

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition

Preserving, studying, and democratizing access to the world heritage of Islamic manuscripts

BY SABINE SCHMIDKE

Reducing the intellectually rich and diverse Islamic literary heritage to a bare minimum of what is seen as allegedly authentic is a strategy that is characteristic of Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism and their respective proponents. Whatever goes against their interpretation of Islam is classified as “heretical” and banned from distribution. Moreover, libraries holding books and manuscripts that are seen as containing deviant views are targeted for destruction, as is also the case with historic monuments, shrines, and religious sites, which have been destroyed over the past decades by Muslim extremists in an attempt to allegedly “purge” Islam.

Mention should be made of the attempts by Islamic militants to destroy the important manuscript holdings in Timbuktu in 2013,¹ or the destruction of books and manuscripts in the libraries of Mosul at the hand of ISIS in 2015.² Another example has received less public attention, though the significance of the literary material and the level of destruction go far beyond the case of the Timbuktu or the Mosul collections. It concerns the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, which is primarily preserved in the numerous private and public libraries of Yemen. Many manuscript collections have been severely damaged, looted, or even destroyed over the past decade, and the continuing war in the country, with its daily bombardments, constitutes an imminent threat not only to the local population, but also to the cultural heritage of the country, including its many libraries.³

To be sure, the world heritage of Islamic manuscripts in its entirety is an extraordinarily rich one and the extant Islamic literary tradition of the premodern period surpasses by far what is preserved, for example, in Latin and Greek. The three most renowned digital collections of classical Arabic texts, al-Jāmi‘ al-kabīr, Shamelah.ws, and ShiaOnlineLibrary.com, include at present about 7,895 individual titles, circa 1.1 billion words in total.⁴ Not included in any of these counts are printed Arabic materials that are not available in digital form. Moreover, the manuscript tradition continued longer in the Islamic world than anywhere else, and only a fraction of the Islamic literary heritage is available by now in print. Preserving this vulnerable heritage and making it accessible to a wider audience is therefore of imminent significance.

The Zaydi manuscript tradition: An endangered cultural heritage

The Zaydi community is a branch of Shi‘i Islam that has flourished mainly in two regions, namely the mountainous Northern Highlands of Yemen and the Caspian regions of Northern Iran. The two Zaydi states that were established in the ninth century C.E. initially constituted separate political and cultural entities. The situation changed in the early twelfth century, when a rapprochement between the two communities began that eventually resulted in their political unification. The political development was accompanied by a transfer of knowledge from Northern Iran to Yemen that comprised nearly the entire literary and religious legacy of Caspian Zaydism.

During the reign of Imam al-Manṣūr bi-Llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza (r. 1197–1217), the knowledge transfer to Yemen reached its peak. The Imam founded a library in Zafār, his town of residence, for which he had a wealth of textual sources copied by a team of scholars and scribes. More than seven hundred years later, in 1929, the rich holdings of his library, which had continued to grow under his successors, were transferred from Zafār to the newly founded al-Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya (nowadays: al-Maktaba al-Sharqiyya or Maktabat al-Awqāf), which is housed in the complex of the Great Mosque of Ṣan‘ā’.

The Zaydi literary tradition is among the richest and most variegated strands within Islamic civilization, and at the same time one of the least studied. The literary production by Zaydi scholars stretches over more than a thousand years covering a wide spectrum of traditional disciplines. Moreover, Zaydis were at all times intimately familiar with the relevant intellectual strands beyond the confines of their own community, and they actively engaged in them. The typical library of a Zaydi scholar would comprise not only works belonging to his own religious tradition, but also an array of titles of authors from other communities, including the literary legacy of the Mu‘tazila, one of the most important rational schools in the history of Muslim theology. The Yemeni manuscript collections thus constitute a unique treasure trove for large segments of the Islamic intellectual tradition—Sunni as well as Shi‘i—much of which has not survived anywhere else in the Islamic world.

