The Challenges of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia: Impacts and Prospects

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Introduction

The Renaissance which enriched and modified Western civilisation, came about in Europe through the dissemination of knowledge whose sources stem from the Islamic educational system, particularly at the time when Islamic science and culture reached their zenith in Spain, spreading its values as a contribution to Europe.¹ In the words of Rosenthal, “In Muslim days, Cordova was the centre of European civilisation and one of the greatest seats of learning in the world.”² And C.H.Haskins has noted, “The broad fact remains that the Arabs of Spain were the principal source of the new learning for Western Europe.”³ George H. Sabine has noted that,

The establishment of universities and higher centres of learning in the Western countries began in the thirteenth century, when the Latin translations of Muslim philosophy, sciences, art and literature were completed, the translators including a large proportion of the most original scholars. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas among the Dominicans, Duns Scotus and Roger Bacon among the Franciscans (who were all scholars of Arabic and completed their studies in Spanish universities).⁴

This historical evidence shows that Western education was greatly influenced by the Islamic education system in Spain, where it provided an atmosphere of learning to Western scholars centuries ago.

The nature of the Islamic educational system started and developed further to a peak of educational achievement in various disciplines and branches which are actually based on a fundamental belief in Allah and the Qur’an and the Sunnah as its source. However, according to S.M. Al-Naquib Al-Attas, this style of imparting knowledge and these educational approaches have been recast and remoulded to fit in with the needs of Western culture. He explains that,

Islam too has made very significant contributions to Western civilisation in the sphere of knowledge and in the inculcation of the rational and scientific spirit, but the knowledge and the rational and scientific spirit have been recast and remoulded to fit the crucible of Western culture so that they have become fused and amalgamated with all other elements that form the character and personality of Western civilisation.⁵

The Western style of knowledge and education then fused into the Muslim world during the emergence of Western colonialisation which resulted in a clash of morals and values in the Muslim world particularly in Southeast Asia. Muhammad al-Faisal al-Saud has noted, “Muslim institutions then ceased to be the vehicles and expressions of a unitary system of education and lapsed after the bifurcation of curricula into cultural ambivalence and educational anarchy.”⁶ Here we may say that Western education, with its absence of harmony between the modern sciences and religious values, has actually been harmful to the Muslim world and has created the challenges and dilemma in the Islamic educational system particularly in Southeast Asia.
The Challenges of Western Education and its impacts in Southeast Asia.

The education system in the Islamic world, particularly in Southeast Asia since the nineteenth century, has imitated ‘secular education’ using the Western approach. In this context, Al-Otaibi and Rashid have noted that,

The second half of the 19th century C.E., therefore, saw many reforms introduced into the traditional Islamic system that brought it more in line with the European approach. As the stage was set for the eventual colonial domination of the Muslim world by the European powers, a form of educational colonialism had already been firmly planted in the Islamic state. The dual educational system, one religious and one secular, that came to characterize the Muslim world was not, therefore, the sole invention of the colonizers.  

The crucial question here is how far this education system has been able to harmonise with Islam and its followers. This is because the nature, principles, ideologies and philosophies of Islam sometimes differ from the Western approach. The reality which affects the Islamic world particularly in Southeast Asia until today is that the secular systems are being used in social life, particularly in the aspect of education. S. Hossein Nasr has noted,

Nowhere is the intrusion of secularism into the Islamic world more evident than in the field of education. Here, from the thirteenth/nineteenth century onward, schools on a European model and teaching European subjects have often been built by Muslim authorities.  

The challenges and dilemma for the Muslim world particularly in Southeast Asia is that the sphere of Western education determines its ground, its disciplines, and attitudes of mind which may be incompatible with any theory based on religious doctrines. This atmosphere of education is a great challenge in preserving the qualities of Muslims, particularly their moral character and their identity as well, because secularist ideology denounces religious principles as the basis of individual development. From an Islamic educational perspective, in contrast, spiritual development is a fundamental need to enable man to attain a stage of certainty in imqan and to build up awareness of Allah, which automatically craves goodness and abstains from evil.

