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The 'Islamic' in Islamic Education: Assessing the Discourse

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Introduction

If one were to comb through the extant works from the first few centuries of the history of Muslims to find a book entitled, 'Islam and ...', one would likely be searching in vain. For example, the bibliographical work of al-Nadim (1970, original in the tenth century) does not carry any such title. If a similar search were made today, however, one could fill an entire library with books carrying titles such as Islam and Democracy, Islam and Capitalism, Islam and Science, Islam and the West, and, certainly, Islam and Education.¹ Clearly, this indicates a significant shift in the understanding of the very idea of Islam. At the very least, it indicates that Islam, in these contemporary writings, is an object of study or an idea to be juxtaposed with other ideas (Iqbal, 2002). What are the implications of this approach? What is its historical context?

'Islam and education' is a strand within the trend of relating the idea of Islam to other social, political and intellectual ideas. In this sense, the discourse is part of a widely advocated call for the Islamisation of various aspects of society – economics, knowledge and science, politics, etc. By exploring the discourse on Islam and education, this paper seeks to evaluate the underlying assumptions of this discourse.

Undoubtedly there is a diversity of approaches to, and stances taken on, writings about Islam and education. While the vast majority of this literature is based on the view that there is a distinct Islamic position with regard to education (Sardar, 1989; Iqbal, 1996; Wan Daud, 1998; Ali, 2000), some critical voices question this fundamental assumption (Hoodbhoy, 1992; Tibi, 1995; Soroush, 1997). The advocates of a distinctively Islamic approach to education also differ among themselves on various matters; some argue for a common inter-faith religious framework on education (The Islamic Academy, 1990; Conway, 2001) while others claim, at least implicitly, a superiority of the Islamic approach over those of other religions (Mukadam, 1997).

This paper focuses on the writings that are underpinned by a belief in a distinct Islamic view of education. Within this framework, some writers restrict the notion of Islamic education to religious education (Ahmed, 1999); others argue for a complete educational system derived from within an Islamic perspective (UI Islam, 2003); while still others argue for the wholesale Islamisation of knowledge (IIS, 1995). This paper seeks to critically assess these approaches by exploring the following: (i) the construction of arguments for an Islamic approach; (ii) the underlying conception of Islam used in the writings; and, (iii) practical proposals for the implementation of Islamic education. Through a critical analysis of a wide range of writings on

¹ I recognise that the title alone is not sufficient to categorise a book. At times, a title reflects more the desires of the publishers than the thoughts of the author. Yet, more often than not, there is a resonance between a title and the central premise of a book.

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the subject, the paper will argue that, at all three levels, the discourse suffers from serious philosophical, empirical and pragmatic shortcomings. It will conclude by offering alternatives that may help overcome these shortcomings.

Arguments for an Islamic Approach

A contemporary discussion on Islam and education usually begins with a critique of western and western-based educational systems in societies that have a significant Muslim population. Professor Ashraf Ali, a leading proponent of Islamic education in UK, writes,

Underlying this paper is the conviction, variously expressed that education in Britain today all too frequently promotes an unduly secularist approach to life. ...[I]t (education in Britain today) can, perhaps unintentionally, too easily breed skepticism and relativism and lead to the loss of the sense of sacredness of life, with all the impoverishment of the human spirit which this entails. (The Islamic Academy, 1990, p.2)

Other critiques of these educational systems found in this literature include permissiveness, declining intellectual standards, lack of discipline among students, and the violence and peer-pressure that exist within these systems (Al-Taftazani, 1986; Sarwar, 1996; Hague, 2002).

While one can agree at least in part with this critique, there are some observations that should also be made. Almost all the data and arguments to levy criticism are drawn from western sources – this is true even for the data used to critique the education systems in Muslim societies. Sardar (1989), for instance, in his attempt to show that “Western science is inherently destructive and is a threat to the well being of mankind” (p.97), relies almost exclusively on European and American writers. Similarly, Salam (2001), in his critique of the so called secular methodologies of research, relies upon both Muslim and non-Muslim writers (as indicated by the names of the authors quoted). Clearly, this reliance on western authors, research and data, demonstrates that Muslims are not alone in their concern about contemporary social and educational conditions, in the West or elsewhere (Young, 1971; Ilych, 1971; Freire, 1998; Bloom, 1998, Bellah, 1996; Apple, 1996, Roy, 2003). The current dominant discourse on Islam and education, however, does not capitalise on this shared concern. Rather, by failing to note this shared concern, much of the literature on Islamic education contributes, perhaps unintentionally, to widening the gap between Islam and the ‘West’. It depicts Western civilisation as deeply problematic and Islam or the ‘Islamic’ approach as the solution (Sardar, 1991; Iqbal, 1996; Ahmed, 1999; Ali, 2000). In adopting this exclusivist position, it creates dichotomies; in a way, this ‘West equals bad and Islam equals good’ approach is a mirror image of Huntington’s thesis regarding the clash of civilisations (Huntington, 1996).