It is fortunate that the majority of Zaydi literature is still extant, mostly in the

form of manuscripts. On the downside, the Zaydi manuscript tradition is widely dispersed. The most significant and by far largest collections of Zaydi manuscripts are housed by the many public and private libraries of Yemen (estimates of their holdings range between 40,000 to 100,000 manuscripts). In addition to this, several European libraries own considerable numbers of Zaydi manuscripts (about 10,000 manuscripts), as is also the case with North American libraries (fewer than 1,000 manuscripts). Of great importance are also the many libraries of the Middle East, especially in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and other places with significant numbers of Zaydi manuscripts.

In view of the poor state of scholarship in the area of Zaydi studies, the challenges that result from the dispersal of the material, and the disastrous situation in present-day Yemen, the tasks at hand are three-fold, namely “preserving” and “studying” the Zaydi manuscript tradition, as well as “democratizing” access to these materials.

The scholarly discovery of Zaydism

As a result of the geographical isolation of Yemen, the scholarly exploration of its political and intellectual history and of its rich manuscript holdings started later than was the case with most other parts of the Islamic world. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a number of European explorers and merchants sojourned to Yemen where they brought together considerable collections of manuscripts that they later sold to European libraries. Mention should be made of the Austrian Eduard Glaser (1855–1908) who visited Yemen on four occasions between 1882

and 1894 and sold his nearly nine hundred manuscripts to the Königliche Bibliothek zu Berlin (now Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), the British Museum in London, and the Austrian National Library in Vienna. The most significant collection of Yemeni manuscripts outside of Yemen (ca. 1,700 manuscripts) was purchased between 1906 and 1914 by the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. Important collections of Zaydi manuscripts from Yemen are also owned by Leiden University Library, the Bavarian State Library in Munich, the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, Princeton University Library, and Yale University Library.

On the basis of the European collections of Yemeni manuscripts, it was mostly German and Italian Arabists who initiated the scholarly investigation of Zaydism during the early decades of the twentieth century. The German scholar Rudolph Strothmann (1877–1960) began to study the holdings of the Berlin Glaser collections during a visit to the city in October 1908, and his rich scholarly output on Zaydism (published between 1910 and 1923) laid the foundation for what was then an entirely new field of study. Dutch scholars were also engaged in Zaydi studies, as were Italian Arabists, who had the largest collection of Yemeni manuscripts at their disposal: Eugenio Griffini (1878–1925), Ignazio di Matteo (1872–1948), Michelangelo Guidi (1886–1946), and Renato Traini (1923–2014).

Strothmann’s erstwhile student, Wilferd Madelung, provides in his seminal 1965 book *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* an unsurpassed analysis of the doctrinal developments of the Zaydis from the time of Imam al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 860) until ‘Abd Allāh b. Zayd al-‘Ansī (d. 1269). Over the past decade, a number of Madelung’s students and other Western scholars have continued to develop the field of Zaydi studies.⁵ Yemeni scholars also contributed to advancing our knowledge of the political and intellectual history of Zaydism in Yemen, among them Ismā‘il b. ‘Alī l-Akwa‘ (1920–2008).⁶ Outside of Yemen, Egyptian scholars have contributed significantly to furthering the scholarly study of Zaydism.⁷

Toward an open and democratic research culture

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century and during the early twenty-first century, various microfilming and digitization projects have been carried out by teams from Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Germany, and the United States in an attempt to facilitate access to the manuscript holdings of the libraries in Yemen.

Despite the enormous significance of all these efforts, there are also several downsides. The Egyptians, and later the Kuwaitis, had a selective approach in their choice of manuscripts to be microfilmed (they were aiming particularly at the literary legacy of the Mu‘tazilites, a theological movement with a rationalist approach that dominated Islamic doctrinal thought from the ninth through the thirteenth century). They managed to publish a fair amount of works they had brought from Yemen during the late 1960s and 1970s, and with this rendered a

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A Yemenite digitization team at work in the Maktabat al-Awqāf

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great service to scholarship. Moreover, the publication of these works evoked a reappraisal of rationalism as evidenced in the theological writings of the Mu'tazila, resulting in a movement that was summarized under the label Neo-Mu'tazila. The Iranians, who microfilmed and later digitized significant amounts of Yemeni manuscripts during the early 2000s, had a far more comprehensive approach—in many cases they filmed entire collections. The various digitization efforts supported by the German Foreign Office⁸ and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities⁹—both carried out in cooperation with the Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation—aimed at digitizing a select number of private collections in their entirety.

