

# TRADITIONAL MORALITY AND THE DEPICTION OF NON-MUSLIMS IN ISLAMIC STUDIES AN ANALYTICAL ACCOUNT

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**Abstract:** *This conceptual paper aims to highlight the traditional morality and the conventional depiction of non-Muslims in the Islamic Studies rhetoric and its influence in shaping stereotypes on the “Other”. A Literature review was conducted via a reflective analysis in which ideas grouping was made and recommendations were deduced. The findings have revealed that the Islamic studies rhetoric is still conventional. It emphasizes on religious rituals and little effort was put in fostering values of understanding and co-existing with the “Other”. It is expected that the results of this study will help in clarifying the need for a language of tolerance and moderation to be adopted in addressing the “other” (non-Muslims and non-Sunni) in order to reduce the gap between religions, and to prepare young Muslims living and working in harmony with humanity at large.*

**Keywords:** Islamic Studies, Rhetoric, Other, Non-Muslims, Co-existence, Tolerance, Moderation, & Traditional Morality

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## 1. Introduction

Educationalists, intellectuals, politicians and other segments of the society in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries continue to debate the issue of extremism and its association with the Islamic faith. In fact, the fear of Islam and Muslims, or what is presently termed as ‘Islamophobia’ has become a real issue in Europe and North America ([Runnymede Trust Report, 1997](#)). Although there is a little evidence of any connection between the traditional Muslim schools and extremism, many people in the West believe that traditional Muslim educational systems, including some of its institutions -*madrasas* in particular- have effectively been grounds for radicalism. They also hold that curriculum in many Muslim countries constitutes fertile abodes for extreme indoctrination, and has the potential to breed terrorism. Many Muslim educationists however, argue that displaying a positive model of Islamic school learning that is progressive and engaging would be the best rebuttal of such a claim. It is chief in this model they maintain to mirror the true universal values that Islamic authentic texts invited people for, regardless of their creed, race and language. It is also important to prove wrong those skeptics who claim that Muslims are inherently hostile to universal values such as freedom, tolerance and peace, because displaying the opposite in our depiction of the ‘Other’ in our practices and culture represents an unwarranted surrender to

fundamentalist arguments. When the Cultural theorist Edward W. Said (1935 – 2003) coined the ‘Otherness’ he referred to minority groups who are different from the rest. However, the sociological usage of the “Other” is usually in reference to the non-members or non-adherents to any social, political, religious, racial or cultural groups. When a person identifies the Other he in fact draws a distinct boundary with those who have differences with the self.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Current Status of Islamic Studies

There is no doubt that some textbooks utilized in some Islamic schools, and approaches adopted by some teachers towards some of the topics they discuss with their students in the classrooms, especially in the classes of theology, exegesis, and history, may reflect forms of discrimination and intolerance towards the ‘other’. Hence, continuous reviews of teaching material -textbooks in particular- and good training programs for teachers in Islamic schools are indispensable measures to ensure that the young Muslim generations will grow up in a healthy environment, and will exercise their roles later on in building the *ummah*, sustaining the religion, and accepting their positions as global citizens who contribute to humanity.

As far as the Islamic education is concerned, it enjoyed a long and rich intellectual tradition across the Islamic history. From the early days of the message, Islamic education was the focus of the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions, then caliphs and rulers, and the Muslim public in general. At the beginning, the main objective was to make the Qur’an teachings more accessible to the Muslim community, later it developed to be a comprehensive discipline where all useful knowledge is sought and integrated in its framework.

For a number of endogenous and exogenous dynamics, the model of medieval Islamic education, *madrasah* in particular flourished tremendously. One of them was the puritanical moral character which considered teaching and learning as a noble action that merits social veneration in this life and divine’s recompense in the other. As such, people in Mosques, private homes, shops, castles, bookshops, tents, or even out in the open, rushed upon disseminating and consuming knowledge. It was during most of the medieval period that Muslims commended political and intellectual dominancy over the world.

