

Approaching Teaching and Learning: The Islamic Way

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Introduction

Given that 60% of world's Muslim population is illiterate (Ramadan 319), it may be difficult for a person without adequate understanding of Islam to comprehend fully the great importance and prominence it has given to knowledge and learning. In view of the enormous emphasis the Qur'an and hadith lay on education, the great British writer Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) highlights Islam's "command for universal education" and considers the existence of an ignorant Muslim "a contradiction in terms" (10, 13). According to the Qur'an, the most important blessing God bestowed on all prophets is knowledge and wisdom. Verse 2:31 states that after creating Adam God gave him information about all kinds of names, and thus He established the superiority of humans over angels on the basis of this

knowledge distinction. Some other Qur'anic verses, such as 2:251, 3:48, 12:37 and 18:65-66, also testify that prophets invariably received the inestimable blessing of knowledge from God.

As the Qur'an and hadith assert repeatedly, the very purpose for which God sent prophets at different spatiotemporal locations was to liberate humanity from the darkness of ignorance and error to the light of discernment and guidance. And knowledge was the most important, invaluable key for them to perform this responsibility effectively in response to God's call, and it was knowledge that they were commanded to disseminate first and foremost.

In hadith literature, the opening prophetic statement that is categorically mentioned in Chapter on Knowledge is: "Convey from me even if only one

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which reflects the unity of the universe, rather than a separation leading to an incomplete or lopsided worldview, circumscribed by a secular outlook.

According to Alparslan Acikgenc, a worldview is an architectonic whole where its "network of ideas, conceptions, beliefs and aspirations" are organised in a coherent manner (Acikgenc 10). It is a window through which all human beings look through when viewing the world (Aldila 278). It is that which determines the perspectives of the person. Political Thought is a subject that has its own systematic ideas, concepts and theories. In itself it is an architectonic whole. Within it contains many worldviews of political thinkers as to what state and leadership should be like.

In looking at Islamisation of Political Thought courses at IIUM, this essay has shown that epistemology and worldview play the role of tools that lead to the understanding of the thinkers within their nomenclatures. When the thinkers are understood within their nomenclatures or paradigms, their ideas will be better understood, and when this happens, students will then be able to see things in the right perspective as because their worldview has been formulated on the basis of *tawhid*.

In conclusion, what the Department of Political Science strives to do through its two Political Thought courses, Political Thought I and Political Thought II, is to naturalise the alien constituents of political thought that are not based on the Islamic paradigm. These alien elements that contradict *tawhid* can be seen,

identified and isolated because of having placed epistemology and worldview as the first and second premise or the foundation for teaching these courses. Once this is done, and the ideas of these thinkers are elucidated, only then students would be able to critically evaluate or analyse the political thought of these thinkers based on the worldview of *tawhid*. Hence, the formation of the worldviews of the students would become an "architectonic" whole, that is holistic not only because they are able to see things from the perspectives of the philosophers but more importantly they are able to do so because their worldviews are based on *tawhid*.

Endnotes

¹ This article is based on "Islamization of Political Thought at IIUM," a paper which was presented at the First World Congress on Integration and Islamicisation of Acquired Human Knowledge (FWCII 2013), organised by IIUM at Prince Hotel and Residence, Kuala Lumpur, in August 2013. Considerable changes were made in the present draft before submitting it for publication in the *Kulliyah Research Bulletin*.

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verse/message" (Bukhari, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 58). The fact that this pronouncement constitutes the first hadith mentioned in Chapter on Knowledge indicates that what Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) has transmitted, and what the faithful have learnt from him, is knowledge and that they are commanded to spread the same to others. In other words, knowledge is the doorway to the fundamentals of Islam, such as *hidayah* (guidance), *tawhid* (unity of godhead) and *iman* (belief). Once a person possesses the right kind of knowledge, it may lead him/her to embrace the Islamic teachings.

