The Importance of Islamic Education in the Globalization Era: An Overview

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Abstract

This article examines the need for the Muslim community to educate their youth concerning a Muslim way of life. This study aims to explore the theological basis for Islamic education. It further analyzes the status of Muslim schools in the Islamic community concerning culture and religion. Finally, this study highlights the exclusiveness of Islamic education owing to Muslim ethnic cultures and the necessity for a more intercultural-oriented Islamic education.

Introduction

There is an escalating inclination for many Muslim parents to send their children to Muslim schools in today's world. This is increasingly being realized, particularly in Europe and the United States, where there are growing numbers countries primary and secondary Muslim schools. However, these Muslim schools should not be confused with the supplementary schools based in a significant number of mosques around Britain. The supplementary, also labeled Qur'an labeled Qur’anic schools, were established in USA and EU countries in the late 1960s. In these supplementary schools, Islamic education is even today imparted by the Imams to the pupils in the late afternoon after school hours and during the weekends (Lewis, 2002, p. 56).

On the other hand, a majority of the Muslim schools are voluntary-aided schools under Muslim control. They follow the National Curriculum with Islamic studies incorporated, and they were the first established during the late 1980s (Nielsen, 1992, pp. 56–59). Accordingly, there are now 45 primary and 52 Muslim secondary schools (Darr, 2003, pp. 147–152). Those who are against the establishment of Islamic schools amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims in the USA and EU have continuously argued by contesting that this would cause segregation of society; these schools would hinder the integration of the Muslim minorities into British society.
In addition, they contest that it goes against the modern norm of the separation between 'Church and State' (Ghaffar, 1997, pp. 5–8).

On the other hand, those who support this movement offer various reasons to support their wish to have their children schooled in a Muslim environment. The reasons vary from the need of Muslim youth to keep a cultural identity and a religious identity to protection from racism. The explicit reason given

A majority of parents seem to be that the youth will succumb to the secularist way of life and leave all that is traditionally valued, i.e., the cultural and religious way (Gilliat, 1994, pp. 232–235). However, these are linked more to the paradigm of modern society and its effects on children. Since Islam is a revealed religion and often seen as a way of life by those who adhere to it, should not the main raison d’être for Islamic education be related to a theological understanding?

**Definition of Islamic Education**

It is vital to appreciate the difference between western civilization and Muslim civilization. Historically, western civilization commenced in Hellenistic Greece, where Plato presented the first education theory in the west. This education theory was devoid of any Divine revelation and was based purely on reason. Whereas in Islamic civilization, all education theories were based upon the dualistic existence of the human being, both the spiritual and the corporeal (Hanson, 2001, p. 1). Consequently, this meant that the theories of Islamic education would always consist not only of the human intellect but also of Divine revelation. It is from this Divine revelation that Muslim scholars have coined and expressed the objectives of Islamic education.

A majority of the scholars agree upon the three Arabic words that stipulate the meaning of education in the Islamic sense. In the Qur'an, there are two terms that explain and rationalize the purpose of education. The first term is 'tarbyah,' which comes from the root word 'raba,' which means 'increase and grow' (Ngah, 1996, p. 34). In the Qur'a-n, God says: 'And lower unto them the wing of submission through mercy and say: my Lord! Have mercy on them both as they did nurture me when I was little' (Al-Qur'a-n, 17. 24; Ali, 1995). Therefore, the first term indicates that Islamic education is there to nurture and care for the child.
The second term for education used in the Qur'an is 'ta'lim', which comes from the root 'alam', which means 'to know' (Ngah, 1996, p. 35). It has been mentioned in the Qur'an as: 'He who taught you the use of the pen, taught man that which he knew not' (Al-Qur'an, 96. 4–5; Ali, 1995). This term explicitly indicates that one of the purposes of Islamic education is to impart knowledge. However, the Qur'an is not the only primary Islamic source that mentions Islamic education (Nasr, 1987, p. 123).