However, the new conditions which began to accumulate in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC led to an extreme tide of regression in the Islamic intellectual life, and ultimately Muslims ceased to produce any kind of useful knowledge. Simultaneously, a wave of rational, philosophical, educational, scientific, industrial and pragmatic transformations was happening in Europe. The people there shook off the dust of decades of clergy dogmatic dominance, and engaged in intensive scientific revolution which ultimately reinstated them to a supreme leading role. The industrial revolution which culminated the European renaissance and enlightenment demanded additional natural resources, raw materials and new markets for the manufactured goods. Europeans forced an imperial concessions of Asian and African territories and trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and continued well into the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, supported by advanced weaponry.

Due to the Western colonization of the Muslim world and the introduction of the Western educational system, post-independence governments in the majority of Islamic countries have reduced Islamic education to an orphan subject in the school time table which takes different labeling: Islamic studies, Islamic sciences, Islamic education and even Qur’anic sciences. This subject is mainly concerned with teaching the Islamic rituals (*ibadat*), which are

normally taught in a form of indoctrination. Private and government sector schools in most Muslim countries make Islamic Studies a compulsory subject for all Muslim students from elementary up to secondary school level. Usually, this subject is responsible for teaching students the Islamic faith (*aqidah*), law (*fiqh*) and the main traits of the Islamic identity. In brief, it is responsible for forming students' views regarding themselves, their relationship with God, fellow Muslim brothers and their views about non-Muslims as well. Islamic studies textbooks<sup>1</sup> are an essential component of the teaching and learning process. They, like other disciplines are the most effective way of presenting materials. Clearly, Islamic studies textbooks are not just pedagogical instruments—they are intensely political documents whose content reflects a given vision of a people, their history and position in the world, and their values and aspirations. (Farrell, J.P. and Tanner, D., 2002). However, it seems that despite the advancements of educational technologies which rendered schooling market much more competitive, the task of Islamic studies textbooks as the second most important element in the Islamic Studies classroom after the teacher has never been more urgent. Recent studies highlighted several problems related to the Islamic Studies textbooks. (Mustafa, Z. and Salim, H., 2012). In most of Muslim countries<sup>2</sup>, Islamic studies textbooks are teacher centered, focusing on quantity and memorization of facts, rather than the higher qualities of reflection, discussion, students' involvement, experiential discovery and life –long skills. Besides, the rise of Islamophobia<sup>3</sup> is intensely deployed to mobilize the so called modern liberal world against Islam and any rhetoric related to it. One of the many things which came under a bitter criticism are the Islamic Studies textbooks with the pretext that these textbooks were written in a conventional traditional fashion where civic values such as coexistence, human rights, freedom, tolerance and moderation are totally ignored and learners are manipulated in a way that blinds them to recognize the existence of the Other. In the wake of September 11, 2001 events<sup>4</sup> and after Paris terrorist attacks<sup>5</sup>, the debate about Islam and terrorism re-emerged strongly in public forums, in media and on social media. The main call in those debates was about who fed the extreme interpretations of Islam, and how to uproot these interpretations and drain its sources. Islamic schools and their curriculum were *tête de liste*. Many thoughtful people in the west overtly held that curriculum of Islamic studies in a number of Muslim countries was actually fostering the intolerance and animosity that helped to lead to the murderous attacks against the west. (Shea, N. and Al-Ahmed, A., 2006). Others called for extensive reforms of Islamic Studies curriculum and indoctrinating students with concepts of love, tolerance and moderation, especially in relation to non-Muslims (Tan, C. ed., 2014). Such shift, they claim could help in the efforts of transforming Muslim students from natural antagonists to the modern culture to global and multiculturalist citizens who contribute to the global community. To ensure coexistence, tolerance, harmony and to combat all potential forms of extremism, antagonism, and violence among a plural, multi-racial, religious, and lingual world population. The far reaching effects of globalization, virtual borderlessness, fast

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<sup>1</sup> A textbook is a manual of instruction in any branch of study.

