly in doing so, I believe we have limited our ability to holistically understand the reality of what is around us…this understanding is so vital…*"

[1] Jackson, Holbrook, *The Reading of Books*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press,2001), pp. 28

[2] As if anticipating such suspicions and mistrust, Ibn Hazm went out of his way to make this confession under oath: God knows, and suffice it that He is all-knowing, I am absolutely innocent…and I swear by God that I have never loosened my underwear in an illegal sexual intercourse, and that God will never hold me accountable for the cardinal sin of fornication. Ihsan Abbas, ed., *Rasa'il ibn Hazm al-Andalusi*, Vol.1-4 (Beirut: Al-Mu'asasah al-Arabiyya lil Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1987), Vol.1, p. 272

By ascribing these stances to the "compartmentalization of sciences", Jessica has aptly pinpointed the root of these negative reactions. What still seems extraordinary to us is other students' positive reaction to Ibn Hazms views. Apart from those few who opposed him fervently, there were many who fell in love with his views. After reading an excerpt from the text, one of the students wrote, "*I felt that the work has everyman appeal perhaps akin today to a book everyone wants to buy at Barnes & Noble. I got the impression that Ibn Hazm would have been great to have over for dinner.*" Is it because Ibn Hazm's text is 'unconventional', and is it that aspect that "surprised" "shocked", and "stunned" most of them, as they described their responses in their own words? Or is it because some of his ideas can easily be "adjusted" to meet modern social trends in which popular culture is raised above high literature and serious intellectual works?

Level 2: Confrontation

This is the level of confrontation, where the reader moves slightly above the physical surface into the mental world of the author but fails to discern the deeper psychological and philosophical dimensions of the text. An example of this type of responses is found in Suzan's essay: "*He (al-Muhassibi) seems to have strong Hadith bias,….this suggests that he might be leaning towards the Shafi'I school of thought. There seems to be a sentiment that the confusion in his mind cannot be dispelled by himself, and that he needed others to guide him out. This quest for finding people to guide him seems to have taqlid (imitation) quality…He*

is clearly biased towards Hadith, to the extent that he quoted and alluded to ones that are not necessarily authentic."

This response clearly shows the characteristics of reading typical to level 2. Suzan takes a confrontational stance against Muhassibi's assumed bias towards the Hadith (tradition of the Prophet) and his Shafi'I leanings. Muhassibi was indeed a follower of al-Shafi'I, and like al-Shafi'I, he was a strict follower of the prophetic traditions. The Hadith he quoted does not meet the criterion of validity laid down by the Muhadithun, but in his excerpt, al-Muhassibi was using the Hadith only as a vehicle through which he could carry on his argument about the social and intellectual decay and disintegration that he was witnessing. If the Hadith is completely dropped, al-Muhassibi's arguments and analysis do not lose their vigour and originality. We should say here that this very Hadith was, incidentally, studied and criticized in a previous course (History of Islamic Sciences). Hence, in this response, Suzan assumed the role of the harsh critic because she knew that such a position was generally sanctioned in the classroom (and in the school), and she said what she thought the teacher would prefer to hear a stance that reflects an unhealthy student-authority relationship. In other words, this student was ready to see only what she was taught to see. In addition, "the peculiarity of not being able to see for yourself, or to think for yourself, is not confined to the average man", as Holbrook Jackson, the English writer and critic noticed. "The majority of people," he continues, "see life through the mind rather than through the eyes. They approach things and ideas through a haze of what has been learnt or thought about them rather

than by direct observation. Myopia and fixity of ideas, not perception, appear to govern the civilized attitude towards life" (Jackson 2001,40).