Perhaps the reason that many of those who write about Islam and education fail to recognise that their critiques about education systems are widely shared by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars is their conviction about the solution they wish to offer. The solution they wish to offer is ‘Islam’ or ‘Islamic’. They do not arrive at their solutions through patient, penetrating and open-minded engagement with the identified problems. Rather, their criticism of education in western, as well as Muslim societies, simply serves as a preamble to their proclamations about a religious, in this case Islamic, solution. This assertion – rather than argumentation – is often betrayed in the way the perceived problems and their solution are linked. Here is a typical example:

The need for an Islamic education system is not only a matter of conviction, but also



crucial for mankind. No other system can save human beings from destruction and perdition, apparent to anyone with insight into and concern for human welfare. On such a system depends the future well-being of all peoples of the world. (Sarwar, 1996, p.7)

Since the goal is to proclaim the necessity of an ‘Islamic’ – accepted as a divinely ordained – system over the western system, the latter is portrayed as ‘man-made’. Again, Sarwar (1996) provides a good example:

The man-made education system has led to many forms of social degeneration: misuse of human intellect and creativity to suit political and economic objectives; abuse of drugs, power, authority and wealth; increased murder and crime; and self debasement through suicide...Wars, genocide, persecution and torture continue even today; whilst most developed countries supply arms, tacitly supporting abuses of human rights, condemning or acquiescing in an appalling show of double standards, dictated by political and economic considerations without reference to moral or ethical concerns.

It is clearly logical and desirable to argue for a system based on the Creator’s revealed guidance which [sic] is the basis for the ultimate success of mankind. (Sarwar, 1996, p.7)

Sarwar’s argument does not acknowledge the positive contributions of such ‘man-made’ education systems. Even if one were to accept that the man-made western education systems are failing today, it does not necessarily constitute an argument for a divinely-based system. Exchanging one man-made system with another one is an equally logical response, but it is never entertained by the author. Instead, a leap of faith is made to assert that the solution lies in a divinely-guided system: Islam.

Conception of Islam in ‘Islamic’ Education

Here we come to a central issue within the discourse on Islamic education, namely its underlying conception of Islam. Ould Bah (1998) argues that ‘Islamic’ meant that education was intimately related to Islam and God.

I am often asked: Is the study of philosophy allowed in Islam? Invariably my response is to ask, “What do you mean by Islam?” I have noticed that to many, this question comes as a surprise. This is a key point, since the term Islam is so often taken for granted that one sees no need to ponder over it. It is not that one does not have a conception of what one means by ‘Islam’. However, the term is used without much reflection – its obviousness acting as a guarantee for its comprehension. It is important therefore, to ask: what conception of Islam underpins the discourse on Islam and education being examined here? To respond to this question, we will have to step back into the past.

From the earliest years of their history, Muslims witnessed juxtaposition of their faith and worldly power. Within a hundred years after the death of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims were ruling over a vast empire. The Qur’anic assurance that they were the best community (Holy Qur’an, 3:110) was nourished and confirmed by this situation, which continued for another thousand years or so. During this time, Muslims had become diverse and internally divided, faced tough enemies, even suffered military defeats, but never were they shaken in their belief about the superiority of their religion and themselves as its followers.



