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Islam's Education Spectrum

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There are no completely neutral studies of Islamic education. Though centuries old, Islamic learning evokes reactions as varied as pride or scorn, hope or suspicion, tolerance or belligerence. Some see Islamic educational institutions as the both the preserve of virtue and the cutting edge of civilization; others see them as a both a threat to freedom and a fountain of extremism.

Approaches to Islamic education are therefore controversial among both Muslims and non-Muslims. In response to globalization, members of both camps turn to various degrees of separatism or integration. Separatists maintain that Muslim and secular educations are fundamentally in competition. Integrationists maintain that Muslim education can cooperate with secular society, and vice-versa. Though these two categories are not comprehensive, they may prove a useful way of looking at the spectrum of Islamic and secular responses to the question of education.

In the end, however, both tend to fall short of reality when taken to an extreme. Integrationists, while aware of the very real diversity within Islam, often fail to see the historical and doctrinal issues that really do divide some Islamic and Western traditions. Separatists, while painfully aware of those differences between Islamic and Western education, usually fail to grasp the complexity of belief and practice among Muslims. By dividing the world into a bipolar conflict between "Islam" and "the West," separatists tend to undermine possibilities for common ground and cooperation.

Amid all this debate and confusion over the nature of Islamic education, it is useful to return to the fundamental issues and historical precedents facing Muslim parents and teachers. It is impossible to understand the role of Islamic education without understanding how it was established and propagated.

Islamic education is not an uncaused, ahistorical phenomenon. Its immediate predecessors include Arabian children's schools and Hellenistic learning centers. Pre-Islamic education emphasized language and rhetoric. In Medina, schools of reading and writing often utilized Jewish teachers. After Muhammad, religious studies in mosques took precedence over, but did not eliminate, linguistics. Islam necessitated a pursuit of religious learning, and mosques seemed to be the most natural venue for it. Students and teachers directed most of their energies toward memorizing and interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith. A dedicated core of students then perpetuated Hadith as a standard of life and behavior. A dedicated core of teachers began to staff the mosques (Gibb and Kramers, 300-301).

The famous "house of wisdom" academies and libraries evolved from from Hellenistic higher learning. Egypt was host to both pre- and post-Islamic academies. These institutions could produce and conserve learning both sacred and secular. The Egyptian academies, however, were also very active in the spread of Shiite Islam. A similar Sunni academy opened in Cairo for three years until it was shut down by the government. The Shiite government executed the two teachers.

Sunni madrasas, however, did succeed outside of Egypt. One school, founded right around the turn of the third and fourth centuries, even included a foreign exchange program complete with scholarships. A Seljuk vizier named Nizam al-Mulk was particularly active in the spread of madrasas around the fifth century. Government-sponsored schools continued to thrive in a tradition that continues to this day. By the seventh and ninth centuries Damascas had become fertile ground for Islamic study, with schools founded by rulers, emirs, merchants, scholars, and even some women.

Islamic schools, originally, had little or nothing to distinguish them from mosques. Mosques were schools as well as madrasas, and madrasas were mosques as well as schools. A madrasa could even be a simple schoolroom inside a mosque. Eventually madrasas became more self-existent, but the distinction between them and mosques remained indeterminate. Originally, Islamic schools focused almost entirely on Qur'an, Hadith, and by extension Arabic. The areas of expertise required for religious knowledge expanded to include theology and legal studies. Eventually, Islamic schools began to accept a dichotomy of studies based on revelation and studies based on science. Alternatively, studies could be classified as "principal" or "instrumental." Under these systems, medicine, logic, and mathematics were accepted as legitimate but secondary areas of inquiry within the "instrumental" category (Gibb, 302-306).

The fact that these fields were secondary to Islamic education does not mean that Muslims did not make significant contributions to them. Al-Khwarizmi, a mathematician from Baghdad, wrote *al-Kitāb al-mukhtaṣar fī ḥisāb al-jabr wa'l-muqābala,* a foundational work on algebra. Scholars like Al-Khwarizmi not only created original contributions to mathematics but also preserved and popularized concepts from Greek, Babylonian, Indian, and Jewish mathematics ("algebra").