A second example of level two reading is revealed in Salwa's response: "*I was a little shocked to read on Ibn Taimiyya. It is hard for me to grasp that Ibn Taimiyya stated we should not be compassionate in inflicting punishment. Allah has said many times in the Qur'an that if you repent He will forgive you. So, I totally disagree with Ibn Taimiyya here. Our Prophet Muhammad was a very compassionate man.*"

On the face of it, this argument is true, though it does not do justice to the text. Writing at a time of external wars and internal disintegration and chaos, Ibn Taimiyya was simply calling for law and order. He believed that relaxing punishment for criminal and armed gangs violates the principles of justice that are also mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an. Like the earlier participants, this student took a harsh, critical stance against Ibn Taimiyya not out of a genuine intellectual analysis but, instead, due to the negative media coverage that Ibn Taimiyya recently received when his ideas were appropriated by some self-acclaimed radical Wahhabis. The student was unable to extract the essence of Ibn Taimiyya's argument because from the beginning, she held back and refused to open her mind as widely as she should have. A student who was reading the same piece but at a deeper level realized that "*Ibn Taimiyya was responding to corruption in the form of external aggression and internal division. He was deeply distraught by this, and, perhaps, he took some extreme stances to address what he saw as extreme threats*." Far from becoming overpowered by Ibn Taimiyya's

argument, or simply denouncing him, this student was able to see Ibn Taimiyya as he was: a product of his own sociopolitical setting.

Level 3: Genuine Intellectual Analysis

One of the few students who was able to provide a profound intellectual analysis was Jessica, as illustrated below in her journal entry on al-Ghazali: "*I found the discussion of love very interesting. First of all, Ghazli is indicating that all of the different types of love, coupled with correct understanding, necessarily lead to love of God. This seems to be marvelously interesting stance, especially in light of much philosophy and theology that downplays the value of these types of love…one of the things I found most interesting in this vein is his view of man's love for himself. Most individuals will unequivocally say that love of one's self is not something that one should strive after; we call it egoism and self-aggrandizement. On the contrary, here, Ghazali is stating that love of one's self is actually the precursor of the deepest type of love for God: "a knowing man loves himself.. then of necessity he must love God.*"

In this response, we see a move towards a closer connection between the student's pre-existing knowledge of social studies (e.g., sociology and anthropology) and the Islamic sciences. She was able to link the themes of the text to her own academic background as well as to her personal experiences. Her use of terms such as 'egoism' and self-aggrandizement' indicated her familiarity with the Freudian paradigm, and her reference to philosophies and theologies that 'downplay' this type of mundane love illustrates her former knowledge about the history of Islamic scholarship

and the prolonged, inter-Muslim debates therein about women and sex. Being a new convert to Islam, Jessica was bringing in some of her former theological concerns. Thus, commenting on al-Muhasibi's work, she wrote, "*I am also intrigued by his commentary on salvation. Although I cannot be sure that this is not just a translation glitch, I am always interested to see the word salvation utilized in the Islamic context. I always wonder exactly what a Muslim author or scholar is hinting at when they discuss salvation. To me, the word is heavily tied to the Jewish and Christian conceptions of the moshiach and messiah. He does not expound upon this in this piece, but it prompts me to inquire about his religious framework.*"

Had it not been for their shyness or reluctance, other students could have been equally competent readers. Commenting on al-Muhasibi's work, one of them wrote that "*of the four authors al-Muhasibi was perhaps the more difficult to read. I had no reference point whatsoever to draw from or anchor me in my understanding him"*. However, reading farther and deeper into al-Muhasibi's work, the same student stopped at a passage where the author's ability as an eminent social psychologist began to show, especially in the way he exposed the moral decadence of the intellectuals of his day in Baghdad of the Abbasids: "*some possess intellect and intelligence, but are lacking in piety and goodness. Some secretly conform with their desires, being ambitious for worldly gain, and seeking to be rulers of men. Some are devils in human form; they turn their faces from the world to come, and rush madly after this world, greedy to collect it, avid of enrichment in it; report says they live, but in truth they are dead; with them virtue becomes abomination, and devil-*

doing a virtue." It is here that the student began to re-read al-Muhasibi more seriously because, in his words, "*this passage was perhaps the most relatable part of the piece to me*." He ended his comments by posing this question*: "Was I any of the abov*e"? Is this not a reminder that some readers tend to recognize and appreciate an author only as far as he or she resonates with their own experiences or form a link with something in their lives?