<sup>2</sup> Singapore, though a non-Muslim majority country has developed a different model called Curriculum Development Project. The project involves producing the syllabi, textbooks and material for the madrasahs in Singapore, for 12 years of education from primary 1 to pre-university 2. The textbooks adopted student centered pedagogies such as discussion, reflection and project work. See, Tan, C.H.P. and Abbas, D., 2009. The 'Teach Less, Learn More' Initiative in Singapore: New Pedagogies for Islamic Religious Schools?.

<sup>4</sup> The September 11 attacks (also referred to as 9/11) were a series of four coordinated [terrorist attacks](#) against the United States. The perpetrators [killed 2,977, injured over 6,000 others](#), and caused at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage.

<sup>5</sup> A series of coordinated [terrorist attacks](#) that took place on 13 November 2015 in France, and claimed the lives of 130 people.

rising of religious extremism, and the tendency of militant groups in many parts of the Muslim world to target and recruit young Muslim learners, rendered the introduction and enactment of values of moderation, tolerance and co-existence is deemed crucial.

## 2.2 Why Civic Values in Islamic Studies?

Education is one of the most important determinants which shape patterns of values. In turn, values help in developing an integrated personality which is one of the objectives of the Islamic Education. Indeed, the functions and objectives of education cannot be isolated from values, because education in its true sense is a value process; and values should formulate the educational act and guide it.

Among the Islamic set of values, the paramount qualities of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and tolerance (*tasamuh*) occupy a big part in the life of Muslim individuals. Moderation in its true Islamic sense means the “movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives” (Schwedler, 2006) Tolerance however could be defined as “putting up with without interference” (Maykel Verkuyten and Luuk Slooter, 2007). Upholding these values in thought and action is regarded as a fundamental part of one's belief and devotion. There is hardly any disagreement among experts in education that the realization of values of moderation and tolerance for good citizenship and for more tolerant trends in perceiving Others (non-Muslims) ought to be one major goal in every system of education in every state, because both can immensely contribute to the integration, harmony and cohesion of the individuals, and arm them with the ability to resist deviant values. Although some strongly believe that in Islam, seeing oneself as superior to others is religiously forbidden, many believe that Muslims look down at non-Muslims and always connect them with immorality and religious incorrectness. A view that is repeatedly manifested in Islamic Studies rhetoric and also upheld by the general public. According to a study on how Muslims and Westerners view each other, It was found that the feeling of enmity and mistrust is reciprocal. It was found that “Muslims and Westerners offer mixed views of each other. Majorities in Britain, France, Russia and the U.S. express favorable views of Muslims, but opinions are divided in Germany and negative in Spain. Similarly, Muslims in Lebanon, Jordan and Indonesia have positive opinions of Christians, while views are overwhelmingly unfavorable in Turkey and Pakistan; attitudes toward Jews are uniformly negative across the Muslim world.” (Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes and Trends Report, 2011). In fact, many accuse Islam of being the culprit behind this feeling of enmity especially those who are thinking in the spirit of *al-Wala wal-Bara*<sup>1</sup>, in which Muslims are asked to be compassionate with one another but ruthless to non-Muslims (infidels). Bernard Lewis has explained that “Islam is still the ultimate criterion of group identity and loyalty. It is Islam that distinguishes between self and other, between insider and outsider, between brother and stranger ... the ultimate definition of the other, the alien outsider and presumptive enemy, has been the *kafir* [infidel].” pp. 4-5. On the other side many Muslims are calling for a more peaceful and tolerant interpretation and understanding of Islam and the think the change can actually start at the level of early education through values education or more specifically Islamic Studies. Incorporating values of tolerance, moderation and co-existence are crucially needed. According to the Polish-American social psychologist Milton Rokeach (1973, p.5) a value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence. Mukhtar Noureldin Osman (2013) defined values as certain qualities and beliefs that are shared within a specific culture or group of people. These traits can be religious, economic or political. The British sociologist Peter Worsley (1997) considers values as

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<sup>1</sup> Which literally means "loyalty and disavowal", which signifies loving and hating for the sake of Allah.

general conception of “the good” ideas about the kind of ends that people should pursue throughout their lives and throughout the many different activities in which they engage”. Among the categories listed by scholars, there are moral, aesthetic, intellectual, religious, economic, political, legal, and etiquette values. The process of acquiring values can be divided into two types, an informal one which begins from the moment parents leave the hospital with their new born, and continues throughout until they reach adulthood. The second is more professional and is mainly handled by institutions of learning. Teachers are “permanently involved in values education... sometimes ... without even realizing that they are teaching values ...” (Kohlberg & Turiel in PORTELE, p. 7) However, values as Wiel Veugelers (2008) argues can be embedded in educational practices, in curriculum materials and in discourses in schools.

