



The Qarawiyyin University and Its Role in History

A woman by the name of Fatima Fihriyya founded the University of ‘Al-Qarawiyyin’ in the year 245 A.H. in the middle of the 9th Century C.E.

Al-Qarawiyyin is a central mosque located in the old city of Fez, Morocco whose name, ‘Jami’ Al-Qarawiyyin,’ means ‘The Central Mosque of the Townspeople.’

The role of the university historically wasn’t merely religious. Rather, it has played a cultural, social, and political role in educating, directing, and reforming the lives of the individuals of the Muslim world community.

Al-Qarawiyyin is also argued to be the first *‘university’* in the world ever to be established, which rivals Azhar University of Cairo, Egypt in this claim.

Al-Qarawiyyin gave birth not just to religious scholars. It also at one time in its history produced great jurists, hadith specialists, historians, mathematicians, time observation experts, astronomers, physicians, ascetics, doctors of literature, language, and poets.

Add to that, classes were not restricted to matriculated students. Classes were also open to merchants, craftsmen, farmers, laborers, and others who attended with the aim of perfecting their knowledge of their various crafts and arts.

During Morocco’s most difficult years under French occupation it was the students and professors of Al-Qarawiyyin who stood up to awaken the heart of the nation and unite its ranks to resist the occupation until the so-called ‘Protectorate’ (Himaya) was lifted and the French left after restoring Morocco’s deposed but rightful Muslim leader to his throne, King Muhammad V.

Since Morocco regained its political independence in 1956, the role of Al-Qarawiyyin would eventually change in that its name was attached to a number of Western-style universities with branches in Fez, Titwan, Marrakech, and Agadir.

As for the traditional school held in the central mosque, it would remain closed until King Hasan II reopened it for study short of 2 decades ago in 1988. And the first graduating class to issue forth from the ancient school since its reopening occurred in the year 2000.

But in spite of all of this, the traditional role afforded to Islamic scholars in Morocco as well as most of the Muslim world has been circumscribed to government taking their counsel on matters related strictly to things like family law, and matters pertaining to the five pillars of Islam; whereas their counsel isn't sought when things relate to criminal law, business law, the general operation of government, and determining the national direction of the country.

The very low salaries that they earn from their limited functions, and the fact that the Muslim masses are inundated by Western philosophy, materialism, and immoral teachings have belittled the scholars' role also.

So the masses have begun to see greatness in technological advancements, and the liberty to act shamefully without being threatened with punishment. And government standardization of Islamic curriculum at Al-Qarawiyyin has played a major part in damaging the traditional role of the university and its scholars, while the masses raise no objection for not seeing any harm or importance in traditional Islamic education anyway.