The handlists that were produced for the digitized materials often omit the whereabouts of the original manuscripts, which is a major hurdle for the accurate scholarly usage of the material and subsequent scholarly communication about the manuscripts, as well as for future efforts to digitize additional private collections. Generally, the cataloguing of the holdings of the libraries of Yemen, especially the private ones, is in a very poor state and their history has not been studied up until now. Moreover, as a result of the political vicissitudes of Yemen during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the fact that most private libraries are in family ownership, those libraries are subject to constant change, and it is often unclear whether a library, quoted for example in a handlist created by Egyptian scholars in the 1960s, still exists, and, if so, under which name.

While scholars outside of Yemen are able to access only a fraction of the relevant manuscript materials housed in Yemeni libraries, scholars of Yemen are for all practical purposes unable to consult any of the Zaydi manuscripts housed by European or North American libraries—the costs for digital images render them unaffordable, and only a fraction of the close to eleven thousand manuscripts have so far been digitized.

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Portal

The most recent initiative to preserve the Zaydi manuscript culture and to democratize access to it is “The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT): A Digital Portal,” a joint project initiated by the Institute for Advanced Study in partnership with the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) in Minnesota. It

Recommended Reading:

“Institute for Advanced Study Partners with Hill Museum & Manuscript Library to Share Threatened Manuscripts from Yemen and Neighboring Countries,” Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, April 11, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oHjzB9>

consists of two components: a digital portal, which is housed on the website of the Institute for Advanced Study,¹⁰ and HMML’s virtual reading room, vHMML, which serves as the repository of digital surrogates of manuscript codices.¹¹

The purpose of the ZMT is threefold. Through its digital portal, it serves as a *comprehensive research guide* to relevant collections of Zaydi manuscripts, providing precise information on the location of each collection with a full list of its holdings (shelf marks) and the relevant bibliography for every single codex. Each entry is linked to a corresponding entry in the virtual reading room of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. This provides a stable HMML Project Number and permanent link for each manuscript. In a second phase of the project, full metadata will be produced for the manuscripts included in the project using the vHMML reading room’s cataloging tools.

In addition to this, the digital portal functions as a *gateway to manuscripts* within the confines of the ZMT that have already been digitized. Provided a repository has uploaded digital images of its own holdings, the portal links the user directly to those repositories. Images of holdings of other collections of Zaydi manuscripts, to the extent that these are available or can be produced, will be uploaded to the digital reading room of vHMML, and links to the respective digital codices are again provided through the portal.

The project, which aims to provide open access to an estimated number of about fifteen thousand digitized manuscripts over the course of the next three years, will help to salvage the rich Yemeni heritage, which is on the verge of destruction. These measures will also effectively *democratize* access to the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, which is expected to result in an upsurge of this important field of study and will serve as a model for other fields within Islamic studies where scholars face similar challenges. At the same time, the ZMT project will help to bring more of the enormous richness and intellectual diversity of Islamic culture to the forefront and make it accessible for everyone.