If we analyse the work plan and methodology of prophets and the primordial importance and tremendous value Islam attaches to the acquisition of learning, it will be evident that knowledge was at the base of the prophethood of all messengers and that in Islam it is inevitable for performing one's duty as God's *khalifah* (vicegerent) on earth. Needless to say, the first revelation God sent to Prophet Muhammad is "iqra" (read), that is, a command to seek knowledge, and the same command has been repeated in many other Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions in various ways. Accordingly, becoming engaged in the practice of education and instruction is considered an essential act of worship and obedience to God's command. While rituals like *salah* (prayer), *sawm* (fasting), *hajj* (pilgrimage), praising and celebrating God's glory orally and similar practices are also important and sometimes seem to overshadow other critical responsibilities, the pre-eminence of the role of knowledge in Islam is undeniable.

Dignity of Scholars

As God has honoured prophets with the attribution of knowledge, He has equally increased the dignity of those who are endowed with it. Verse 58:11 of the Qur'an states that knowledgeable people have a higher status in Islam.¹ Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "The superiority of an 'alim (scholar) over an 'abid (devotee) is like the prominence of a full moon over the stars" (Tirmidhi, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 61); "The superiority of an 'alim over an 'abid is like my superiority over the lesser amongst you (in good deeds)" (Daremi, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 62). The eminence of the people of understanding in Islam is not simply for the knowledge and information they may carry, but mainly for its commendable outcome. If knowledge is compounded by good action and by laudable character, only then its possessors will be worthy of the honour Islam accords them.

An interpretation of verse 39:9² of the Qur'an may suggest that, in terms of behaviour, moral conduct, human relations and interactions and other matters of lifestyle, the people who possess knowledge are

supposed to excel those who do not. According to verse 35:28,³ one obvious corollary of knowledge is piety and God-consciousness, and the scholars are expected to be mindful of the act of servitude to God. Verse 3:18⁴ associates the people of knowledge with the testifying of articles of faith and with the attribute of justice. Needless to say, knowledgeable people are supposed to have a higher moral, ethical ground and, compared to ordinary people, shoulder greater responsibilities religiously and intellectually. Their elevated status is attached with and conditional to their superior conduct, higher merit and more impressive virtues and to the services they would render to society and to humanity as a whole.

"Scholars" Not Up To the Mark

Unfortunately, in today's world, scholars that the Qur'an and hadith celebrate are not in great number. An overwhelming number of so-called scholars are perhaps equipped with information about some facts and figures, or many of them may even carry knowledge of ethics and religion, but their conduct and moral behaviour do not satisfy the higher standard that Islam sets for the rightly-guided, true scholars. Despite all the knowledge they may possess, most of them do not seem to have developed an internally set moral compass that could function as their guide and help them distinguish what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly.

In the areas of religion and ethics, in many cases, there seems to be a clear gap between knowledge of ethics and religion and being an ethical and religious person. In this regard, Harvard professor Harry Lewis' observation may constitute a wake-up call for all of us: "Society is going to hell in a hand basket, and the great universities are going to get there first" (108). In other words, even though decadence and moral degradation has gripped the entire fabric of the social system, universities are the worst affected by this tsunami of decay or even, perhaps, are the root causes of this phenomenon.

What is more ominous is the fact that, university lecturers may not necessarily be taken as role models whom the learners can emulate. As Lewis states, "Professors are hired as scholars and teachers, not as mentors of values and ideals to the young and confused" (4). As a result, university students are not adequately grounded in moral and religious teachings and their moral crisis has perhaps reached all-time high and many seats of learning turned into demonstrable sites of moral degeneration. The youth culture and lifestyle and leisure activities that many of the students practice are complete anathema to decent people. When these students graduate, leave the university and enter the world of work and become part of the wider world, they do not contribute much to elevating and ameliorating the moral and social

conditions of people around them.