Muslim intellectuals have criticised the secular ideology which is fused into education and has failed to inculcate Muslim behaviour in accordance with Islamic ethics and to preserve the harmony and stability of values in Islamic society. According to S.A. Ashraf, the outcomes of this system of education may produce secularist intellectual experts who pursue solely material desires and comforts without any spiritual progress and this has lately paved the way for exploitation and selfishness. He explains that, “As immediate utility is the sole goal, technical experts exploit society and nature to their detriment. Forests are destroyed, rivers polluted and hills denuded, and thus an imbalance is created in the environment.” According to Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, the Western style of education in terms of dissemination of knowledge has left many undesirable effects. Even though its knowledge has been used to discover numerous facts and scientific truths, it has failed to offer any guidance in search of righteous living and good moral qualities.
Abul ‘Abdulla Maududi held the view that the secular system has caused problems, particularly in the Muslim community and generally in other communities. He actually rejected the division of education into the secular and the religious, which was unable to develop a comprehensive system of life, whereas *ad-din* and the system of life are sustained by each other.\(^{11}\) Sayyid Qutb also argued against the ideology of secularism that the advancement of sciences and technology, and achievement of a modern style of life lacking a moral and spiritual foundation are not real modernisation because they cannot save humanity.\(^{12}\) Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi has also argued against the secular system that it “…must be removed and abolished once and for all. The two systems must be united and integrated. The emergent system must be infused with the spirit of Islam and function as an integral part of its ideological program.”\(^{13}\)

From the foregoing arguments, it appears that most Muslim intellectuals have refused to accept secular education because its ideologies, theories and education are unable to solve a form of conflict between knowledge and values and to create a moral basis for society. This atmosphere, however, did not extend to Islamic disciplines and sciences in previous centuries. Ziauddin Sardar has noted that,

> …Islamic science, as its history demonstrates, explicitly seeks to serve and promote the values of the world-view and civilization of Islam. The unique character of Islamic science stems from its all-embracing emphasis on the unity of religion and science, knowledge and values, physics and metaphysics.\(^{14}\)

Nevertheless, we are not denying that this system of education has enabled Western civilisation to achieve great successes in the field of knowledge, science and technology, intellectual development and has even enabled it to discover the secrets of nature. Even now the Western scientists enable to explore far into space on the basis of this style of education. But from the Islamic point of view, education is considered as not only great achievement in the various fields of knowledge and material advancement, but also as complementary spiritual aspects.

We acknowledge that education is a crucial element for the intellectual and moral development of men’s characters. According to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, “Man is man because of education. None of the peoples of mankind, not even the savage, is completely deprived of education.”\(^{15}\) Because of the vital part played by education, Muslim intellectuals came to realise that the secular system of education was very harmful to spiritual belief, the way of thinking and moral quality of Muslims. In some ways they were not diametrically opposed to the whole system of Western education, but it needs to be reconciled with the Islamic view and a unification of secular and religious knowledge is essential. This is because the Muslim community needs its engineers, architects, scientists, doctors and other professionals. Thus, “Clearly, education for Muslims must reflect a synthesis of the revealed and acquired sciences.”\(^{16}\) This atmosphere initiated the reaction of many Muslim scholars, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his Egyptian disciple Muhammad ‘Abdu who were pioneers in previous centuries and who attempted to reconcile Islam and modernisation. Their aims was to combine the truth of Islam with Western sciences and skills in order to create a peak of powerful Muslim civilisation once more.
Integration/ Islamisation of Knowledge

In this regard, al-Faruqi has noted that,

In the past, many great Muslims have attempted to reform Islamic education by adding to its curricula subjects constitutive of the alien view. Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh were champions of this cause. Their strategy came to fruition in the 1380s A.H./ 1960’s A.C., when some of the Islamic Universities were turned into ‘modern’ universities. All their efforts, and those of millions like them, rest on the assumption that the so-called ‘modern’ subjects are harmless and can only lend strength to the Muslims.17

These ideas then inspired Ismail al-Faruqi and his colleagues bravely to face the challenge of the crucial issue of the Islamisation of knowledge. These efforts were made through debates and discussions in several international conferences and seminars. Finally, the workplan for the Islamisation of knowledge, which has five objectives, was established as follows;

1. To master the modern disciplines.
2. To master the Islamic legacy.
3. To establish the specific relevance of Islam to each area of modern knowledge.
4. To seek ways for creative synthesis between the legacy and modern knowledge.
5. And to launch Islamic thought on the trajectory which leads it to fulfillment of the divine pattern of Allah.”18