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad also contains various sayings concerning knowledge and education. The Prophet himself specified the most robust call for individuals to educate themselves when he said, 'The Quest of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim man and Muslim woman' (Al-Zarnuji, 2001, p. 1). Other sayings included hadith such as, 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave' and 'Indeed, the people of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets' (Siddiqui, 1979, p. 1). It is from the following hadith that the third and last Arabic term for education is derived. The Prophet Muhammad said, 'My Lord educated me, made my education most excellent' (Al-Attas, 1979, p. 144). The term used in this hadith is 'ta'dib', and its root is 'adab'. The meaning of ta'dib is 'the disciplining of the mind, body and soul'. It also implies the teaching of good manners, ethics and politeness (Ngah, 1996, p. 38). The word ta'dib is a term that fully demonstrates the importance of the three parts of the human existence that Islam upholds: the mind, the body and the soul. Hanson eloquently describes Islamic education as the tool of society where 'the idea is to create an ethical, moral, spiritual being who is multi-dimensional and who has a positive and healthy direction' (Hanson, 2001, p. 14).

**A Theological Understanding**

According to the hadith$^2$ of the Prophet Muhammad, every child in this world is born in the state of fitra, which can be translated as 'innocence' (Hanson, 2001, p. 14). This innocence is a state and condition that all humans are born with; thus, in Islam, the concept of 'original sin' as presented in Christian theology is non-existent in the newborn child. However, this Christian concept of original sin in Islam can only be described as a continuous progressive deviation of the heart of the human being while he/she is alive in this world. In other words, the child is born with inherent nature, and only through deviating from this state do they
become sinful. This is due to the dual nature of the human being, who is in a continuous state of being both a spiritual and a human being. The human being finds themselves to be constantly struggling to find a balance between the worldly and the spiritual sphere. Human beings 'are found love and hatred, generosity and covetousness, compassion and aggression' (Nasr, 1987, p. 29). In Islam, it is an accepted belief that God has given the human being an intellect; however, this intellect cannot fully comprehend the truth without Divine Guidance (Al-Attas, 1979, p. 24). Thus, the human being has appetites that are harmful for both the body and the soul. The body occurs when the human being drives its animal aspect to excess, and spiritual pain descends on the soul when it succumbs to something that is deleterious to its nature (Hanson, 2001, p. 15). In Islam, the spiritual pain is removed by atonement, but there is no ritual connected with this. According to the Prophet, God forgives the human being when they repent, but if other creatures are involved, this repentance includes rectifying the injury done to them (Nasr, 1987, p. 37). In this way, the dual nature of the human being needs to rely not only on the intellect but also on Divine Revelation, to comprehend the distinction between right and wrong. In addition, Islam, as already noted, upholds the existence and the importance of the three features of human existence: the mind, the body, and the soul (Shadat, 1997, p. 25). Consequently, Islamic education is paramount for Muslim youth owing to the belief that in order not to deviate from the true path, Divine Guidance is needed for all three aspects of the human being's life, i.e., mind, body and soul. In Islamic tradition, in addition to the fitra of the newborn child, the Muslim has to accept a covenant 'mithaq' to recognize and acknowledge God as his or her absolute Lord. After the child reaches puberty, he/she has to take the responsibility, 'amana', of the covenant, thus making Islamic education imperative to fulfill the trust (Hanson, 2001, p. 26). Thus, a theological understanding of why there is a need for Islamic education transfers the perspective of the modern-day debate to the root understanding of Islam as 'a way of life'.