The colonial encounter in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, brought a revolutionary shift. Unlike the subjugation by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, which was essentially military in character, colonialism brought a total eclipse of Muslim military, political and intellectual life. And, in any case, the Mongol advance was halted by a Muslim dynasty – the Mamluks – but there was no such respite against colonial rule. The result was that, for the first time, Muslims felt a need to defend their religion against an ‘other’ that claimed worldly superiority over them. In the Indian context, this condition produced a wide range of responses, some military, some political and some intellectual. In the intellectual realm, some Muslims, such as Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Syed Amir Ali (d. 1928), took up the task of defending the Muslim faith and its traditions against these attacks.²

Syed Amir Ali’s book, *The Spirit of Islam* (1902), provides a good example of the manner in which this defense was taken up. Like many other Muslims of his time, he sought to show that, despite its appearance, Muslim religious tradition was indeed compatible with the then prevailing ideas and practices of modernity. For this, he could not appeal to the reality of Muslims in his time; it was obvious that, in material terms, there was a marked difference in the quality of life between predominantly Muslim societies and the societies in Western Europe, France and England in particular. In his defense, thus, Syed Amir Ali had to draw upon ideals and history rather than reality and the present. He claimed that Islam in its ideal form – or in its spirit – was compatible with the Victorian notions of individual choice, private property, diligence in profession and business, high regard for science, rationality, etc. The ideals of Islam were, he claimed, no different from the ideals of modernity. In fact, he claimed, that there was once a time – a golden age – when Muslims too practiced these ideals. Like General Ivolgin in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (1869), Amir Ali sought to compensate for the ‘decline’ of his own time by glorifying the past. He selectively drew examples from the history of Muslims to argue for the compatibility of Islam and science, and to claim that at one time Muslim societies were far more advanced than European societies in scientific endeavours. His last step was to explain the gulf between the past and the present. His explanation was that this situation existed because Muslims were not following the true ‘Islam’ or the ‘spirit of Islam’. His approach – often called apologetic for it sought to provide an apology for Islam – was thus a complete system of thought seeking to argue for the inherent compatibility of Islam and Western notions, and to explain the contemporary situation of Muslims.

Beginning with individuals like Syed Amir Ali, this approach became widespread over time, both among ordinary believers and scholars. It is this apologetic stance and the accompanying conception of Islam as an ideal that underpins the discourse on Islam and education being considered here. These are exemplified below.

“Islam is a comprehensive way of life. It is vision and civilisation and a great blessing which flowered from the revealed knowledge delivered by the Almighty Allah.” (Ali, 2000, p. 49).

“Muslims belong to an ideal Divine system perfected by Allah as a way of fulfilling his grace and blessings unto mankind.” (Ould Bah, 1998, p.1).

² Such attacks included those by Christian missionaries, politicians and scholars who portrayed Islam and Muslims (Muhammadans, as they were called) as backward, unenlightened, religious zealots. Smith (1946), Bayly (1988), Bose & Jalal (1998), Crane & Barrier (1981) and Fenner (1966).



“Islam, after all, makes it a duty for everyone to seek knowledge and discover facts, and increase the welfare of mankind.” (Sardar, 1989, p. 25).

“Islamic in the phrase ‘Islamic education’ means that education is intimately related to Islam, which God completed and perfected over fourteen centuries ago.” (Ould Bah, 1998).

In line with the apologetic approach, the idealised conception of Islam is sustained by a reference to a supposed glorious age. For instance, while bemoaning the divide between the secular and the religious in contemporary educational systems, Hewitt (1997) claims that the Islamic concept of knowledge is unitary. In addition to quoting some Qur’anic verses, he claims that, in the past, Muslim scholars were trained both in religious scholarship and in scientific and philosophic fields, which he sees as an example of the practice of the unitary concept of knowledge in Islam. He shows no interest in alternative explanations of why scholars mastered many fields of learning; for instance, the possibility that the mastery of many or all of the fields of learning available at a given time may not have been an ‘Islamic’ feature but rather a reflection of the comparatively limited stock of knowledge available at that time (Mottahedeh, 1986). This phenomenon is found in other societies as well. European societies, for example, had the notion of the ‘Renaissance Man’, which referred to persons who excelled in multiple fields, particularly in both the arts and sciences. Furthermore, even if many Muslims had mastered several branches of learning, this in itself would not mean that they had a unified concept of knowledge. They also distinguished among many types of knowledge - *ulum al-Shari‘a* (sciences of Shari‘a), *ulum al-Aqliya* (sciences of reason), *ulum al-marzula* (harmful sciences) and *ulum al-Mahmooda* (praiseworthy sciences) – and in these, some types of knowledge were preferred over others and a moral hierarchy was associated with them (Ibn Khudun, 1967). It is only through such oversimplification or misrepresentation of the history of Muslims that apologists have been able to present Islam as an ideal and proclaimed it to be the solution to contemporary issues.