Concluding Remarks

After a careful survey and analysis of the Saudi religion curriculum, Eleanor Abdella Doumato wrote, "despite the content of the religious curriculum texts, what messages are actually being imparted to students through the texts is still an open question, because the critical factor in student learning is what the teacher does with the text in the classroom, and to know that we would need a different kind of study"[1] "Despite twelve years of studying religion," she continues, "students graduate from Saudi high schools with a very limited view of Islam…the lessons are taught through memorization, often with an emphasis on trivial facts as opposed to understanding broad principles or reading critically for meaning."[2] The outcome was, in her view, an emergence of a "radical political opposition with expectations for Islamic governance that the Saudi regime is neither able nor willing to fulfil."[3] In another study, Mariam Abou Zahab, a French specialist on Pakistan, and Olivr Roy, a

[1] Doumato, Eleanor Abdella,"Manning the Barricades: Islam According to Saudi Arabia's School Texts." In: *The Middle East Journal*,Vol.57,No.2,(2003), p.242
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 245

writer on political Islam, presented (in their *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*) a detailed analysis of the al-Qaeda organization and its pattern of recruitment. In that work, the authors also concluded that contrary to popular belief, the great majority of violent Pakistani jihadists have come not from the madrassas but from dysfunctional state schools or private, semi-commercial English-language schools promising a modern education in exchange for religious indoctrination.[1]

These two studies suggest, among other things, that madrassas do not necessarily remould students in drastic ways. Neither the Saudi religious curriculum and its state-run schools nor the secular, private British schools have accomplished their implicit political objectives (e.g., helping authorities to prevent Islamic extremism at home and abroad). In fact, both systems produce Islamic radicals, as has been explicitly mentioned in these studies. Though leaning towards the same perspective of these researchers, our study tends, interestingly enough, to suggest that the ability to associate, integrate and synthesize information owes something to the general structure of knowledge and teaching techniques that Western institutions offer. We found that 33% of the students who focused, against all advice, on collecting new information without trying to connect it to their pre-existing knowledge and who thus converted the process of learning into a process of a semi-mechanical acquisition, (like their Saudi counterparts) were the students who were less exposed to "secular" social sciences. Other students who had much greater exposure

[1] Coll, Steve, "Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection.", Book Review, *The Washington Post*, 2004, p.10

to social sciences and cultural studies were quicker to discover connections, discern underlying assumptions, and construct new meanings. One may argue that it is evident that "something" must have been in these Western social sciences that prepared the students to become competent readers. Likewise, that same element must have been lacking in the Saudi religious curriculum and the British semi-commercial English-language curriculum. Here, we might be tempted to conclude that it was the "secular" content of the first and the "religious" content of the latter that made the difference. However, according to our analysis of the students' journals, this is not the case. We found that 50% of the students who were able to associate new information to their pre-existing structure of knowledge had no social studies background. What set them apart from all the other students was the fact that they were keen and motivated to apply the reading strategy and techniques that they were taught in the classroom. Hence, it must not be perceived that curriculum content, per se, (be it secular or religious) will have the predominant effect on students' consciousness.

Though thorough and informative, Doumato and Abou Dhahab's studies do not adequately explain why these "dysfunctional" schools and curriculums have become a breeding ground for radical politics. For our part, the limited number of students' responses we obtained and the location of the study in the United States did not permit us to make bold generalizations about this phenomenon. To make such generalizations, this study needs to be replicated in a Muslim country, that is, replicated with Arab Muslim students who differ in their cultural frames of