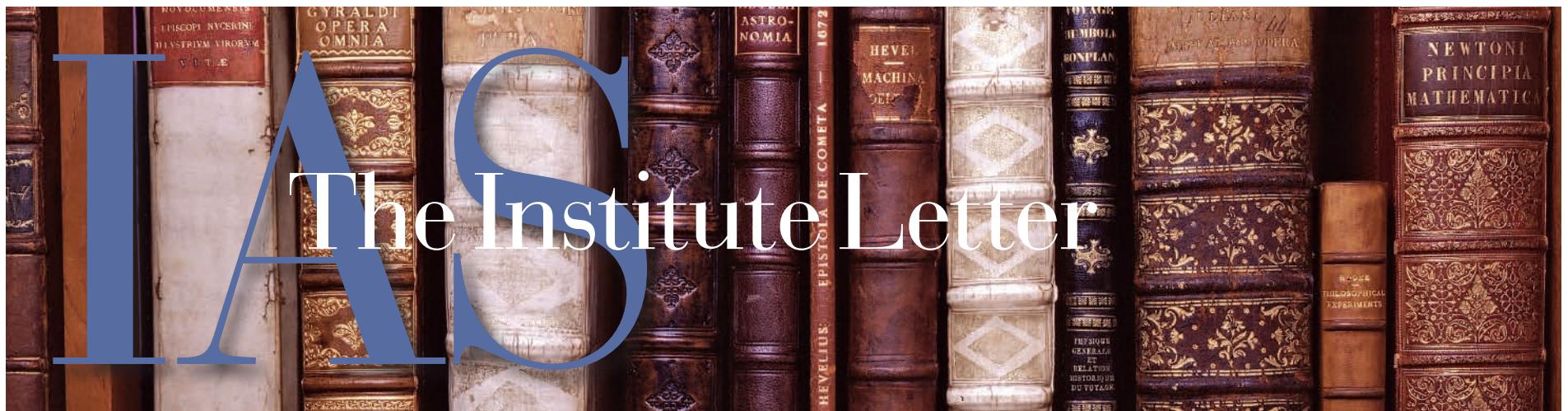
Most importantly perhaps, the preservation and dissemination of the mostly unknown Zaydi theological and legal literature will underscore the fact that a rationalist epistemology continued in Islamic thought for a longer period than is generally recognized. The preservation, dissemination, and study of these rich manuscript materials will thus not only have an immediate impact on several fields of scholarship in the humanities but also bring the rational heritage of Islam to the forefront and thus contribute to a more nuanced picture of the Islamic intellectual tradition and culture among Western observers. ■

Sabine Schmidke, Professor in the School of Historical Studies since 2014, has played a central role in the exploration of heretofore unedited and unknown theological and philosophical writings. Schmidke has applied rigorous study to the edition and critical analysis of manuscripts in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian, and her work extends from Arabic-speaking countries to Israel, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

1. It is mostly thanks to the courageous attempts of the people of Timbuktu that most of the manuscripts were saved and clandestinely smuggled out to Bamako. They are currently being preserved through digitization, with generous support by various international funding agencies and private donors, under the aegis of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML), <https://goo.gl/v7hGEg>.
2. Cf. Muna Fadhil, “ISIS Destroys Thousands of Books and Manuscripts in Mosul Libraries,” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2015, <https://goo.gl/xNCzZZ>; Henri Neuendorf, “8,000 Books Burned by ISIS in Massive Iraqi Libicide,” *Artnet News*, February 25, 2015, <https://goo.gl/anUEjj>.
3. For cases of looting and destruction between 2014 and 2016, see David Hollenberg and Anne Regourd, “Manuscript Destruction and Looting in Yemen: A Status Report,” *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 21 (2016): 157–177.
4. Maxim Romanov, “Chronological Coverage of an Arabic Corpus: An Experiment with Data Statements,” <https://alraqmiyat.github.io/2016/03-29.html>.
5. See, e.g., the contributions to *The Neglected Šīites: Studies in the Legal and Intellectual History of the Zaydīs*, ed. Sabine Schmidke, *Arabica: Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 59 (2012): 3–4; and *The Yemeni Manuscript Tradition*, ed. David Hollenberg, Christoph Rauch, and Sabine Schmidke (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
6. See, e.g., the obituary by Adel al-Aulaqi at <http://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/bys/obits/alakwa.htm>.
7. See also the references to the relevant primary and secondary sources included in the Zotero Group Library “Zaydi Studies” at www.zotero.org/groups/zaydi_studies, which is an ongoing project.
8. “Preserving Yemen’s Cultural Heritage: The Yemen Manuscript Digitization Project” (YMDP), 2010. See Sabine Schmidke and Jan Thiele, “Preserving Yemen’s Cultural Heritage: The Yemen Manuscript Digitization Project,” *Fair Observer* (2011), www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east-north_africa/preserving-yemens-cultural-heritage-yemen-manuscript-digitization-project/
9. “The Yemen Manuscript Digitization Initiative” (YMDI), 2010 through 2013, [https://ymdi.uoregon.edu](http://ymdi.uoregon.edu)
10. www.ias.edu/digital-scholarship/zaydi_manuscript_tradition
11. www.vhmml.org



