Enhancing Religious Literacy

by Ali S. Asani

Over the two decades that I have been teaching at Harvard I have been asked many questions about Islam, but I was ill-prepared when, a couple of years ago, a student asked me over dinner at a restaurant in Harvard Square: “How can anyone who is rational and intelligent believe in and practice a religion that promotes violence, terror, [and] suicide bombings and is blatantly against fundamental human rights and freedom?”

Exacerbating the lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslim cultures in the United States is a widespread illiteracy about the nature of religion in general. One of religious illiteracy’s common symptoms is the tendency to associate a religion solely with its devotional practices, such as rites, rituals, and religious festivals. Another is the propensity to attribute the actions of individuals, communities, and nations exclusively to religion. With regard to Islam, it results in the perception that the faith is chiefly responsible for all the actions of anyone who is a Muslim. It also leads to the assumption that everything that happens in a predominantly Muslim country can be attributed to religion. Thus many people commonly assume that Islam is the principal cause of a variety of ills that plague some Muslim-majority countries, such as the lack of democracy, economic underdevelopment, unjust treatment and marginalization of women. To many Muslims, such explanations are as absurd as the claim that Christianity is responsible for the United States, a predominantly Christian nation, having one of the highest crime rates in the world. Illiteracy about religion and culture hinders the ability to look for complex and more plausible explanations rooted in political, economic, and sociological conditions. It also hampers people from realizing that, while religion may be invoked as a le-
gitimizer for certain human actions, the primary motivating forces are often rooted elsewhere. Religious literacy helps students to recognize that all interpretations of religion are essentially human enterprises; the faithful may consider certain religious truths to be divinely revealed, but the meanings they construct from these truths are heavily dependent on their worldly circumstances and realities.

Ultimately, if unchecked, religious and cultural illiteracy strips peoples and nations of their history, their culture, their politics, their economics—in short, their humanity. History is full of examples of conflicts and tragedies that result from a group of people from one religious, racial, or ethnic background failing to accept and to respect the humanity of others. During times of heightened political and military conflicts, religious and cultural illiteracy strongly influences how peoples of different nations, cultures, and religions perceive each other.


**Asserting Power over Technology in an Era of Leaky Bits**

*by Harry R. Lewis*

Looking at cyberspace from 50,000 feet, we are going to be choosing between two alternative worldviews. In one view of the world, information ubiquity is the natural state; the bits will always leak. There are digital tools, such as encryption and anonymous routing, to make the flows of bits less dangerous to us and less conducive to surveillance and commercial exploitation. But fundamentally, in this worldview, people must be responsible for themselves. They need to learn homespun safety lessons: Don’t give away data about yourself if you don’t want it abused. Don’t believe what you read on a Web site if it’s anonymous and can’t be traced. Don’t believe that anyone, even the government, can collect vast amounts of information and keep it all secret forever.

In this worldview the most important thing society can do is to teach people how to take care of themselves, how not to overreact to misfortunes, how to capitalize on the potential of the revolution without assuming its risks.

In the alternative view, information, for all its usefulness, is a fundamentally dangerous substance. It must be bottled up, dammed, diverted, and origin labeled, or packaged and sold for money, even if it is a century old. This is the world of 1984, except that the information sources are in private hands, not just government hands, and the information users are commercial as well as governmental. This is the world in which the response to every problem is a regulation, or an agency, or perhaps a hardware feature. This is the world of Green Dam spyware and censorship software—China’s modern *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. It is also the world of central Internet monitoring in Australia (for obscenity) and France (for copyright infringement, in spite of the provision in Article 19 of the UN General Assembly’s 1948 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”). It is the world in which the most open societies use the tools of the most repressive, and citizens of democracies are grateful for the safety and prosperity they are promised.

Commercial and governmental forces make it easy to forget how much power we have over how technologies will shape our future. All of us who live in free societies share that power, and especially the young, who can decide what kind of world they want to inhabit.
We can help make that choice through the political process, by watching what laws are enacted by state and national governments. We can help make it by our choices as consumers, by what we say about the features present in, and missing from, the devices and technologies we buy.

We can make it by what we have to say about the workings of the institutions and businesses of which we are a part. We can resist those expurgated dictionaries and those Web sites that want to know things you do not want to tell them. We can speak up. We can leave the box on the shelf. We can click “I don’t agree.”

Whatever we choose, we should not let one world or the other evolve because others—especially governments and corporations—have made the choice for us. The revolution has its delights, but we need to think beyond them—think how they work, who has the data, and what they can do with it. We need to use our rationality, our knowledge, and our education to shape the world in which we and our children and our children’s children will live.


Literature and the Environment

by LAWRENCE BUELL

The arts and humanities have potentially crucial contributions to make toward full understanding of the multiple, accelerating environmental challenges facing the world today.