**The Notion and Practice of Islamic Education**

From a socio-religious point of view, both the definition and the theological understanding of Islamic education demonstrate a necessity for Muslims to have Divine Revelation as a part of their everyday educational life. However, the question arises as to how this is applicable in contemporary times. Primarily, Islamic education does not per se commence in schools but the
home of the child. In Islam, it is an accepted fact that the parents are the child's first teachers. In many ways, in the early stage, children’s minds resemble a sponge that absorbs data without discrimination; thus, they learn from what they see, hear and feel (Shadat, 1997, p. 27). On the other hand, since all children are born with the fitra, it is a fact in Islamic belief that subconsciously all children know that the One God exists; it is only when they are brought up to believe in something different owing to their parents' belief that their inherent nature is changed (Hanson, 2001, p. 23). Due to this belief, the new Muslims in the west have rejected the word 'convert' in favor of 'revert,' insisting that they were born with the fitra and have now returned to their faith. Islamic tradition also strongly advises that Islamic education should be through play in the first seven years of a child's life. Hanson maintains that the need for this is because children are submerged in a subliminal realm. He states, 'They are not in the same world as we are in; they are in a beautiful world, and that world needs to be nurtured through play' (Hanson, 1997, p. 23). This also corresponds to the Islamic tradition that a child does not need to start praying his/her salah until she/he is seven, and even then, she/he is only to be recommended to do the prayer. It is not until the child is ten that it becomes obligatory upon the child to pray his or her five times prayers daily. It is after these prior seven years that a child should be entered into the Islamic school. But what constitutes an Islamic school? It is tough to ascertain one single definition for this phenomenon. In today's Britain, all primary and secondary Muslim schools differ and cannot be seen as a homogeneous faction. The reason behind this becomes apparent when the overall picture of the Muslim population in Britain is viewed. There is a tendency to believe that Muslims in Britain are a homogenous group; however, that is simply an illusory perception. The Muslims in Britain are different in national and ethnical identity, but there are even wide variations in culture, class, and ideological standpoints. In present-day Britain, Muslims are constituted by several ethnic and racial groups. There are 1.5 million to 2.5 million Muslims in Britain today. Of these, 80% are of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi descent. The rest of the Muslims are composed of Turks, Arabs, Persians, Africans, and many other Muslim ethnicities. The leading ethnic group in Britain which is becoming more recognizable is the white and African-Caribbean reverts group, which numbers around 10,000 at present (Office for National Statistics, 2001). Thus, the main element of difference with regards to Muslim schools is the cultural and ideological environment. Each school operates according to the ethnic and cultural background of the British Muslims who have helped set it up. This is similar to how the
mosques of Britain were set up in the earlier decades, based on an ethnic and cultural milieu. Accordingly, vast differences exist between Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, Gujrati-speaking East Africans, and other numerous ethnicities. Every Islamic school is based firmly on ethnicity, and a racial structure, and the argument has been endorsed that this makes the school more a cultural school than a religious one. The majority of the Muslim schools in Britain are of an Indian subcontinent background due to the high percentage of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian descent. This gives rise to whether those who are educated in certain ethnic Muslim schools are becoming British Muslims or simply cultural Pakistani, Gujrati, Indian, etc. According to Phillip Lewis, culture has from time to time been a more significant obstacle than religion about Muslims integrating with the rest of Britain. Certain cultural traits have brought considerable dilemmas in the lives of British-born Muslims, such as the acceptance of forced marriages, misunderstanding of Islam as 'just a religion', or an identification of ethnicity with Islam which reinforces the suspicions of the west that Islam is alien to their culture. Moreover, Friday sermons are still carried out in ethnic languages that British-born Muslims do not comprehend (Lewis, 2002, pp. 197–198). It has been argued that most Muslim parents of the first and second-generation born in Britain were not educated in Islam themselves, but their cultures highly influenced their belief structures. 'The parents' belief structure may correspond to the life experiences of those living in rural Pakistan or India; thus they do not accord with the life experiences of those who have been born and raised in the west' (Gilliat, 1994, p. 173). Thus, as was stated earlier in the introduction, it may be concluded that many parents who send their children to Muslim schools do so because they want their children to remain within their parental culture and not be assimilated into British culture. Those younger Muslims who discover a way to stay both British and Muslim find themselves clashing with their cultural counterparts. For example, should these young British Muslims accept forced marriages, is their mother tongue a necessity to understand Islam, why can the Friday sermon not be held in the English language, why does the Imam of the community have to be educated in India, Pakistan, etc., is Islam synonymous with their parents' culture, why should a white Muslim be any different from an Asian Muslim? However, some Islamic schools have started to move away from a cultural background and have tried to develop into a more interracial and British-oriented Muslim schools. An example of this is the 'Islamia School' in London set up by Yusuf Islam (formerly the singer Cat Stevens); this school now has children from more than 25 nationalities
(Ghaffar, 1997, p. 160). These schools can be more related to the British culture of their young pupils, and they teach a broader Islam that does not alienate certain minority members of the British Muslims.