Columba Stewart (left) and team digitizing the famous Abba Garima gospels, possibly the oldest Ethiopian manuscripts in existence, in 2013



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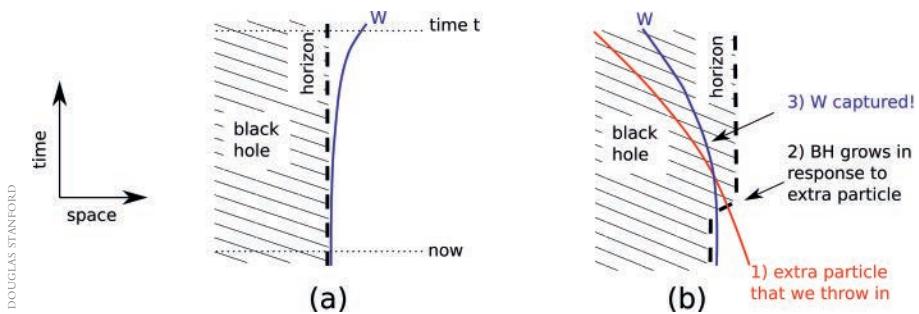
Black Holes and the Butterfly Effect

How a solvable description of a black hole might shed light on quantum gravity's deep mysteries

BY DOUGLAS STANFORD

One of the surprising things about chaos is that it took so long for physicists to appreciate how common it is. This is despite the fact that people seem to come naturally programmed with intuition for the basic phenomenon: that small changes to the state of a complicated system can lead to dramatic changes a short while later. This idea is often referred to as the butterfly effect, and it was on display in creative works like the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and

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The butterfly effect, as implemented by a black hole: a small perturbation (red particle in b) can have a large impact on the fate of a particle (blue line) that otherwise would have escaped.

BY HISTORY WORKING GROUP

Sanctuary rites

The Institute for Advanced Study came into being at the most inauspicious of times. Founded in the early years of the Great Depression, it took shape during the buildup to the Second World War and under the growing shadow of authoritarian regimes. Its first Director Abraham Flexner published his manifesto on the "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge" in October 1939, barely a month after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. Surely this was a daunting moment to defend "the fearless and irresponsible thinker" and advocate for the free expression of knowledge and curiosity.

The very adversity of the era, however, also created opportunities for the fledgling institution, primarily in the form of sudden availability of renowned and newly mobile scholars from the upper echelons of the German university system. After expressing initial hesitation, Flexner followed the urging of influential faculty members, particularly the mathematician Oswald Veblen, in seeking to provide a haven for some of these new refugees, a sanctuary tradition continued by Director Frank Aydelotte, Flexner's successor. In association with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars (on which



Albert Einstein at his home with a group of World War II European Jewish refugee children

Veblen and Flexner served and whose name initially specified German rather than Foreign Scholars), the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation, IAS played a leading role in this farsighted, if ever elite, rescue effort.

We find ourselves today, nearly nine decades after the Institute's founding in 1930, at another inauspicious juncture. Global political forces in power from Turkey to the United States are posing serious threats to the autonomy of scientific research and the mobility of researchers, undercutting two cardinal conditions for scientific progress. Walls, fences, bans, blocks, restrictions, cuts, and expulsions are slowly becoming run-of-the-mill terms for us to navigate in an increasingly precarious political landscape.