From Theory to Practice: Implementing Islamic Education

How does the discourse fare when it comes to proposing solutions to the problems it identifies? An analysis of writings that seek to advocate an Islamic solution in education shows that they often make an invalid comparison of practice and theory. Time and again, authors go into factual details to describe the problems with contemporary education in the West and in Muslim societies. They give facts and figures and quote authorities. However, when these authors turn to proposing solutions or, rather, ‘Islamic’ solutions, their tone changes from factual to rhetorical and from argumentative to assertive. Though he himself fails to provide any way forward, Sardar’s (1991) observation, more than a decade ago, that there is a widespread school of thought that asserts that “all we need is to show complete and uncritical love of and devotion to Islam and everything else will fall into place” (p.71), is still valid. It is thus no surprise that when, on rare occasions, some writers attempt to describe in detail the implementation of the project of Islamic education, the result is hardly different from what is being proposed in other secular contexts, albeit with reference to Qur’anic terms and the history of Muslims. Remarking on a proposal for Islamic universities, Sardar notes that, “Despite the Islamic trappings, the model that Bilgrami and Ashraf are offering differs little from Western Universities.” (1991, p.71).

Similarly, Iqbal (1996), in proposing an ‘Islamic’ model of teacher training, ends up giving examples of modern teaching methodologies by over-stretched and anachronistic interpretations of Qur’anic verses and the *hadith*. His ‘genuinely Islamic’ proposal is that in Islamic teacher



training, a reasonable percentage of marks have been allocated to the observation of *ibadah* and Islamic morals and values. “Each prayer of the day should have a credit of one mark and each Friday prayer, two marks.” (p.233)

If macro-level proposals suffer from this lack of creativity, so do the micro-level suggestions. In his over promised title, ‘Putting Statistics in its place: Implications for teaching in Islamic institutions of higher learning’, Ratnawati (2003) regurgitates the familiar arguments about the limitations, as well as the potential, of using statistics or quantitative methods in research. He ends with advice to Muslim teachers that they ought to be aware of these limitations and also make students aware of them. In what sense this advice is new or specifically applicable to Islamic institutions of higher learning, we are never told. Furthermore, Ratnawati’s sources are almost all non-Muslims, showing again that the issue at stake is not Islam/Muslims versus non-Muslims/the West.

The Way Forward

Thus far, I have noted three inter-related problems found within much of the writings on Islamic education. First, it seeks to be exclusive in its understanding of contemporary educational conditions. In part, this is because it wants to advocate a particular interpretation of Islam as a solution to current problems. Second, the ‘Islam’ it appeals to is a theoretical Islam that, though thought by its advocates to be grounded in scripture, is simply a projection of whatever is valuable to the authors at the given time. Third, most of the writings on Islamic education fail to provide any feasible and creative solutions to the problems of education.

Is it possible for the discourse to emerge from this impasse? To the extent that the above critique is sustainable, the entire discourse needs to be rethought. Such rethinking is not the work of any one individual; a collective effort has to be made. However, I would like to offer a conceptual shift that may serve as a way forward for the rethinking of the discourse on Islam and education. This shift entails complementing the conception of Islam as an ideal with the role of human agency in interpreting these ideals.

The apologetic approach with its stress on ideals and a glorified past needs to be reconsidered, bringing to bear the reality of Muslim history as a history of human beings who continuously, but imperfectly, have sought to grapple with their human condition in the light of their interpretation of Islam’s ideals. In other words, there is a need to shift from ‘Islamic’ history to the history of Muslims, though even this may serve only as an initial move and not be sufficient for a thorough revision of the discourse.

Fortunately, today there are voices that have begun to question the dominant ‘Islamic’ approach and foray into alternatives. For example, in May 2004, the BBC World Service broadcast an interview with two Muslim women authors. Irshad Manji, the author of *The Trouble with Islam* (2004), and Asma Gul Hasan, the author of *Why I am a Muslim?* (2004), came to loggerheads on the program, as they disagreed on almost every issue discussed. What became apparent was that beneath the differences on particular issues, there was a philosophical schism with regard to their basic notions of Islam.³

³ The conceptual divide being explored here is not restricted to Muslims or to the discourse on Islam. It is a widespread phenomenon and can be noted in other religions as well as in other human contexts.