According to him, in order to achieve these objectives, there are twelve steps which inescapably need to be considered.19 Eventually, his efforts led to the establishment of Islamic institutions such as the International Institute of Islamic Thought with its branches across the world and the International Islamic University in Islamabad, and later in Malaysia. These efforts are of great credit to him and his colleagues particularly, and to the Muslim community generally. However his achievements were not totally without weaknesses. Ziauddin Sardar came to criticise his work, particularly on the second objective of the workplan; he argued as follows:

But when he states that one of the objectives of his programme for the Islamisation of knowledge is ‘to establish the specific relevance of Islam to each era of modern knowledge’, it does seem as though he is putting the cart before the horse. It is not Islam that needs to be made relevant to modern knowledge; it is modern knowledge that needs to be made relevant to Islam. Islam is a priori relevant for all times.20

This means that scientific and technological knowledge should be reoriented through Islamic perspectives and approaches if we really want to Islamise them. In addition Ziauddin Sardar argued that a contemporary epistemology of Islam, not only through the process of Islamising Western knowledge, but the previous works of Islamic sciences and disciplines, needs to be developed in relation to the current situation. He considered that this programme was not an impossible task, but it was formidable.21

In this context, reseacher believe that both ideas, whether the Islamisation of knowledge or the appropriate study of earlier works of Islamic epistemology, are good starting-points for the
contemporary Muslim community to gear up their challenge for the new millennium and the era of globalisation.

The other crucial step for the solution to this dilemma is to have a module of the Islamic educational system. Nevertheless, this system does not claim to be Islamic simply because verses from the Qur’an and the Hadith have been included in it. In fact, in order to bring Islamic education into existence, the whole of the secular educational system needs to be reviewed, studied, researched and reoriented from the Islamic viewpoint on the basis of divine guidance. S.A. Ashraf has noted that, “...whatever is taught in general education may be included as elements to be studied from the Islamic point of view.” Thus to replace totally the elements of a secular system is not an easy task. It needs an intellectual jihad as exhorted by S.H. Nasr in his foreword,

Muslim thinkers must integrate various forms of knowledge within themselves by not only accepting but also often criticizing and rejecting prevalent structures and premises of many of the sciences, and then write textbooks in which a particular subject whether it be anthropology or astronomy is treated from the Islamic point of view as was done by an Ibn Sina or Ibn Khaldun centuries ago.

The efforts and ideas as laid down in the discussion are probably the early stages of the solution to the dilemma of education in the Muslim world. Another solution has been provided by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) which took a crucial initiative, holding several conferences on Muslim education from the first conferences in Makkah (1977), Islamabad (1980), Dhaka (1981), and Jakarta (1982), to the fifth conference in Cairo (1987). These conferences left a great many ideas, resolutions and recommendations for contemporary Islamic education which have inspired us in certain points of this study. At least the outcome of these recommendations may pave the way for the emergence of an Islamic education system as created by Muslim scholars in previous centuries.

**Prospect and actualize the Islamic Education and Islamic Studies based on the Quran and Sunnah.**

Islamic education system and its processes never separate the iman from aspects of the branches of knowledge and sciences. This is an important principle and a feature of Islamic education which has the aim of securing the advancement and happiness of man’s life in this world and the Hereafter. Through this approach Muslims are enabled to progress and develop human life to its full maturity and perfection whether material or spiritual in accordance with the permanent values given in the Qur’an. Thus, man may develop in himself the good qualities of his nature materially and spiritually. However, the phenomenon of weak iman has nowadays become very widespread among Muslims.

The effects of this shortcoming can be seen in the personality of Muslims, which sometimes stands in opposition to the real mission of Islam, particularly their akhlaq. The weakness of iman is the cause of every adversity in the Muslim community such as corruption,
social problem among teenagers particular in Malaysia (bohsia, zina, rempit, buang anak, disrespect to the alder people, parent, teacher etc.) injustice, lack of integrity and solidarity among Muslims and so on. So every Muslim must find out the nature and cause of the problem, and treat it straightaway, before it overwhelms the community. Therefore, among the solutions to this problem, the model of an Islamic education/Islamic Studies system, which exists not merely for the sake of gaining knowledge, but also generates good moral qualities and builds up a close relationship between man and Allah, develop creative and critical thinking needs to be established and implemented. The proposed model of an Islamic education/Islamic Studies as the following:

a. Integration of knowledge; Islamic Studies and other disciplines (Islamic Studies subject as university required courses)

