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Knowledge and Education in Islam

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INTRODUCTION
Madrasah education in Singapore has raised a number of issues and concerns, chief of which relate to the quality of such education and the impact that this education has on social cohesion. Because madrasah education presents itself as Islamic education, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by Islamic education in order to establish the criteria according to which madrasah education in Singapore may be assessed. This requires a brief introduction to the philosophy of education in Islam and an understanding of the various institutions of learning in Islamic history that were founded on such a philosophy of education, including the madrasah. This discussion concludes with some remarks on how madrasah education in Singapore can be founded on the theme of multiculturalism.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN ISLAM
Education has been a central feature of Islam from the very beginning. Furthermore, because of the centrality of the Koran as the word of God, Muslims have always been obliged to learn to recite Arabic. This applied even to peoples for whom Arabic was not their mother tongue, but who may have, nevertheless, used the Arabic script for their languages. This was the case with Persians, Turks, Afghans, Indians and Malays. As a result, the rate of literacy among Muslims was relatively high from the early days of Islam. Furthermore, the impetus to the cultivation of knowledge was due to both practical consideration, such as the need to know the qiblah (direction of Mecca for prayer), as well as the higher purpose of knowing God's creation and taking it seriously by studying it.
Today, however, educational underdevelopment is a major factor in the general underdevelopment of Muslim societies. This problem began to be recognised in the nineteenth century by a number of Muslim scholars and reformers in the Arab world, Iran, India and Southeast Asia. Among the first to raise the issue in the Malay world of Southeast Asia was Syed Shaykh al-Hady who urged the Malays to be more serious about the practice of the Divine Law, and to develop themselves culturally, economically and politically by systematically applying reason and rationality. In 1908, al-Hady started the Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Malacca, which included as part of its curriculum English, arithmetic, geography, history, elocution and essay writing in addition to the traditional sciences, Arabic and Malay (al-Hady, Syed Alwi, 1999). In the early 1950s, Syed Hussein Alatas recognised that “the most urgent problem for the world of Islam to-day is the formation of new elites who are very learned in the Holy Koran, the Hadith, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the Shariat and last but not least in the affairs of modern science and philosophy”, and that the formation of such elites could only take place by means of education (Alatas 1954).

Knowledge and Education

Muslims define education as the teaching, learning and assimilation of knowledge. Therefore, much of our understanding of the philosophy of education in Islam hinges on our conception of knowledge. Knowledge in Islam has been defined as the “arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge” (Al-Attas 1980, 17), meaning the results of the valid methods of interpretation such as tafsir and ta’wil established by the authority of the Koran. The empirical world is regarded as constituted by signs (yat), that is, words and things amenable interpretation by valid methods as the yat (verses) of the Koran are. Knowledge, therefore, refers to the “recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence” (Al-Attas 1980, 17–19).

A formal definition of education in Islam as given by Al-Attas is:

Recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence” (Al-Attas 1980, 22).
In Islam, the definition of education is not confined to epistemological concerns but also includes ethical and other dimensions. This is presented succinctly by Alatas as follows:

Islamic education shall aim at a harmonious formation of the human personality. This education shall not only strive for the harmony of thought and action, instinct and reason, feelings and emotion, but also for depth of knowledge and beauty of character. One can experience harmony also in a negative way. The Islamic concept of harmony includes the formation of a certain type of character rooted in humility towards God, love towards fellow creatures, perseverance in times of affliction, honesty, decency, uprightness, courage to say the truth, a balanced attitude towards issues which involve human emotions, etc. Thus, education without an emphasis on character formation has practically no value in Islam (Alatas 1954).

