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Education in the Arab world

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

"From the Atlantic to the Gulf, people—women, men and children—are the real wealth and hope of Arab countries." So begins the introduction to the Arab Human Development Report 2002 by the UN Development Program (www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr).

The first report of its kind, it cites successes in development over the past three decades, and opportunities. Authored by a "group of distinguished Arab intellectuals," its purpose is to help "Arab peoples and policy-makers in search of a brighter future."

One example of success is that adult literacy has almost doubled and women's literacy tripled. However, more than 60 million Arab adults remain illiterate, including 55% of Arab women. The report questioned the quality of public education as compared with privileged private schooling: "Poor quality has become the Achilles heel of education in the Arab world, a flaw that undermines its quantitative achievements." The authors fret that Arab countries are becoming "isolated from global knowledge, information and technology."

To resolve an impending educational crisis, they give 10 recommendations, including: "the dignity of the individual should be respected," "intellectual and cultural heritage should not be immune to criticism and change," "equal educational opportunities should be made available to all children." Certainly, we can support such constructive educational goals prayerfully and practically.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of this newspaper, links educational development with spiritual growth. Perhaps this came from her own experience, growing up at a time when girls and women had limited educational opportunities. She believed that proper education opened thought to higher, more spiritual dimensions. She wrote: "Academics of the

right sort are requisite. Observation, invention, study, and original thought are expansive and should promote the growth of mortal mind out of itself, out of all that is mortal" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," pg. 195).

Through her study of philosophy, homeopathy, and other thought systems then in vogue, Mrs. Eddy recognized the power of thought. She found that what a person believed had an effect on everything from economics and family relations to health. Eventually her intellectual pursuits culminated in a conviction that God was the source of mind. In fact, that God was divine Mind. Understanding, even in a degree, the presence and power of divine Mind would elevate and change human belief and experience.

Considering God as Mind, the source of all good and inspired ideas, has positive implications for the illiterate around the world. If Mind supercedes human limitations and cultural beliefs, then the impulse for education and improvement is divine rather than merely human. And if the impulse for higher education is divine, then the entire might of God is supporting it. Like an irresistible force, divine Mind is attracting individuals throughout the world to increase their intellectual and spiritual awareness. No human system can forever impede the innate impulse to progress.

Evidence of this divine impulsion is already at work in the Arab world. The UN report cites Lebanon as "the most advanced in the Arab region in so far as quality and gender equality are concerned."

The report continues, "The gender gap in enrollment has been bridged, that is, female enrollment has become a bit higher than that of males at the preparatory and secondary stages of education." This rise in enrollment for women and the lowering of illiteracy rates took place while Lebanon was basically in a state of war. The commitment to education and the impulse for progress could not be buried under decades of unrest and brutality.

As we teeter on the brink of global conflict in the Middle East, part of our prayer can be to support the supremacy of divine Mind over human beliefs.

We can pray not only for peace but for progress, both individually and collectively. We can innately feel the desire for education and access to increased information that simmers in the human spirit. And we can pray that this right desire be recognized and rewarded by the heavenly Father-

Mother of us all. Whether called Allah or Lord, the divine Mind is leading humanity to a higher hope and fulfillment.