b. Double Degree; other disciplines and Islamic Studies

Indeed, the nature of Islamic education/Islamic Studies is integrally related to the creation of man who has conceived the physical and spiritual in order to develop the potential of his dignity and humanity. Islamic education is different from other types of education since it starts with the spiritual aspect which forms the link with belief in Allah. So the spiritual aspect may produce a righteous Muslim, namely al-Muttaqqi, one who follows wholeheartedly the Islamic code of life and never loses sight of his relation to Allah. Therefore, the great benefit of Islamic education is the acquisition of knowledge for the pleasure of Allah the Almighty which people then may use for their life and the benefit of other human beings. Conversely if they have done nothing with their knowledge then from the Islamic view, they can be categorised as a donkey which carries a huge burden of books but understands nothing of them. The Qur’an lays emphasis on the good example of the most excellent educated man, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who received the message from Allah and then disseminated it to the people. Allah says,

He it is Who sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger (Muhammad) from among themselves, reciting to them His Verses, purifying them (from the filth of disbelief and polytheism), and teaching them the Book (this Qur’an, Islamic laws and Islamic jurisprudence) and Al-Hikmah (As-Sunnah: Legal ways, orders, acts of worship of Prophet Muhammad). And verily, they had been before in manifest error.

This deliberation may give a picture of the nature of Islamic education, which takes its aim from beyond the excellence of the intellect. It has a relationship with Allah, men and nature, and allows the creation of moral values for man who may use his knowledge as it was intended. This education needs to watch over men’s nature in order to cultivate and actualise them for complete submission to Allah the Almighty, and its principles ultimately make them act in conformity with their creation as Khalifatullah (vicegerent of Allah) and as a servant of Allah. In this regard, researcher is right to say that the Islamic education system prepares an individual Muslim whose objective is to establish justice and goodness in society and destroy every sort of evil deed and injustice on the basis of iman. It actually induces man to move towards good moral qualities and perfection of character.
In fact, the practice of good deeds in every activity of man’s life will keep stable his nafs and strengthen iman in Allah. If the inner characteristics of goodness are consistently built up in man, he will be drawn close to Allah. Conversely, if the actions of bad deeds are always practised in the life of man, then it affects the nafs in such a way that it gets further away from Allah and the reality of life. In this matter, the Islamic education system gets involved directly in propagating the nafs towards its perfection through the various processes of education.

The Islamic education system attempts to promote a feeling of fear of Allah the Almighty in man. The feeling of fear of Allah may encourage a Muslim to perform a good deed in his life and towards society solely for the pleasure of Allah and to gain His love. The practice of this attribute in man will then develop a feeling of gratitude to Allah the Almighty. In the Islamic view, for signs of gratitude to Allah, Muslims will struggle for goodness, as explained by a Qur’anic verse, “Verily they used to hasten on to do good deeds, and they used to called on Us with hope and fear, and used to humble themselves before Us” in their life and in society.

In a man who has a strong feeling of gratitude towards Allah, a feeling of love is created in his heart for Allah, for the Prophet (pbuh), for other human beings and for the creation which surrounds him. Love of Allah the Almighty and love of the Prophet constitute one of the most significant principles in the establishment of good morality and justice in Islam. Indeed, the love of Allah is absolute and is subject to no limitation. It signifies that believers at all times choose their activities in life through obedience to Allah and keep away from the temptations of Shaitan. The love of Allah is built up through the knowledge of Him. The Islamic educational system laid down the way towards the knowledge of Allah in order to shape the love of Allah in man’s life. This may make man lead a life of purity in both conduct and character, in a way that is acceptable to Allah. Those who love Allah would be motivated to follow the path shown by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as laid down by the Qur’an. Allah says:

Say (O Muhammad [peace be upon him] to mankind) “If you (really) love Allah then follow me (i.e. accept Islamic Monotheism, follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah), Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

This love which is generated from a sincere heart would inspire man to love goodness and always to struggle for it. Therefore a Muslim, who has reached this stage, is almost ready to spend his life helping and sacrificing himself for others.