This conception of knowledge sees knowledge and education not merely as the acquisition of information or the capacity for explanation and analysis, but also connects these processes to the nature of God and reality and a human ethic of responsibility. This by no means implies that only what is in revelation is knowledge or that only what is apparently compatible with revelation is true knowledge. Muslims believe that all knowledge originates from God and that such knowledge arrives to humans by way of various channels. Islamic epistemology, that is, the study of the sources, limits and methods of knowledge and the nature of truth from the point of view of Islam, affirms the realities of existence and of things and the possibility of knowledge of both. Such knowledge comes from God and is acquired via the authority of Revelation, the authority of the learned, sense perception, reason and intuition. This in turn implies that both induction from observation and deductive reasoning are valid methods of knowledge acquisition (Al-Attas 1990, 1).

As knowledge in Islam is intimately related to belief, it can be said that the Islamic worldview, that is, that worldview that can be abstracted from the Koran and the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) consists of both the creed or articles of belief as well as the various sciences. Together these form the total consciousness of Islam. Knowledge, therefore, is part of faith. It is obligatory for all Muslims to pursue knowledge and it is obligatory for Muslim societies to cultivate the various branches of knowledge. It is for this reason that the various sciences (ulum) were studied, developed and promoted by Muslims for centuries prior to the European Enlightenment.
A glance at the classification of the sciences that were cultivated by the Muslims and taught in their institutions of higher learning in the past will serve as an introduction to the more practical aspects of Islamic education. The learned Muslim scholars then had usually divided knowledge into two kinds—the rational sciences (al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyyah), and the traditional sciences (al-‘ulum al-naqliyyah). The first, also referred to as the intellectual sciences, is knowledge that arises from man’s capacity for reason, sense perception and observation. The second, also referred to as revealed knowledge, is not knowledge that dispenses with the intellect but is devolved to man via Revelation (Ibn Khaldun 1971, chapter 6). The traditional sciences included 1) the sciences of Koranic recitation and interpretation, 2) the sciences of Prophetic traditions (hadith), 3) jurisprudence and its principles (fiqh and ‘usul al-fiqh), 4) speculative theology (‘ilm al-kalim), and 5) the science of Sufism (al-tasawwuf). The rational sciences included 1) logic (‘ilm al-mantiq), 2) physics (al-‘ilm al-tabii’i), 3) metaphysics (al-‘ilm al-ilahiyyah), 4) geometry (‘ilm al-handasa), 5) arithmetic (‘ilm al-artamatiqi), 6) medicine, 7) geography, 8) chemistry, 9) biology, 10) music (‘ilm al-musiqt), 11) astronomy (‘ilm al-bay’ati), and 12) science of civilisation (‘ilm al-‘umran).

The Significance of Islamic Learning

Islamic learning of the past made significant contributions to the following fields: 1) translations and commentaries, 2) causality and sense perception, 3) the scientific method, and 4) institutions of higher learning.

Translations and Commentaries

It has often been assumed in popular accounts of the history of science and philosophy that the Muslim scholars who were contemporaneous with the European Middle Ages were simply followers and translators of the Greeks, Persian and Indians and that they merely continued the philosophies of Peripeteticism and Neo-Platonism. For example, Alfred Weber stated that Muslim philosophy was “more learned than original, and consists mainly of exegesis, particularly of the exegesis of Aristotle’s system...” (Weber 1925, 164) This was only one of their roles. In addition to being great translators of and commentators on Greek philosophy and science, the Muslims also made original contributions in various fields.
But even in the area of the transmission of the ideas of other civilisations, the Muslims were very active. One example is the ancient Hindu idea of the sphericity of the world, which found its way into Latin works after the fifteenth century, giving Columbus the idea that the earth was shaped like a pear (Hitti 1970, 570).

The Emphasis on Causality and Sense Perception
The philosopher Ibn Sina substituted a material cause for Aristotle's metaphysical cause as the middle term in the syllogism. Ibn Rushd was critical of Neo-Platonism and emphasised the importance of causality for valid knowledge. His ideas in the form of Latin Averroism made an important contribution to European critical discussions on religion which led to the Enlightenment.