reference and social circumstances. Nevertheless, mention must be made of the following points. This researcher did not detect signs of extreme attitudes, female exclusion, or hate of others among the participants. The students were not extreme radicals or simple-minded reactionaries. Having said that, I must also record some observations about the reactions of some of the students to the course material and to my method of instruction. At the beginning of the course, some of the students were cautious, and others directly objected to the inclusion of a certain author in the reading list. I also noticed that including (in the required readings) the work of a Muslim scholar who had Sufi leanings, such al-Muhasibi, or a Zahirite position, such as that of In Hazm, was not readily accepted by some of the students. If I had also added the works of a Shi'a or an "Orientalist" scholar, the resistance might have been stronger. Does this indicate that the attitude of this group of students towards the "other" is rather alarming and could possibly develop into the types of extreme attitudes that intelligence experts warn against,[1] or does it indicate a positive trend, i.e., that those students were in fact standing up for the "democratization" of the curriculum and starting a new era of bottom-up educational reform?

The fact that such tendencies were detected prior to the reading of the texts suggests that something may have been germinating in the wider social, political or intellectual environment. Students strive, like all other social groups, to interpret the world around them, to construct their own

[1] As a remedy, those students should have more exposure to diverse views and modes of thought within the Muslim tradition. It was obvious that only a few of these students were aware, for example, of the intensified debates that Ibn Hazm's views have aroused within the Muslim community of scholars or the counterattack that Ibn Taimiyya and his disciples, e.g. Ibn al-Qaiyyim, launched against Ibn Hazm's position.

meanings, and to adjust themselves to their circumstances. In these processes of revision and adaptation, students may look for and attach themselves not to the curriculum or madrassas but to individual thinkers (dead or alive) whom they trust. This is not a new phenomenon in the Islamic educational tradition. The idea that a student identifies with a trusted teacher has found exponents in Islamic education circles before our modern educationists were born, as the late Fazlur Rahman, of Chicago University, reminds us: "It would not be far from the truth to say that even in the later Middle Ages, the majority of celebrated savants were not the products of the madrassas but men who had been informal students of individual teachers. If one were to write a history of great and original thinkers in Islam, one would not find many recruits from the madrassas."[1] Politicians and educators who see themselves as the sole authority on issues of qualification and curriculum and who aspire to discredit and dislodge the Sheikh-scholars and impose, by the force of the law, alternative "secular-sheikhs" in their place might soon realize how mistaken they are.

The findings of this study also indicate that there are certain misconceptions that should be clarified. Surely, the conception of "Islamic knowledge" suffers from various distortions in the students' minds. First, some identify it, rather exclusively, with the revealed truths (as embodied in the Quran and Sunnah) and with what they conceive as "authentic" explications of them (e.g., comments made by the first generation of Muslims who succeeded the Prophet). Second, others identify Islamic

[1] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), p.145.

knowledge with what they conceive as "authentic tradition", meaning the orthodox, mainstream brand of Islam upheld by Sunni scholars. In both cases, neither the 'other' Islamic schools of thoughts (e.g., Mu'tazila, Shi's or Sufis) nor the findings of secular, non-Muslim scientists and scholars could possibly be included in that conception of Islamic knowledge. Many problems arise from this, and if our intention is to reform the Islamic educational system or change it, we cannot make progress, in my view, unless we take issue with these conceptions and manage to synthesize a truer and wider conception.

This study shows, moreover, that stances towards texts vary even among students who belong to the same system of beliefs and who are exposed to the same curriculum. It also reveals that improving students' learning is highly dependent on the types and quality of teaching rather than on the quality or authenticity of the text. To some extent, this conclusion coincides with the view of those educators who put more emphasis on "effective teaching" and see it as a means of overcoming student indifference, parental disengagement and poverty.[1] If I were to teach this course again, I would certainly urge my students to activate their own resources and help them to deconstruct and synthesize while reading a text. I would also provide more frequent feedback on their progress and change how I interact with them in order to encourage closer personal contacts. At the beginning of this course, I was nursing the naïve hope that I would make a valuable contribution to the students' learning by stimulating them to engineer their own life-long self-development. It

[1] Brill, Stephen, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix American's schools*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p.2.

turned out that not everyone was willing to express his views frankly, let alone to voice his innermost thoughts or expose and criticize his ideology. The directive that participants should show how they relate to the text was generally ignored. Was this a reminder that curriculum, as some would argue, represents the shape of power in school and society more than transmitting knowledge? Can we say that there is a barrier of fear and mistrust (caused by the school, teacher and curriculum) that limits the intellectual engagement of students and that the first step towards reform starts with encouraging free and confidential interactions between students and teachers?