Indeed, the process of akhlaq development is the crucial factor in the nature of Islamic education. Nevertheless, this process does not appear suddenly, but needs consistency of education and a long-term process of training. We believe that the establishment of iabadah may provide a good way to shape the education and training which would enable every Muslim to attain husnul khuluq and to live righteously. Allah has designed the various forms of ibadah for man to worship Him; at the same time it enables Muslims to educate their diversity of nature properly, and to purify themselves to please Allah, above all spiritually. The real significance of ibadah is that an individual Muslim may create a kind of relation of humility, adoration and thanksgiving with Allah the Almighty that may build up the strong iman in Allah.
question is raised in this concept paper, how to develop the concept of “shukr” (pay a gratitude to Allah) in the teaching Islamic Education/Islamic Studies in Muslim World generally and in Southeast Asia particularly.

We acknowledge that Islam does not restrict the fields of Islamic education to Islamic studies but it always encourages man or woman to discover all scientific facts. Directing man’s or woman’s intellect towards this universe may draw him or her to the conclusion of the existence of the Creator, of His Uniqueness, Who created all the creatures in wonderful order with its laws of nature. Then, he or she may believe that all these phenomena are the Signs of Allah. The Qur’an says,

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of Night and Day – There indeed Signs for men of understanding – men who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting and lying down on their sides and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, (with the thought): “Our Lord! Not for naught hast Thou created (all) this glory to thee! Give us salvation from the Penalty of the Fire.  

In this regard, the aim of the educational system in Islam is to educate man or woman in the awareness of Allah through the acquisition of knowledge, researching and studying the natural order. Therefore, when Muslims acquire knowledge and explore the physical world around them, they may draw meanings from it, may reflect from their hearts to arrive at the conviction that Allah the Almighty is the most powerful. In other words, Islamic education aims to direct the rational faculties of those who seek knowledge in all fields towards the search for truth and thereby invite them to praise the Greatness of Allah and thank Him for His Mercifulness. The effects of this education may lead Muslims to deal with their knowledge for the benefit of themselves and for others in accordance with the teaching of Islam. Therefore, the teachings of Islamic Education/Islamic Studies in the era of globalization should have:

a. a creative and critical thinking
b. an application of modern technologies and contemporary approaches
c. an Islamic Studies Research Centre to investigate and to actualise the principles of knowledge based on the Quran and Sunnah

Conclusion

Researcher stated that the feeling of pleasure gained from doing good from the Islamic point of view is rooted in iman. This induces man to develop good moral qualities and perfection of character. Therefore, iman and its role in motivating goodness should be taken into consideration by educational and school authorities. This key feature of Islamic education must be continuously developed and widely promoted in the school environment in order to attain good behaviour in the students as well as excellence in academic studies. In this connection, the education policy-makers should respond to the challenge to produce educational materials such as text books, teaching aids, programmes and so on, to strengthen iman among students. The Qur’an often encourages people to practise self-contemplation and also to contemplate the whole
of creation. Therefore, a study should be made by education policy-makers, of the relevant contents of the materials used for Islamic education/Islamic Studies.

Then, through this point, we hope that the ideas from this concept paper may help to explain and prove that the essence of Islamic education/Islamic Studies, is to attain a good life, righteousness, a total balance of personality, real perfection in this world and the achievement of eternal bliss in the Hereafter can be considered into actualization in Islamic educational system and to resolve the challenges of Islamic education/Islamic Studies at all levels in Muslim world today particularly in South East Asia.
End Notes

9 S.A. Ashraf, New Horizons in Muslim Education, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 18
12 Sayyid Qutb, Milestones, (Indianapolis, 1993), p.184
18 For further information of these twelve steps see: Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, “Islamization of Knowledge: Problems, Principles and Prospective,” in Abdul Hamid A. Sulayman (ed.), Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge, (Herndon, 1988), pp. 53 – 54
19 ibid, pp. 54 – 62
21 ibid, p.104
22 S.A. Ashraf, New Horizons in Muslim Education, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 44
25 The Qur’an 62 : 5
26 The Qur’an 62 : 2
27 The Qur’an 5 : 42, 3 : 76, 159
28 The Qur’an 21 : 90
29 The Qur’an 2 : 165
31 The Qur’an 3 : 31
32 Murtaza Mutahhari, Fundamentals of Islamic Thought: God, Man and Universe, translated by R. Cammbell, (Berkeley, 1985), p. 82-83
33 For further explanation see: Abdul-Rahman Salih Abdullah, Educational Theory A Qur’ân Outlook, (Makkah, 1982), pp. 159 – 165
34 The Qur’an 3 : 190 – 191