As regards universally accepted moral principles and code of ethics, we do not see much difference between university graduates and unlettered people. Many bigger crimes are being perpetrated around the world by people with impressive academic credentials. The harsh reality is that, the educated gentry do not inhabit a higher moral ground and in many cases they are worse than the non-educated. In social life, it may appear that many people without any exposure to higher education are generally more polite, humble, caring, selfless and less hypocritical. Even if we believe that people in the wider society are also not up to the mark morally or religiously, people affiliated with the great seats of learning have no greater claim on "moral and ethical armour capable of withstanding the blandishments of greed" (Meisel 9). Greed for money and status and lust for power and other materialistic ambitions seem to determine students' educational intensity, career choice and work trajectory. In most cases, students in Muslim societies, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, are exposed to alien ideas, led into a moral maze and eventually estranged from their own cultural and religious traditions. The inevitable consequence of it is identity crisis, cultural waywardness and ideological vagrancy.

God says in the Qur'an: "Where are you going?" (81:26). This stark reminder is very much relevant to the crisis in the modern education system that is largely based on a secular, atheistic philosophy and hence is not producing morally upright or righteous individuals. Many parents are ready to spend huge amount of money to send their children to renowned seats of learning, and educators are desperate to expose students to higher learning. However, if education does not make much difference in their moral or religious character, what is the point of all the hype and hysteria for learning? Perhaps, one lesson of the Qur'anic verse (81:26) mentioned above is that Muslims are supposed to reflect on current teaching and learning practices and find a remedy to the moral and religious crisis in education. Some Muslims may swim in a sea of complacency and point their finger at the West for this wholesale degradation, but Taha J. al Alwani says that Muslims are "now full partners in the worldwide crisis" (87). So Muslims are also responsible for this education crisis, and they should take an equal or greater role in addressing the issue.

Remedy

The most dominant trend around the world to address the crisis in education is the faith and learning integration approach. It is felt across religious spectrums that there is a need to integrate education and religious belief and commitment. Pickthall argues for the abolition of

the rift between religious and secular education. He maintains, "In Islam, there are no such terms as secular and religious, for true religion includes the whole sphere of man's activities" (9). He adduces that, in the past masjid was the centre of educational activities, and subjects like "chemistry and physics, botany, medicine and astronomy" were taught at masjid which "welcomed to its precincts all the knowledge of the age from every quarter" (9). If this model can be revived especially in Muslim societies, education will come under the purview of religious ethos again and the graduates will hopefully not isolate learning from its social and religious contexts, and from their moral and religious obligations.

Like other "Islamisation of knowledge"⁵ scholars, Alwani locates the remedy to the crisis in education in the *tawhidi* episteme that espouses a link between education and the Creator, the "One and Unique, the Originator of all things and their Provider" (84). Alwani argues that the *tawhidi* framework of education would "result in the production of proper, discerning, and purposeful knowledge" (84). He divides education into two forms of reading – revelation and real-existential – and argues that the main reason for the intellectual crisis in the present era is the bifurcation between these two readings. In fact, the crux of the Islamisation of knowledge undertaking is to bring together the readings of revelation and real-existential.

The most important aspects of integration of faith and learning are teacher-student dynamic and discipline (Lessard-Clouston 116). While in the Islamisation of knowledge discourse, the latter is given some attention, the former is still neglected. The teacher-student dynamic is mainly concerned with the role of the teacher in an educational setting. The teacher has the responsibility not only to transmit to students what is there in the texts or to provide them with facts and figures. S/he has a responsibility to look after the moral health of students as well, which Mohd. Kamal Hassan regards as "Islamicisation of the Self" that can be delivered through "Jihād al-Nafs (striving against the base desires) and Tathir al-Qalb (purification of the Heart)" (56). If this programme of fighting against the base desires and purifying the hearts of students is not undertaken by the teacher in the classroom setting and beyond, s/he may end up producing graduates who, as the Qur'an states, will know some outward facts of this life but will be heedless about life hereafter and about associated obligations (30:6-7).⁶ A stringent analysis of the Qur'anic statement contained in verses 30:6-7 may suggest that people who have knowledge of only this world (real-existential) and are forgetful of the life hereafter, are not true scholars. In other words, if lecturers are providing students with mere facts and figures about the corporeal world, they are not engaged in

producing scholars in the Qur'anic sense of the term. In order for teachers and lecturers to produce morally and religiously grounded students, they should not avoid the responsibility of instilling moral and religious values as well as the right understanding of human nature and purpose of life in them.