The following passage from the interview is an illustration of the interviewees' differing standpoints. In the excerpt, Ms. Hasan is responding to Ms. Manji's assertion that while literalism with regard to a religion's sacred book is found in all the major world religions, only among Muslims is it part of the mainstream.

Hasan: Unlike Irshad, I think that Islam is a religion of moderation. It says in the Qur'an there is no compulsion in religion; you know that religion is a matter of your choice and is a matter of freedom. I disagree with Irshad that literalism is a part of mainstream Islam. I don't think that moderate Muslims are literalists. In fact, most Muslims belong to a school of Islamic thought that believes that the Qur'an is a living document . It even says in the Qur'an, shouldn't they keep looking again and again to the Qur'an ...

Manji: Asma, you know what it says in the Qur'an but really how many Muslims know that that's what it says and more than that how many Muslims actually practice that? I think the kind of Islam that you are describing is Islam in theory. And let's face it, everything is wonderful in theory but you need only open your eyes and take a look at what's happening on the ground among Muslims to know that what you are describing is quite sanitised ...

While Hasan is seeking to defend Islam by appealing to ideals, Manji is proposing to bring in human agency – in this case Muslims themselves – into the picture.

Another Muslim contemporary who supports viewing history in this manner is Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush, who argues for a distinction between the ideals of a religion and their actual interpretations and practices in history through the human apparatus. Responding to a question about Islam and modernity, Abdolkarim Soroush summarises this notion of historical Islam as follows:

First of all we have the phenomenon of Islam. Muslim intellectuals still talk about Islam as if it were a simple, unified entity; a singular object . But in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of different interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thoughts and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no such thing as a 'pure' Islam that is outside the process of historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space. (Noor, 2002, p.25)

Thus, at any given time in the history of Muslims, the ideals of Islam were understood and practiced in many different ways; the divine will has always been received through human receptacles. Similarly, Abdullahi An-Naim (2004), while discussing the issue of human rights, argues that "In my view, the question can be meaningful only when it is about Muslims not Islam..." (p.2)

Perhaps it is time that writers on education and Islam take notice of this shift and begin focusing on Muslims rather than on Islam. An appreciation of the role of human agency could lead to the recognition that while Islam may have ideals, they were continuously formed and reformed in the interaction between the revelatory text and the concrete realities of Muslims; this was and should continue to be an interpretive and ongoing activity. Above all, this process could lead to a very



different set of questions from those that are asked today. For scholars, questions are a tool and the quality of their scholarship is integrally linked with the type of questions they pose. If the question posed is, ‘What is the Islamic concept of knowledge?’ it can easily push one to seek a unified, ahistorical concept of knowledge in a unified, ahistorical notion of Islam. The use of the term ‘Islamic’ as an adjective can become a totalising notion constructed to describe Muslims and their cultures.

However, a question focused on the social actors, the Muslims, allows for the recognition of historical, cultural and social forces that shape societies. If the question is, ‘How have Muslims understood knowledge?’ then we are likely to search for context-based answers that would show that, since their earliest history, Muslims have had a healthy diversity of views with regard to this important epistemological issue. While all Muslims referred to the basic texts (i.e., the Holy Qur’an), their answers were also shaped by their socio-cultural world, theological positions and intellectual dispositions. Thus, one soon realises that there is no single unitary concept of knowledge in Islam; rather, there are many concepts of knowledge held by Muslims in different times and places and that these concepts were interacting with each other and with other pertinent concepts, giving them both a level of stability as well as fluidity.

The focus on the ‘Islamic’ in current discourses on Islamic education thus needs to be revisited. Not as an abstract idealised concept but rather, focused on the concrete historical agency of Muslims. Such a shift might help a better understanding of how Muslims dealt with the intellectual and educational issues of their times. It may show that, while retaining their ideals, Muslims have worked with people of other faiths to engage with problems of their times, be they in practical matters such as medicine or irrigation, in governance and administration, or in intellectual matters. Such findings could both enrich our knowledge and, more importantly, liberate Muslims to seek pertinent solutions.

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