Many contemporary studies stressed on the importance of rehabilitating values education and re-including them in the curriculum at all levels (Gabriele Harecker, 2012). They maintained that schools must become knowledge and assessment factory more than apple-sorting, for students are more than disincarnate minds, and so are teachers (B.V. Hill, 1991 as cited in Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter. (2006).

As religious values specific to each religious group will not be able to bring about cohesion and unity, education experts do not offer a clear-cut answer to the question of which values must be included in the curriculum in a multi religious, lingual and ethnic society. Much has been written on religion, race, ethnicity, language and education. For instance, in the United States of America autonomy and independence are often highly valued. However, in China, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, interpersonal harmony, relational hierarchy and traditional conservatism are prevalent values. (Yang, L. (2015). Generally, experts in theories of the curriculum offered views on what could be called moral curriculum. They identified a number of goals ought to be attained by the curriculum, which can be summarized as follows:

- a. Imparting to students some desirable characteristics and personal habits, such as trust, honesty, cooperation and helping others.
- b. Reinforcing values relating to society and the history of the nation, such as belongingness, commitment, sacrifice, valuation of work, and appreciation of the heritage and culture of the society.
- c. Establishing universal values, such as respect for human rights, rejecting the idea of occupation, cooperation, dialogue, tolerance, moderation, and appreciation of the international principles ratified by nations.

Except for few, the homogeneous nature of social fabric in most countries of the Muslim world, often eases for educationists to select a list of core values that should be either taught or imbedded in the curriculum. For instance, in Malaysia with its colorful and diversified social structure constitutes a rarity in the sense that a Malay majority Muslim ethnic and lingual group dominates a sizable non-Malay and non-Muslim minority. The purpose of school as a social agent to promote social cohesion remains one of the primary purposes of educational policies in Malaysia (Haniza, 2014). To achieve that, reformulating the educational system is needed, and national schools must be truly national in their syllabus and in their ethnic composition of pupils and teachers. In the case of Malaysia, various educational attempts initiated by the government to bring Malaysian races together, such as the introduction of vision and integrated schools did not receive positive response from some components of the Malaysian society, and ethnic lines and segregation are still rampant (Raman and Sua, 2010: 124). Some critics claim that Malaysian schools through the official

and hidden curriculum reinforce uncritical political loyalty of citizens to the state (Haniza, 2014). Thus, reforming all sorts of character building school subjects became an immediate task that needs to be undertaken by all educationists and all those who are concerned with education in general and Islamic education in particular. Another challenge faced by contemporary Islamic education as a system and Islamic Studies as a school subject is the persistence of the dual systems of education in many Muslim countries, one that is mainly secular and sponsored by the state, and the other is religious and run primarily by the private sector. In the syllabi of the traditionalist religious system, religion is depicted as an overarching epistemological framework within which all other forms of knowledge are subsumed (Thobani, 2007). Religion in the state and private schools is presented as one discipline among a range of others. Between these two extremes lie other modes that approach Islam from interdisciplinary or ancillary perspectives. Many are calling to review and re-design the Islamic Studies content. A call which seems legitimate, however the foreign (non-Islamic) interference in the shaping, running, and reviewing curriculum of Islamic institutions of learning is one of the most controversial external challenges that Islamic education is constantly facing, especially after the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (Amr Abdalla.et.al., 2006). Many think that attempts to radically change the curricula, exposing the Muslim identity and inserting foreign values are among the threats that menaced the very core of Muslim personality. Globalization, which many like to define as a process of international integration arising from the interchange of [world views](#), products, ideas, and other aspects of [culture](#) (Nasser Redn Thamer Al Motairi, & Abdul Rahman Zaki, 2013) is another inevitable external challenge facing Islamic education, because underneath what seems to be an innocent interchange of human achievements are many forms of supremacy and control exercised by dominant post-colonial forces over the cultures and identities of other people. This control is reflected in education through the imposition of certain models and values. However, this does not negate the fact that Islamic Education in general and Islamic Studies in particular are lacking behind compared to contemporary Western education in general and subjects dedicated to character building and morality in particular. Therefore, in any attempt to find remedies, it is crucial to identify the problems and the challenges facing Islamic education and prevent it from being a modern, progressive educational system that can help students learn while preserving their Islamic identity and at the same time to interact positively with the world around them.