But there is more to a British Muslim school than simply being interracial and British. The majority of Muslim schools base their aims and objectives on educating children according to the principles of Islam, having an Islamic ethos throughout the school, for example, making time for prayers during school time, standard Islamic school dress, providing halal food, and providing Islamic religious sciences (Ghaffar, 1997, pp. 160–209). However, many educators emphasize that it is not enough that Muslim schools teach the Islamic religious sciences and have an Islamic ethos. They maintain that all the other sciences should be Islamized. It is crucial to note that many semantic differences can be found in the use of the term 'science' across various cultures, which is especially true for Islamic and western cultures. Therefore, it would be erroneous to assume that what is meant by science in one culture has the same meaning for the other. In Islam, all knowledge is referred to as a science ('film), whether history, poetry, biology, or theology. The classification of these sciences is made up of a dual nature in the same manner as the human being is classified in Islam. All sciences are recognized as God; however, the first kind of science is referred to as the revealed sciences or the religious sciences. All the religious sciences that have their origin in the Qur'an are seen as the knowledge that brings the human being closest to God. The second kind of science is the knowledge that the human being acquires through speculation and rational effort based on the intellect (Al-Attas, 1979, pp. 30–31). But this second kind of knowledge is only seen as acceptable as long as it moves within the framework of Islam and is in harmony with Islamic concepts. On the other hand, modern science and even the humanities are today functioning within a worldview that relies upon human reasoning as the ultimate criterion of truth, the reality is only limited to the physical domain, and the relationship between human beings and nature is restricted to the level of the senses and of reason (Nasr, 1976, p. 27). In the Islamic worldview, all sciences are required to accept and include the fact that the Divine revelation is the ultimate criterion of the truth; reality is more than what humans perceive as the physical domain, and that reason and faith do work hand in hand, i.e., Islamification of the sciences.
Conclusion

Why is there a need for Islamic education? In my opinion, the question of identity is secondary to the ongoing debate concerning the existence of Muslim schools and Islamic education. The discussion regarding Islamic education and Muslim schools has to commence from the theological understanding of Islam, i.e., as a way of life. The Muslim pupil, in many ways, requires not only the Islamic atmosphere but also the understanding of a worldview that recognizes the existence of a Creator in all aspects of life. The problem that faces Muslim youth in Britain today is the western understanding of life and the continuous struggle of defining what their parents' culture is and what their 'deen' (way of life) is. They as a generation have to be able to understand the British society they live in; they can only do so when they fully comprehend their Islamic way of life. Muslim schools are needed so that Muslim youth can understand and contextualize Islam in their environment (Britain). Thus, this also requires the Muslim schools to achieve a broader British identity and Islamize their sciences. In many ways, this could help the Muslim community of Britain to understand Islam more clearly and to develop skills to deal with cultural obstacles such as forced marriages, lack of women's rights, superstitions, etc. and to curtail extremism, all of which is carried out 'in the name of Islam.'

Notes

1. 'Sunnah' signifies the sayings, practices, and living habits of the Prophet Muhammad.
2. 'Hadith' are reports which describe the sayings, actions, and living habits of the Prophet Muhammad.

References

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