The idea of causality had practical applications. For example, Muslim physicians in fourteenth century Spain freed themselves from unscientific ideas, opting instead for the explanation of the plague in terms of contagion and not divine punishment. The famous physician, Ibn al-Khatib wrote in The Plague:

> the existence of contagion is established by experience, study and the evidence of the senses, by trustworthy reports on transmission by garments, vessels, ear-rings, by the spread of it by persons from one house to another, by infection of a healthy sea-port by an arrival from an infected land...by the immunity of isolated individuals and ...nomadic Bedouin tribes of Africa...It must be a principle that a proof taken from the Traditions has to undergo modification when in manifest contradiction with the evidence of the perception of the senses (Ibn al-Khatib, cited in Meyerhof 1931, 340).

The Scientific Method
While the Greeks were more taken in by the deductive method and underplayed sense perception and observation, Muslim scientists went beyond this and based their investigations on observation and experimentation. Muslim scientists Jabir Ibn Hayyan, al-Biruni, Umar Khayyam, Ibn Sina, Ibn Yunus, al-Tusi and others all worked in their own or in state laboratories. This had to do with their belief in the reality of this world and that knowledge of it was possible and that knowledge of it pointed to the Creator. A very important example of the application of the scientific method was Ibn Haytham’s work on optics. He proved Aristotle’s thesis that light is reflected from objects to the eye and not the
reverse as was thought. What is important about this is that he arrived at this conclusion via observation and experimentation with lenses, by testing the angles of reflection.

Institutions of Learning
Even the modern university, as we shall discuss later, owes its origins to the Muslims. The idea of the degree most likely came from Islam. In 931 A.D. the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir had all practising physicians examined and those who passed were granted *ijzah* (certificates). In this way, Baghdad was able to get rid of its quacks (ibid, 364). The *ijzah* was the principal means by which scholars and Sufis passed on their teachings to students, granting them permission to carry on their teachings. Although the learned scholars of Islam taught in formal institutions of learning such as the *maktab*, the *kuttab*, the *madrasah* and the *jmi'ah*, the degree was personally granted by the scholar to the student.

The importance of Muslim contributions to science, technology, philosophy and the arts cannot be overstated. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1250 A.D.) came into contact with Muslims in Sicily and was so impressed that he adopted Arab dress, customs and manners. He admired their philosophic works. In 1224 A.D. he founded a university at Naples which specialised in translating scientific works of Muslims from Arabic into Latin (O'Leary 1939, 280–281).

From the above, we may draw the following conclusions about the conception of knowledge that forms the basis of education in Islam:

1. All knowledge comes from God.
2. Muslims had never recognised the division of knowledge into the religious and secular. All knowledge comes from God but such knowledge is either about God (as in theology, for example) or about God's creation (as studied by the various rational sciences).
3. Islam recognises various sources and methods of knowledge acquisition, including sense perception and reason.
4. The acquisition of the various sciences is obligatory upon all Muslim societies because this is one way of taking God's creation seriously. Furthermore, the study of the world of empirical things points to the Creator.
MUSLIM INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING

In Islamic education, a range of subjects was taught that included both the traditional as well as the rational sciences. For example, during Abbasid times, subjects taught include jurisprudence, exegesis, literary studies, history, mathematics, politics, ethics, music, theology, metaphysics, logic, medicine, astronomy and chemistry. In the time of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin), it is known that a similar range of courses were taught (Dodge 1961, 36, 40–52). These sciences that Muslims cultivated were taught at various levels in the different types of institutions of learning in the Muslim world prior to the introduction of modern Western schools and universities. The following is a brief sketch of some of these institutions.

The maktab and kuttab (writing schools) were schools providing basic instruction in the reading and recitation of the Koran during the first century of Islam. Later on they expanded to provide elementary education in calligraphy, poetry, grammar, arithmetic, penmanship, horsemanship, and swimming. The difference between the two seemed to be that maktabs were for lower elementary education whereas the kuttab were for older students (Nakosteen 1964, 46; Makdisi 1981, 19). Writing schools were found in Spain, Sicily, Africa and throughout Iran and the Arab world.