The following table contains a brief comparison between the core educational and pedagogical values between Islamic Education and Western Education. This table was prepared based on the general findings from the literature.

**Table 1: A Binary View Of Islamic And Western Educational And Pedagogic Values**

<b>Values</b>	<b>Western ,Liberal Education</b>	<b>Islamic Education</b>
1. Metaphysical & Ontological focus/centralization	Human-centered	God-centered
2. Pedagogic leadership	Learner-led	Teacher/text-led
3. Freedom vs Submission	Freedom, autonomy	Obedience, reverence
4. Thinking vs certainty	Skepticism, rationality, criticality	Certainty, trust, piety, fidelity

5. Individualism vs collectivism	Individualistic, personal fulfilment	Collectivist/religious fellowship ( <i>ummah</i> ) and discipleship
6. Basis of knowledge	Free inquiry-based knowledge Materialistic, market-driven, dualist secularism	Revelation, tradition-based knowledge Spiritual, moral, holistic
7. Modes of learning	Discovery, questioning	Instruction, memorization, transmission, indoctrination
8. Timely vs timeless	Progressive/linear time perception	Retrospective, cyclical and apocalyptic time perception
9. Learning's character	Literate, organized, intellectual, scientific	Oral/aural, story-shaped nurture, unscientific
10. Ideology	Democratic, open	Authoritarian, inward-looking
11. tangible vs intangible	Measured, assessed, outcomes-based	Informal, repetitive, unmeasurable
12. Pro- social vs anti-social	Civic, inclusive	Intolerant to religious, gender, cultural difference, no interest in the study of other faith traditions or worldviews
13. Objective vs subjective	Interpretative plurality, relativity of values and truth	Essentialist conformity, monolithic perception of values and truth & no role for personal interpretation
14. Educational Attainment for genders	Gender equality	Gender inequality
15. Educational ends	Focused on 'this' world	This world seen as preparation for the 'next' world
16. Teacher's role	Teachers seen as knowledgeable guides and co-learners	Teachers revered as repositories of knowledge

### 3. Methodology

#### Review Methods

This paper presents a reading of the literature explaining the nature of morality disseminated via the Islamic Studies school subject in order to highlight the type of morality Muslim students are exposed to and its efficacy in creating tolerant and intolerant trends among the learners that shapes their perception towards the Other (non-Muslims). A range of definitional understandings of Islamic studies were identified. Besides this paper presents a critical account of how this school subject is delivered to students and what needs to be done to improve the syllabus by incorporating up to date pro-social civic values and also to engage students in interactive learning in which critical thinking is incorporated and new understanding are created. In relation to each element a synthesis and summary of the views of scholars were highlighted besides the results of related studies were also used to reinforce and strengthen the discussion. For this purpose, a range of internationally academic sources, including research articles, books & reports were utilized.