Implications for Policy and Proposed Reform

Since reading and learning cannot be done in a vacuum, as this study has suggested, some modifications are needed in the institutional contexts within which certain texts are recognized as important and given new meanings. Similar modifications are also needed in most education policies, particularly in faculty development and curriculum reform. Rooting out religious content or bringing in functional subjects (as is usually suggested) will not solve the problem because changing the teaching material alone will not improve students' learning. What must change, however, is the teaching quality. Teaching philosophies and instructional methods must be reformed in such a way that all techniques and processes that lead to the compartmentalization of sciences are removed. The focus should be shifted from curriculum content to

students' resources (e.g., their pre-existing knowledge and experiences, which implies the individualization of the system).[1]

Appropriate material on reading strategies, discourse analysis, and cross-cultural dialogue that enable students to re-read classical Islamic texts must be provided, and the Arabic language must be made accessible to students. Arabic is important because it is the literary tradition upon which the knowledge of the Islamic classic texts is based. Young Muslim activist-readers who are not familiar with this literary tradition might tend to idealize certain texts or, worse still, confine themselves to the literal meaning of the texts.[2] Finally, course material must be designed in a manner that emphasizes the diversity and relativity of human knowledge. They must also be based on a comparative perspective when possible. Comparison reveals diversity and might provide students with opportunities for discerning the cultural and ideological frames and formulations of the classic jurists who produced Islamic thought. That in turn might make the students feel the need to move away from their own stereotypes and superficial assumptions and develop strategies for understanding others' cultures from the inside, a process that propels each student to also explore into his own experiences and positions.

[1] This will of course bring us back to a thorny issue: since students' pre-existing knowledge and experiences are usually deposited in their local languages, which language should we use to present classical texts? Should we urge them to learn Arabic or just feed them on translated sources? If some students are highly conditioned by their pre-conceived ideas about knowledge, authentic personalities and texts, how can that be changed? Challenging as they are, these are the real questions that educators must address.

[2] There are some studies on the relationship between Islam and the retention of Arabic among some Muslim communities in the USA. See for instance Kate, Allan, Book Review, *Language and Society*, Vol., 22, No.4 (Cambridge University Press,1993),p. 596).

However, for such a process to succeed, faculty members and not mere curricula are needed. "Students' often need faculty members with whom they can not only relate but identify. Such faculty members serve not only as role models or as symbolic statements of the possible, but their immediate concern and support of troubled students is often the deciding factor in a student's finally making an effective bridge between his or her background and the college experience."[1]

It should be noted that extremist tendencies do not grow automatically out of Ibn Taimiyya's or Sayyied Qutb's texts. If we wish to acquire a true understanding of these tendencies, we must try to discover the "conditioning contexts" within which medieval texts could sometimes be twisted and transformed into modern, radical Muslim politics. Before rushing to remove classic texts or to dismantle the madrassas that teach them, one should ask, as did Alex De Tocqueville more than a century ago, why certain ideas are welcomed by the masses and acquire the driving force of a political passion instead of remaining confined to the few advanced thinkers as in the past?.[2]

[1] Blake, J. Herman and Saufley Roland W.," A Case Study in Faculty Development." In: *Individualizing the System*: *Current Issues in Higher Education*, edited by Vermyle, Dyckman W, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979), p. 98.

[2] Tocqueville, Alex De, *The Old Regime and the French revolution*, Trans. By Stuart Gilbert, (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday,1983), p. 139.

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