To take a simple example from one of modern environmentalism’s comparative success stories: How does one transform a “swamp”—a boggy impenetrable tract of no seeming use except when drained for tillage or building sites—into a “wetland” considered worthy of preservation, intrinsically valuable, and even beautiful in its own way? Obviously, such a shift, which has taken place only during the past half-century, requires a fundamental transformation of taste and values as well as scrupulous scientific research, protracted advocacy and litigation, careful legislation, and administrative implementation. A mere glance at guidebooks like the National Audubon Society’s Wetlands that line the shelves of the nature section of a typical American bookstore confirms the importance of narrative and image in helping to bring about and to solidify that transformation of values. These two approaches each have distinctive, though often overlapping, contributions to make. Narrative can both define and underscore the gravity of actual or possible events by means of plotlines involving characters the reader or viewer is made to care about intensely. For example, the sport-hunting industry used to complain that the worst thing that ever happened to it was *Bambi*—an antiwar novel of the 1920s made into a more famous Disney film on the
A successful public health prevention program requires knowledge of factors that may increase the likelihood of maintaining health or developing a disease. Several different study types can be employed to gain a better understanding of such risk factors. Which study type is most appropriate depends on the question at hand; each study type has its own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Initial explorations of the relation between a suspected risk factor and a disease may include examining their correlations across several countries. For example, plotting estimated alcohol consumption per capita and death rates from coronary heart disease (CHD) against each other reveals that the population of Finland has low alcohol consumption but very high mortality from CHD. Conversely, the French have a high consumption of alcoholic beverages but one of the lowest death rates from CHD. What can we learn from these observations? Such ecological studies suggest that alcohol consumption may reduce the risk of dying from heart disease. But this picture could be distorted by other lifestyle factors correlated with alcohol consumption and also with CHD mortality. The Finns have a high consumption of saturated fat, and the French have a diet rich in vegetable oil and fresh fruits and vegetables—although the French do like their butter, too.

The Finns have a high consumption of saturated fat, and the French have a diet rich in vegetable oil and fresh fruits and vegetables—even though the French do like their butter, too. How a place gets imaged, what stories about it get told, how they are remembered—all this can clearly make a difference not just aesthetically but historically, for public values and behavior.
that fulfill these conditions and can therefore distort the association of interest. Our goal is, therefore, to exclude the influence of confounders. To do this we would need data on the individual level. And we need to be able to measure the potential confounders. We can then eliminate their influence statistically by holding their level constant in so-called regression models (which allow for the simultaneous adjustment of many confounding variables).

From “Medical Detectives,” by Karin B. Michels, associate professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive health, Harvard Medical School, and associate professor, department of epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, who teaches Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning 15 under the same title.

Accounting for a Good Life
by THOMAS M. SCANLON JR.

A plausible account of what makes someone’s life better will be a “substantive good” account: a claim or set of claims about what things are good in themselves, not good because they are desired. Hedonism is one such an account; it is just an implausibly narrow one, a list that includes only one element.

Any account of what makes someone’s life go better, especially one that rests on claims about what is substantively good, is bound to be controversial. So one might ask (as some student in my course always does), “Who’s to decide what makes a life better?” It is important to see that this is a facile debating move, not a serious question. To say of some person that he is “the one to decide” whether A is the case or not suggests that this person has the authority to settle this question: that his deciding that A is the case would make it so. Sometimes, in some institutional settings, for example, there is authority of this kind. The Supreme Court, for example, has the authority to decide whether something is the law of the United States. But with respect to the questions we are considering there obviously is no authority of this kind. The answer to the question “Who’s to decide?” is “No one.” That is to say, no one has the authority to settle the question.

But in another, more relevant, sense the answer to “Who’s to decide?” is “Each of us.” That is to say, it is up to each of us to make up his or her own mind about such questions as what makes a life better for the person who lives it. This is not to say that each of us has any authority to settle this question. It is up to each of us to assess the merits of competing answers and arrive at our own conclusion as to which one is correct. But whether this conclusion is correct depends on its merits, not on our decision.

It may seem that each person has special authority to settle the question of what makes a life the best for him or her. This may be true in a sense, but not in the sense relevant to our present discussion. It is up to each person to decide how to live, and each person has authority over this question in the sense that (within limits, at least) his or her decision has a claim not to be interfered with. But authority of this kind should not be confused with authority to settle the question of what makes a life worth living—to determine, by one’s decision, what the right answer to this question is. We do not have this authority. We can be mistaken about what life would be best for us, although it is also true in many cases that our choices about how to live, even if misguided, ought not to be interfered with.

There is now a growing body of empirical investigations, by psychologists and economists, of what makes people happy, and it might be thought that these findings could provide an answer to the question we are considering. At the most fundamental level, this is not so. Philosophical questions, such as whether the quality of a life for the person who lives it depends only on the person’s experience, or only on what he or she desires, or also on something else, cannot be settled by taking a poll. The correctness of an answer depends on the merits of the argument supporting it, not on how many people believe it to be correct.


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