The concept of *ta'leem* (teaching) in its various derivatives has been associated with God in the Qur'an about twenty times. For example, verses 96:4-5⁷ say that God taught human beings through the pen and taught them what they did not know, and verses 55:1-2⁸ state that He taught humans the Qur'an and regards this act of teaching as a manifestation of His mercy upon them. Prophet Muhammad clearly identifies himself as a teacher, as his famous statement – "I have been sent as a teacher" (Daremi, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 69) – amply suggests. It is important to note that, as verses 2:129 and 2:151⁹ of the Qur'an indicate, one important work plan of the Prophet as a teacher is "purification" which is also associated with God the Supreme Teacher: "God purifies whom He pleases" (4:49).

So if Muslim teachers and lecturers want to emulate the work plan of God and His Prophet concerning the grand calling of teaching, they must take this task of moral purification seriously. Tazkiyah al-Nafs or the purification of the soul involves moulding the praiseworthy character of students and help them remove all destructive and blameworthy traits from their personalities. If teachers stop their professional duty by simply teaching the course contents to their students and do not guide them to become better human beings, then they may swerve from the Islamic pedagogical practices and may not be able to prepare the future generations who will know and realise themselves and become the agents of change.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown how the absence of moral and religious values in education has undermined the noble calling of teaching and learning. Contemporary education does not seem to have made comprehensive moral and ethical impact on its recipients. It is high time to reflect on this grave phenomenon and take appropriate measures so that all our energy and efforts employed in educational activities do not go in vain.

In the Islamisation of knowledge movement, emphasis is given to Islamising the content of various disciplines. However, I argue that an equal importance should be laid on the teacher-student dynamic. Teachers should be actively involved in the purification of the hearts of their students and in moulding their characters. In this regards, Syed Ali Ashraf says: "The teacher has to train the sensibility of students in such a manner that students do not succumb to propaganda and always evaluate the genuineness of a human condition with

reference to the absolute norm of human conduct" (54). Our students are exposed to many untoward influences ("propaganda") both from the real and virtual worlds, so as teachers and lecturers we have a duty to guide them, with our knowledge and experience, to the right path and protect them from all immoral and irreligious temptations and predators; only then they will be able to soar really high both in knowledge and character.

Endnotes

- ¹ Verse 58:11 states: "Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who have been given knowledge, by degrees."
- ² "Say: Are those who know and those who do not know equal, the same?" (39:9).
- ³ "Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge" (35:28).
- ⁴ "There is no god but He: That is the witness of God, His angels, and those endued with knowledge, standing firm on justice. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Power, the Wise" (3:18).
- ⁵ This term refers to an intellectual undertaking that seeks to look at human knowledge from Islamic perspectives. However, the usage of the term itself is debatable.
- ⁶ The Qur'an states: "... most people do not know. They know the outward of this world's life, but of the hereafter they are absolutely heedless" (30:6-7).
- ⁷ "[God] Who taught by the pen, He taught human which they did not know" (96:4-5).
- ⁸ "The Most Merciful [God] taught the Qur'an" (55:1-2).
- ⁹ "Our Lord! and raise up in them a Messenger from among them who shall recite to them Your communications and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them; surely You art the Mighty, the Wise" (2:129); "Even as We have sent among you a Messenger from among you who recites to you Our communications and purifies you and teaches you the Book and the wisdom and teaches you that which you did not know" (2:151).

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