Ibn Sina, known as Avicenna in Latin, was an Islamic scholar whose life makes a rather convincing case for the possibility of constructive academic interaction between Muslims and outsiders. He wrote *The Canon of Medicine*, which influenced European medical practice into the 1600s ("Avicenna"). According to his autobiography, Ibn Sina was born to a royal administrator in the year 370 AH. By age ten, he mastered a number of literary pieces including the Qur'an. He continued his education with philosophy, geometry, and Indian mathematics. He studied jurisprudence, and then he mastered logic. He learned Euclidean geometry as well, then

turned to science and metaphysics. Not satisfied, he began to practice medicine, which he maintained "is not one of the difficult sciences" (Gohlman, 25). Aristotle's *Metaphysics* proved much more frustrating to him despite his memorizing it; but with the help of Abu Nasr al-Farabi's commentary, he eventually understood it too. All this he claims to have accomplished by the age of eighteen. Ibn Sina acknowledges that he used government patronage for his pursuit of learning. However, Ibn Sina also describes a frequently antagonistic or even subversive relationship with his superiors, whose intelligence he was not above insulting (Gohlman, 17-89).

Granted, his was an incredibly self-flattering biography. He and his assistant biographer have much to say about his genius and his superiority to others. As a window into Islamic education, however, this piece is still very revealing. Ibn Sina, claiming to be in every way the ideal devout Muslim scholar, makes a point of having mastered Euclid, Aristotle, Indian mathematics, and numerous secular fields of study. He also describes a diverse Islamic world where Ismailis contend with other doctrines and Sufis have a recognizable presence. The world of Ibn Sina was autocratic, but by no means uniform.

It was not a world that would last. From the 1500s to the 1800s, European colonizers subjugated the entirety of the Islamic world. In the 1900s, Muslim nationalists began to push for reform and self-government (Ansary, 217-246, 291-296). Today, Muslim countries are dealing in a variety of ways with issues raised by modern pluralism. The responses taken by Muslim nations and communities are deeply affected by educational systems (Hefner, loc. 87-100).

The impact of Islamic history on education is hotly disputed. In the eyes of many, Muslims are locked into a very limited range of authoritarian ideals. According to others, Islamic education can be diverse in its responses to modernity. Both views are limited by certain principles outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Education and the pursuit of knowledge remain crucial aspects of Islamic practice. According to one hadith, "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (Ibn-Majah). Another quotes Muhammad as saying that "Whoever goes out seeking knowledge, then he is in Allah's cause until he returns" (at-Tirmidhi). The Qur'an itself asks rhetorically, "Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?" (Surah 39:9). Today the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia takes verses such as these to mean that Islam is conducive to, and even demands, the pursuit of all knowledge. King Abdullah describes the university as a modern House of Wisdom made to reflect the educational history of Islam (Saud). The significance of education to Muslims, however, runs much deeper than a pro-scientific reading of these particular passages.

According to hadith, all children are born Muslim, in submission to God. Their environment after birth determines what course their lives and eternities will take. "There is none born but is created to his true nature (Islam). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian quite as beasts produce their young with their limbs perfect" (Sahih Muslim). Children are born perfect, but their parents can put them on the road to rebellion against God during their formative years. Proper instruction, therefore, is crucial not only for mental development but also for spiritual salvation. Asked about the cost of private Muslim schools in America, a teacher asks "What is more expensive? Paying a little and having a better chance your child will make it to Jannah, or saving a measly sum and crying in twenty years when you realize your child is not a Muslim…" (Siddiqui).

Parents, according to Dr. Mubarak Ali in *The Muslim Handbook*, must train their children in Arabic recitation of the Qur'an, both for its own sake and as a prerequisite for prayer. Muhammad is quoted as praying for his nephew to "acquire a deep understanding of the religion

of Islam and instruct him in the meaning and interpretation of things" as well as claiming that "A father gives his son nothing better than a good education." (Ali, 326-327). This fits in with the historic value of learning the Qur'an, Hadith, and Arabic.