The masjid (mosque) schools in the masjid or everyday mosques (which did not hold the Friday congregational prayers) were often sites of instruction for elementary education as well as more advanced education in the various Islamic sciences. Baghdad alone had three thousand such schools by the third century of Islam and they were also found throughout the Muslim world. It was quite often that well-known and learned scholars founded and taught at these schools (Nakosteen 1964, 47; Makdisi 1981, 21–22).

The educational institutions described above were, however, limited in terms of the quality of teachers and facilities or scope of instruction. A new type of school, the madrasah or school of public instruction, was developed to provide an alternative. These were established as waqaf (sing. waqf) (charitable trusts). The first of such institutions was the renowned Madrasah Nizamiyah of Baghdad, established in 457/1065 by the famous Abbasid vizier Nizam al-Mulk who later developed a vast network of madrasah across the Arab world. These schools were provided with the best professors and libraries and even offered scholarships to students (Nakosteen 1964, 49; Makdisi 1981, 27).
Another institution was the jmi‘ (congregational mosque) schools. The jmi‘ housed a number of educational institutions such as the halqa (study circle), the zawiya and madrasah, with the latter two focusing mainly on instruction in law, unlike the madrasah established independently of a jmi‘ (Makdisi 1981, 12, 13, 21). One such jmi‘ is that of Al-Azhar in Cairo. This was established during the last quarter of the tenth century by the Fatimids to teach the principles of jurisprudence, grammar, philosophy, logic and astronomy (Dodge 1961, 18). Its name was later changed to Jmi‘ah al-Azhar, jmi‘ah here meaning universal in terms of a complete course of studies (Dodge 1961, 13; Wan Mohd Nor 1998, 183). It is in this early jmi‘ah or jami‘ah institution that we may find the origins of the modern universitas.

The Jami‘ah and the Origins of the Modern University

By university is meant the degree granting institution that we find in Europe and America from the twelfth century and which had been introduced to the rest of the world since the seventeenth century. On the other hand, colleges in Europe were charitable foundations set up to help needy students. They were established within a university but were not themselves degree granting. Gradually they evolved to become degree granting, that is, they became more like universities (Makdisi 1980).

According to Makdisi and others, the European university as degree granting academic institutions emerged spontaneously in Europe in the twelfth century. What Europe did borrow from Islam was the college. The proof that Makdisi offers of this is that the colleges or madrasah in Islam were charitable trusts (awqff) just as in Europe, and that the internal structures of both types of colleges were similar. Muslim colleges had the sabib (fellow) and mutafaqqib (scholar), with the Latin translation of sabib being socius. The fact of the priority of the two in terms of time means that Europe borrowed from Islam. For example, charitable trusts emerged in England only in the thirteenth century.

One could go further to say that the Islamic educational institution, whether madrasah or jmi‘ah, was also the origin of the European university and not just the European college. Several points lend support to this position.

First, although the Latin term universitas predates Islam, its use as a reference to an educational institution in Europe appears for the first time only in 1221 (Gabriel 1989, 12: 282, cited in Wan Mohd Nor 1998,
182). On the other hand, the term jami'ah, meaning “universal,” was used to refer to Al-Azhar in the tenth century.

Second, although the meaning of the Latin universitas as gatherings of students predates Islam, the idea of the universitas as the site where universal knowledge and the branches of knowledge of a universal nature are taught (hence jami'ah, universitas) appeared only after the madrasah and jami'abs in the Muslim world.