#### 4. Findings and Recommendations for Improvement

- a. The 21<sup>st</sup> century's education is multifaceted. Globalization's effects, the technological rapid change, social change and its impact on how social groups adjust themselves are all reasons to push man to think about how education should be performed via which mediums and with what intended objectives. A generation ago, Teachers could expect that what they taught would last their students a lifetime. Today, because of rapid economic and social changes, schools have to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, technologies that have not yet been invented and problems that we don't yet know will rise." (Andreas Schleicher 2013). Education should embed today's necessities and tomorrow's prospects. Religious education in general and Islamic education in particular is in a great need for an over whole rechecking and evaluation in order to be able to overcome its shortcomings and cater for contemporary needs.
- b. 21<sup>st</sup> century education is tainted with an increased focus on social justice (Brooks, 2009), therefore adopting any exclusionary rhetoric would be a futile effort. Islamic education should incorporate pro-social values such as cooperation, moderation, tolerance, love, co-existence, empathy, understanding and accepting the Other who is different. In Islamic education in general and Islamic studies syllabus in particular, the Other in general and the West in particular are usually associated with a variety of social ills, immorality and religious incorrectness. A trend that may create intolerant trends among learners and also to nurture an atmosphere of skepticism and enmity especially with the claim of the conspiracy theory's advocates who always portray Muslims as being under constant threat and thus they need to get ready to fight back. A sentiment which might be exploited by extremists. 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic education should emphasize on equipping learners with thinking tools that enable them to think for themselves and understand clearly the objectives of their lives as God's vicegerents who always call for the well-being of all the human race.
- c. Islamic education should not be done just for the sake of it. Its utility should be measured by its ability to help students to overcome all contradictions they face while dealing with their daily life matters which could be very confusing. Besides its ability to offer explanation to contemporary educational issues based on a sound and useful learning techniques rather than the provision of information that belongs to history books and does not relate to contemporary issues. There is a need to put its goals in place, both for short



term and for long term. Teachers and parents need to decide what they want children to attain while schooling under the umbrella of Islamic Education.

- d. The current syllabus used for Islamic studies across Muslim countries are too basic. They in fact concentrate on providing religious information. There is a crucial need for these syllabus to be broaden up, because contemporary education shouldn't be preoccupied by how much knowledge students must attain but how students deal with this knowledge in other words "learning how to learn". Dewey (1991) has asserted that, neither traditional moral norms nor traditional philosophical ethics were up to the task of coping with the problems raised by the overwhelming dramatic social transformations in modern democratic societies because traditional morality was adapted to certain social and educational needs that are not valid in the contemporary world. There is no doubt that teaching critical thinking has become crucial nowadays because of the rapid development humanity is witnessing in all aspects of life. Critical thinking helps students, particularly in moral education to avoid ineffective, conventional and indoctrinating inputs of morality. Hence, new syllabus should be designed for a more active role for students to play in the learning process. Teachers shall adopt more student-centered than teacher-centered approach. (Paul, R. W., 1992).
- e. In order to shift Muslim students from natural antagonists to the modern culture to global and multiculturalist citizens who contribute to the global community, teaching the Islamic rituals (*ibadat*) shouldn't be regarded as teaching Islam. Islam cannot be taught without a deeper understanding of its philosophical foundations and cultural history. The syllabus has to be revised and reconstructed. Life based topics should be added as they are crucial for young learners.
- f. Due to many internal and external challenges, it is incumbent upon Muslims in general and educationists in particular to engage in a soul searching process, in which the learning experience at all levels is candidly securitized. This includes a comprehensive review of curriculum content (teachers training, methods of teaching, teaching material, assessment and evaluation to name some. Within this spectrum of review and reform this research is located.
- g. There is a need to upgrade methods of teaching. Exam oriented teaching in which students are forced to memorize is a bare method in a time where people are trying to foster 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as critical and creative thinking and problem solving. Therefore, teachers should be trained to teach using up to date methods and not being confined to old conventional methods. A trend that was observed in teaching and learning in an oriental context in general. Rosnani Hashim et.,al (2014), stated that "Like many other educational institutions across the globe, Malaysian schools are no exception to the teaching and learning methods that offer students little or no opportunities to become critical and creative thinkers, and/or active partners in producing knowledge."

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it is concluded that there is a need to look into how Islamic Education is applied and specifically how Islamic studies syllabus are designed. It is fundamental that Muslim students are taught Islamic values valid for the 21<sup>st</sup> century combined with civic values to enable them not only to become good ummah members but global citizens who are able to work and contribute to the global community without being expelled or alienated.

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