The Qur'an also introduces the concept that Muslims are a people, community, or nation separate from all others. Surah 3:110 says that "You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) men; you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and believe in Allah; and if the followers of the Book had believed it would have been better for them; of them (some) are believers and most of them are transgressors." A few verses later, Surah 3:118 says "O ye who believe! do not take for intimate friends from among others than your own people…" A certain degree of separatism, then, is mandated by the Qur'an. Interpretations, of course, vary greatly, but these concepts have a claim on the attention of most Muslims.

The history of Islamic education, then, is fairly well-documented even if it isn't that well-understood in the West. As with most detailed history, it does not lend itself very well to sweeping theories. Islamic education has historically behaved in ways that could support both integration and isolation in different cases. In favor of a separatist model, there is the fundamental religiosity of Islamic schools, including sometimes-bloody conflict along sectarian theological lines. In favor of an integrationist model, history shows a continuity with intercultural traditions of education such as the Hellenic libraries. In addition, Islamic education spread along intercultural lines, engaging a diversity of peoples across the Middle East and Central Asia. The acceptable topics of study also expanded from exclusively Islamic subjects to more universally-researched fields.

Nevertheless, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike differ on how Islam can or should respond to today's pluralistic, globalized environment. In general, they tend to see Islamic

education as either an isolating or integrating force. Separatists believe that Muslims must cut themselves off from outside influence. Integrationists believe that Muslims can participate fully in modern academic discourse.

A study of the Sister Clara Muhammad schools exemplifies a separatist Islamic approach to education. It chronicles how a set of American schools in the 1970s began to move from the Nation of Islam to a more universal vision of Islam. The study hails this as a crucial move in a global conflict between anti-Islamic oppression and the civilizing forces of pan-Islamic brotherhood. The authors use near-apocalyptic language to describe the conflict between the two systems. The Sister Clara Muhammad schools, say Rashid and Muhammad, "are on the front lines of a battle for the hearts and minds of Muslim children in America, a battle between al-Islam and the hedonism, materialism, and nationalism of the West" (Rashid and Muhammad, 185). Rashid and Muhammad see Western education and values as threatening to undermine, if not outright oppress, Muslim communities. To them, Islamic education is the only hope for a Muslim youth capable of remaining moral in the face of Western decadence. Their vision of Islamic education is fundamentally anti-Western and separatist.

Equally separatist, but founded in a non-Muslim worldview, is Aziz Talbani's study *Pedagogy and Discourse: Transformation of Islamic Education*. In it, Talbani models Islamic education as an outgrowth of authoritarianism and absolutism. In terms borrowed from Michael Foucault, Talbani defines Islamic education as a power structure designed to sustain a "regime of truth" and maintain a particular sociopolitical vision. He states that early madrasas focused "on listening, memorization, and regurgitation." They supported authoritarian, conservative political structures that were threatened by European colonization. Colonization shifted the focus of Islamic education from religion and government to fundamentalist, anti-Western resistance

(Talbani, 66-73). The rest of his paper focuses on Pakistan as a case study of Islamic education transforming into an anti-colonial measure. Talbani's position, in short, is that Islamic education is a machine for perpetuating dogma that is incompatible with modern democracy and scientific enquiry. His view is separatist, but unlike Rashid's and Muhammad's, it is fundamentally pro-Western and anti-Islamic.

In contrast to both of these views are the integrationist-leaning scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Where the separatists see Islamic and Western educational models in unavoidable or even apocalyptic conflict, integrationists see them as potentially harmonizing and complementing each other.