Third, the Islamic educational institutions were degree (ijazah) granting. This predates degree granting in European medieval universities. In this regard, there have been some interesting discussions on the origins of the term baccalaureus. In the 1930s, the renowned Orientalist Alfred Guillaume noted strong resemblances between Muslim and Western Christian institutions of higher learning. An example he cited is the ijazah which he recognised as being akin to the medieval licentia docendi, the precursor of the modern university degree (Guillaume 1931, 244). Guillaume suggested that the Latin baccalaureus may have originated from the Arabic bi haqq al-riwya (the right to teach on the authority of another) but was unable to go beyond this speculation (Guillaume 1931, 245n). Later, Ebied and Young, aware of Guillaume’s suggestion, discussed the appearance of the exact phrase bi haqq al-riwya as a technical term in documents that conferred the right to teach on the recipient (Ebied & Young 1974, 3-4). The theory is that the phrase bi haqq al-riwya was assimilated to baccalaureus.

Fourth, the European notion of facultas (faculty) is a direct translation of Arabic qawwah which refers to the power inherent in an organ. According to Al-Attas, “the university must have been conceived in emulation of the general structure, in form, function and purpose, of man” (Al-Attas 1979, 38, cited in Wan Mohd Nor 1998, 181). This seems to be the sense in which facultas was used in the medieval European university.

**Islamic Knowledge/Education and Multicultural Education**

According to accepted classifications of knowledge among the Muslims, there is a category of knowledge under which are subsumed those sciences that result from the activity of man’s intellect. It is in these sciences, particularly those that deal with the study of history, society and economics, the history of science, and literature that the following three themes are
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to be stressed: 1) inter-civilisational encounters; 2) the point of view of the other; and 3) the multicultural origins of modern civilisation. It is these themes that instil the kind of knowledge and attitude that is required for mutual respect, admiration and compassion among peoples of various ethnic and religious groups. I believe that these themes from Islamic knowledge and education can be worked into the curriculum on religion in both madrasah and national schools and universities.

The first theme is that of intercivilisational encounters. The study of Islam is a case study in the encounter of civilisations. Historically, Islam was the only civilisation to have conquered the West and to be in protracted conflict with the West. It is important to convey the fact that intercivilisational encounters are not always negative. The Crusades, for example, resulted in much scientific and cultural borrowing between the Muslims and Europeans.

The second theme is on the multicultural origins of modernity. Modern civilisation is usually understood as having Western origins and is usually defined in Western terms. Nevertheless, many aspects of modern civilisation originate from Islam, China and India. The idea of the university referred to above is a case in point. When we further take into consideration the examination system developed by the Chinese we find in the modern university its multicultural origins.

The third theme is on the variety of points of view. The study of Islam and other civilisations presents to us the possibilities of experiencing the range and variety of points of view from which any particular issue can be seen. Many people are familiar with accounts of the Crusades from the point of view of the European crusaders. The viewpoints of Arab Muslims and Christians who fought the crusaders, and then lived amongst the Europeans who settled in and around Palestine in between the Crusades, contribute to a more complete picture of that history. Another example is the hijab or head covering worn by many Muslim women. In some contexts it is to be understood in terms of patriarchy and the oppression of women, while in others it is a powerful symbol of liberation. Therefore, it is vital that people are exposed to the diversity of experiences of Muslim women some of whom took to wearing the hijab in order to escape the lustful gaze of the fashion and beauty industry.

To reiterate, these three themes can inform not only Muslim education in madrasah but also the national education system. This will contribute towards the development of multicultural education that will expose and enable our children to grow up with multicultural sensibilities.
defined by appreciation, admiration and compassion for each other.

CONCLUSION

If the above is what is understood as a progressive standard of Muslim education, in the sense that both the traditional and intellectual sciences were pursued in a scientific manner in the context of institutions designed to further knowledge, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the Muslim curricula of the past can be used to derive criteria with which to judge contemporary Muslim education. This is not the place to go into a detailed study of the curricula of the various Muslim institutions of education that are found in Singapore and elsewhere. But it can be pointed out here that in most places, the Muslims schools and colleges now make a distinction between religious and secular education, a distinction that was not made by Muslims in the past. Rather, the distinction then was between the traditional and intellectual sciences.