Travel restrictions involving pure accidents of birth, documented by passports from flagged countries, have prompted us to revisit today the Institute's history not because we believe that history repeats itself. Rather, we seek to provide the IAS community (Continued on page 5)

The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge

IAS founding Director Abraham Flexner's compelling belief in the power of human curiosity

BY ROBBERT DIJKGRAAF

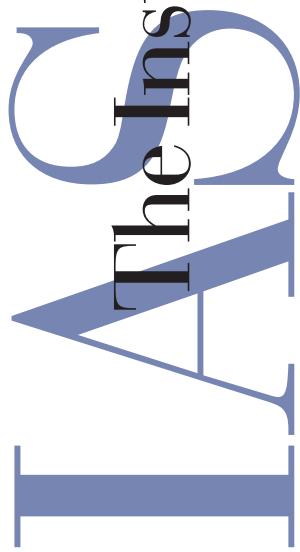
Abraham Flexner's perspective on the "usefulness of useless knowledge" has only gained in substance and breadth since his time. First and foremost, as Flexner argues so elegantly, basic research clearly advances knowledge in and of itself. Fundamental inquiry moves exploration as far up to the headwaters as possible, producing ideas that slowly and steadily turn into concrete applications and further studies. As it is often stated, knowledge is the only resource that increases when used.

Second, pathbreaking research leads to new tools and techniques, often in unpredictable and indirect ways. A remarkable, late-twentieth-century example of such a fortuitous outgrowth was the development of automatic information-sharing software, introduced as the World Wide Web in 1989. What began as a collaboration tool for thousands of particle physicists working at the CERN particle accelerator laboratory entered the public domain in 1993, unleashing the power of the Internet to the masses and facilitating large-scale communication around the

(Continued on page 4)

ABRAHAM FLEXNER
With a companion essay by
ROBBERT DIJKGRAAF

This article, among three in this issue, was written by a Member-organized History Working Group that mobilized in response to the January 27 executive order initially banning travel and immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries.



THE USEFULNESS OF USELESS KNOWLEDGE

BY ABRAHAM FLEXNER

It is not a curious fact that in a world steeped in irrational hatreds which threaten civilization itself, men and women—old and young—detach themselves wholly or partly from the angry current of daily life to devote themselves to the cultivation of beauty, to the extension of knowledge, to the cure of disease, to the amelioration of suffering, just as though fanatics were not simultaneously engaged in spreading pain, ugliness, and suffering? The world has always been a sorry and confused sort of place—yet poets and artists and scientists have ignored the factors that would, if attended to, paralyze them. From a practical point of view, intellectual and spiritual life is, on the surface, a useless form of activity, in which men indulge because they procure for themselves greater satisfactions than are otherwise obtainable. In this paper I shall concern myself with the question of the extent to which the pursuit of these useless satisfactions proves unexpectedly the source from which undreamed-of utility is derived.

We hear it said with tiresome iteration that ours is a materialistic age, the main concern of which should be the wider distribution of material goods and worldly opportunities. The justified outcry of those who through no fault of their own are deprived of opportunity and a fair share of worldly goods therefore diverts an increasing number of students from the studies which their fathers pursued to the equally important and no less urgent study of social, economic, and govern-

mental problems. I have no quarrel with this tendency. The world in which we live is the only world about which our senses can testify. Unless it is made a better world, a fairer world, millions will continue to go to their graves silent, saddened, and embittered. I have myself spent many years pleading that our schools should become more acutely aware of the world in which their pupils and students are destined to pass their lives. Now I sometimes wonder whether that current has not become too strong and whether there would be sufficient opportunity for a full life if the world were emptied of some of the useless things that give it spiritual significance; in other words, whether our conception of what is useful may not have become too narrow to be adequate to the roaming and capricious possibilities of the human spirit.

We may look at this question from two points of view: the scientific and the humanistic or spiritual. Let us take the scientific first. I recall a conversation which I had some years ago with Mr. George Eastman on the subject of use. Mr. Eastman, a wise and gentle far-seeing man, gifted with taste in music and art, had been saying to me that he meant to devote his vast fortune to the promotion of education in useful subjects. I ventured to ask him whom he regarded as the most useful worker in science in the world. He replied instantaneously: "Marconi." I surprised him by saying, "Whatever pleasure we

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