One view conducive to integrationism is the idea that Islam, and by extension its educational systems, can be diverse. If one begins with the idea that all Islamic thought is essentially the same, it follows that Islamic education will be monolithically partisan against all other systems. However, not all Muslims agree on how education, or for that matter religion, should play out in the global arena. In "Multiple Modernities," Robert Hefner argues that liberal and conservative Muslims disagree on whether Islam should be a total way of life or merely apply to the more spiritual aspects of life. Many Muslims are challenging traditional power structures and spiritual authorities. Dissenters range from secularists to Sufis. These debates are compounded by "mass higher education, the emergence of vast markets for inexpensive 'Islamic books' and newspapers… and the unsettled pace of urbanization in much of the Muslim world" (91). Rather than being a traditional power structure, Islamic education is here portrayed as a potential force for change as well.

One of the best examples of this view being taken by Western scholars is the book *Schooling Islam*. It is a collection of case studies edited by Robert Hefner and Muhammad

Zaman. These studies are drawn from South Asia, India, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, Mali, and Britain. Accordingly, the editors are very sympathetic to the idea that Islamic education is diverse and even conflicted. They acknowledge the existence of militant Islamic schools, specifically citing the Pakistani madrasas that Talbani studies. However, the contributors all agree that Islamic education has many faces and agendas. Importantly, they also state that despite its origins, Islamic education "is now thoroughly embedded in the modern world" (Hefner and Zaman, loc. 54, 74, 81). In addition, the editors make it clear that in their view, the sources for authority in Islam are fragmented. Some religious scholars are Shiite, some are Sunni. Their outlooks and opinions differ not only by sect but also by nationality and change over time (Hefner and Zaman, loc. 3892-3905). The *Schooling Islam* approach to education, while certainly acknowledging the influence of history, takes the view that modernity is not bound completely by the past.

Integrationist Muslims are more likely to emphasize commonalities between their religion and others. Susan Douglass takes this approach while writing for the Council on Islamic Education (later renamed the Institute on Religion and Civic Values). In "Contending and Abiding Truths," she defends Islam in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Douglass decries what she perceives as a media feeding frenzy of anti-Islamic rhetoric. She maintains that education about religion should focus less on differing rituals and traditions, and more on the commonalities between faiths. She especially hopes that Islam will be seen as a legitimate Abrahamic religion and not as an exotic intruder. Douglass also maintains that in the face of secularist attacks on religion in general, all faiths should unite rather than be marginalized. She applauds the academic response to the attacks; and she takes comfort in the fact that teachers were seeking education about Islam rather than simply believing the media. By seeking common

values, increased education about religion, and shared dialogue through democratic civil liberties, Douglass's position exemplifies an Islamic integrationist perspective.

In conclusion, Islam as the guiding principle of education can be conducive to both integrationism and separatism. Separatists, however, tend to have a vastly oversimplified view of the debate. A global showdown between Western and Islamic educational systems seems rather unlikely, given the complicated relationship between them. Scholars like Ibn Sina and Al-Khwarizmi prove that Muslims can integrate knowledge from other cultures into their own studies and provide crucial, original contributions to their fields. If Ibn Sina's fifth-century world could host an intercultural collaboration between Western, Middle-Eastern, and Asian scholarship, then there is little reason to believe that the twenty-first century must inevitably become a battlefield for monolithic concepts of "Islam" and "the West" as Talbani fears.

Integrationists, while much more appreciative of the diversity that exists in Islam, do need to remember that Islam possesses some rather non-negotiable ideas. The Qur'an and Hadith set forth several concepts that can make full integration difficult or even impossible. The idea that all children are born Muslim and then molded into their parents' (or educators') beliefs will give pause to many Muslim parents. Giving their children a purely secular education could threaten to undermine their foundation of faith or even their very salvation. The Quran also states that all Muslims, everywhere, belong to a people distinct from all others. Islam has proven diverse, but that does not mean that it is devoid of any actual ideological content.

As separatists will acknowledge, full and unconditional integration is impossible without a complete redefinition of Islam. Nevertheless, integrative interaction between Islamic scholars and outside academia has proven extremely constructive in the past. There may be a "battle for

the hearts and minds" of Muslim children, but it is not a bipolar conflict between all Muslims and all non-Muslims.

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