The choice of distinction in the sciences is important. If one were to opt for the first distinction, i.e. between religious and secular education, the tendency would be to downplay the importance of the physical, natural and social sciences as these come under secular knowledge where the “secular” is often associated with the philosophy of secularism and has negative connotations. On the other hand, the second distinction between traditional and intellectual sciences provides a balance and suggests that all knowledge is important whether it is given directly by revelation or acquired via the intellect or sense perception. What is needed is a thorough study of the curricula, including the textbooks used, in order to assess the philosophy of education that informs it.

What I have done above is to present in broad terms the Islamic philosophy of education from which can be derived criteria to assess the current status of education. Such criteria would be founded on the recognition of the importance of both knowledge of God as well as God’s creation. Not to study the creation in all its aspects would be tantamount to not taking God’s creation seriously. This was the attitude of the early Muslims. As a result they cultivated practically all of the known sciences during their time and even discovered new ones. Every phenomenon was seen as yat, pointing to its creator. These signs had to be taken seriously, to be “read” and interpreted (tafsir and ta’wil) much like the Koran is. What would be new for Muslim education is the thematic infusing of multicultural content into the curricula. This is vital in view of the
current international political and cultural order that tends to generate or exacerbate already existing ethnic and religious conflicts.

As far as Muslim educational institutions are concerned, whether in Singapore or in other parts of the world, their alienation from the early Islamic spirit of universality in education and their lack of a multicultural perspective has to do with the nature of some educational and other professional elites among Muslims. Such elites lack a cosmopolitan outlook as they tend to remain unexposed to the entire cosmos of knowledge and to restrict themselves to certain legalistic traditions of learning within Islam. As a result, things non-Muslim are seen to be irrelevant, even though they have not worked out the definition and criteria of irrelevance. Nor have they really intellectually engaged the West.

Syed Hussein Alatas referred to the domination of developing societies by the dualistic man who may introduce and work with scientific products but lacks the scientific outlook (Alatas 1977, 87). This dualism is also true of the educational elite in the Muslim world. They are able to introduce modern curricular as well as teaching techniques but do not have a cosmopolitan and universalistic outlook on education. The Muslim scholars and thinkers of the past who worked in the various Muslim educational institutions discussed above never neglected knowledge on the grounds of their origins. Instead, they were opened to, and even enamoured by, the scientific contributions of the Greeks, Indians and Persians. They translated and studied whatever they could find of the pre-Islamic heritage and incorporated these into an Islamic philosophy of education, some aspects of which are presented above. They did not neglect the rational and intellectual sciences and certainly did not relegate them to the status of secular knowledge. Today, however, the false distinction between secular and Islamic knowledge is often made or, at least, assumed to be correct.

Even in the past, there was opposition to the cultivation of science, philosophy and logic by the conservative ulama. But what made the sciences among the Muslims flourish was the presence of a critical mass of scholars and thinkers who pushed ahead with their intellectual and scholarly agendas. Ultimately, the question of the reform of Muslim education in Singapore and elsewhere depends on the ability of the educational elite among Muslims to recognise the problem and to have the will to implement the required solutions.

NOTES
SECULARISM AND SPIRITUALITY

"All views, errors and inadequacies in this chapter remain the author's sole responsibility.


2 Al-Attas here draws our attention to al-Taftzn's commentary on the 'Aqaid of al-Nasaf which contains the creed of Islam rendered in concise form and which contains the epistemological position of Islam (Al-Attas 1990, n.1).

3 This is a point stressed by Syed Muhammad al-Naquib Al-Attas several times in personal communications.

4 Al-Attas, personal communication on various occasions.

5 Al-Attas, personal communication on various occasions.

6 I myself have attempted to put this idea into practice by informing a course entitled "Islam and Contemporary Muslim Civilizations" that I teach at the University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore. This course is an introductory course on Muslim civilisation which places emphasis on the historical, cultural and social context of the rise and development of Islam, covering the entire historical period from the birth of Islam to the contemporary period. The purpose of the course is not so much to provide knowledge of facts and events as to convey to students an understanding of three central themes of the study of civilisations.

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