Islamic Curriculum: Philosophical Foundations and Historical Practices

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Summary

There is a close relationship between the Islamic conceptualization of curriculum and the nature of the Islamic faith. An Islamic curriculum can be defined as an integrated system of constant divine facts, criteria and values, as well as changing human experiences and items of learning and skills which an Islamic academic offers to learners therein in order to enable them to attain the degree of perfection for which Allah has prepared for them. The Islamic curriculum transcends the limited space of pure religious subjects to embody every useful knowledge. Across the Islamic history one can notice that the Islamic curruculum has developed in three main stages; a. Stage of infancy and standardization coeval of prophet Muhammad message and his first four successors, b. Stage of diversity in the post classical era (661 AD to 1450 AD which could be divided into pre-madrasa and madrasa eras, c. Stage of regression and reform which stretches from the tenth century untill the present time. During this stage a number of historical, cultural, social and political contributed to the decline of the Islamic curriculum and diminished its appeal. Despite current efforts to revive the Islamic curriculum, challenging issues like dualism, rigidity, passivity, irrelevancy and social alienation continue to plague this model.

Keywords

Islamic Curriculum, Education, *madrasa*, *Halaqah*, *shaikh*, pedagody

Introduction

Education in Islam is not conceivable without the religion. Its main aim is to preserve the foundations of the faith, traditions and way of life. The launching of Islamic education with *da'wa*[1] in the very early stage of Islam's advent, which is in essence to spread the principles of faith and gain god's favor by living according to his commands in this world and preparing for the day after, explains the importance of education for the survival of the faith itself. "Education was considered a ministry within Islam and those who entered it did so out of dedication and a genuine interest in the life of the mind."[2]

 It is vital for any person dealing with Islamic education to distinguish between the original educational principles, which are deeply rooted in god's words as revealed in the Qur'an and the canonical words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad, and the Islamic educational theory which is the sum total of views and practical experiences that Muslim thinkers, jurists, educationists and others offered along the Islamic history. Such distinction helps in identifying the principal and constant aims of education in Islam as reported in the Qur'an and stressed upon by prophetic tradition. This aim is none but the worship of god in all that the individual thinks, learns, and executes.

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[1] *da'wa* means the effort of preaching the Islamic faith on earth.

[2] Stanton Michael Charles, *Higher learning in Islam: The Classical Period A.D 700-1300* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1990), 33

Islamic Education: Concept, Foundations and Objectives

In Islam, education is an integral preparation of individuals. Like its predecessors Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a "literate" religion in the sense of having holy texts which play a central role in the maintenance of and instruction in the faith.[3] Among the ideals of education in Islam as embodied in its two sacred sources i.e. Qur'an and prophetic traditions, is to produce a good, dutiful, and wholesome man in the physical, spiritual and mental aspects, within a clear and simple frame work that begins with the individual and ends with the entire human society. It also starts from this life and eventually leads to the hereafter.[4] The pursuer of knowledge accordingly strives for the good will of god, the future life, the removal of ignorance, the conservation of the religion and the survival of Islam, for the survival of Islam depends on knowledge. The true aim of education in Islam then is:

> To produce men who have faith as well as knowledge, the one sustaining the
> other. Islam does not think that the pursuit of knowledge by itself, without
> reference to the spiritual goal that man must try to attain, can do humanity much
> good. Knowledge divorced from faith is not only partial knowledge; it can even
> be described as a kind of new ignorance.[5]

Laid down by revealed truth, this aim of Islamic education has always reflected objective quality that does not vary according to individual opinion or experience.[6]

In order to realize such an ultimate goal, Islam values prized knowledge and learning. The first word uttered by angel Jibril (Gabriel) was '*iqra*'! (lit. "Recite" or "Read"). The full verse made journey in search of knowledge an incumbent assignment upon every believer, including the prophet of Islam himself to whom the text addressed: {*Proclaim (or Read) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created*} (96: 1)

Eventually, the general aims of Islamic education could be summarized in the following:

1. To realize individual development through a positive guidance of the child which helps him to grow into a good adult, who:
   a. Accepts the obligations of his glorious position as *'abdullah* (servant of god) and *khalifah* (viceroy) on earth. To reinforce this objective, *shari'a*[7] stresses that every individual must have god in mind and only god when he performs any kind of action, otherwise he will not get his recompense.[8]
   b. Seeks to reflect in his actions the divine attributes such as *hikmah* (wisdom) and *'adl* (justice)
   c. Strives for the balanced growth of the integrated personality made up of the heart, the spirit, the intellect and rational, self-feelings, and the body senses.
   d. Allows the entirety of his life to be governed by Islamic principles so that whatever he does, however mundane, becomes an act of worship.
2. To realize moral and social attainment: The notion of community in Islam is broader than in any other faith. It extends from the diminutive body of the family

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[3] Wagner, D. & Lotfl, A. (2009). Learning to read by 'rote'. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1983(42), pp. 111-121. Retrieved 29 Aug. 2017, from doi:10.1515/ijsl.1983.42.111

[4] See, Tahraoui Ramdane, *Education and Politics: A Comparative Inquiry of the Fatimids and the Ayyubids in Middle age Egypt*.

[5] S. S. Husain and S. A. Ashraf. Crisis in Muslim Education (Islamic education series) Hodder and Stoughton, King Abdulaziz University. First published 1979. Jeddah. Chapter 2. P 38

[6] Halstead, M. (2004). An Islamic concept of education. *Comparative education*, *40*(4), 517-529.

[7] *shari'a* in Arabic means "the way", technically however, it refers to wide range of moral principles interpreted by jurists. They are drawn from the Quran and the tradition of prophet Muhammad.

[8] See, the prophetic tradition, "Verily the deeds will be counted according to the intention of the doer."

to the great mass of the *ummah*[9]. Equality of all member believers in the eyes of *shari'a* guarantees its continous bonds and survival.

The social and moral dimension of education in Islam is eventually a matter of coming to understand and learning to follow the divine law, which contains not only universal moral principles such as equality among people, justice and charity, but also detailed instructions relating to every aspect of human life. The *shari'a* integrates political, social and economic life as well as individual life into a single religious world view.

Islamic Curriculum: Meaning and Objectives

To have a better understanding of the Islamic curriculum, it is instrumental to depart from its western mutable meaning which involves "…over 120 definitions of the term"[10]. The Islamic curriculum has a broader meaning than the academic programmes which involve teaching, learning, research and assessment. In fact, there is a close relationship between the Islamic conceptualization of curriculum and the nature of the Islamic faith. In Islam, activities of the faithful "come under the exigencies of the *sharī'ah* because, without them, lives of Muslims cannot be straightened in a good order."[11] This is echoed by Bernard Lewis "In this society the distinction between secular and religious is unknown in law, in jurisdiction or in authority."[12]

Thus, an Islamic curriculum can be defined as an integrated system of constant divine facts, criteria and values as well as changing human experiences, items of learning and skills which an Islamic academic offers to learners therein in order to enable them to attain the degree of perfection for which Allah has prepared for them. Thereby, they will be able to positively and effectively fulfil the requirement of vicegerency on this earth by its development and by promoting life on its surface as wanted by Allah.[13]

The Islamic educational curriculum is monotheistic, integrated in its constituents, divine in terms of source and aim, complete in which it does not accept any spare parts from outside, and distinct in which it does not tolerate importing of any principle, interpretation or information related to the faith or foundations of the religion from any foreign source. In contrast to the strict stance in matters related to the faith –considered sacred and absolute-, the Islamic curriculum appears flexible and receptive to foreign approaches in matters related to the betterment of life. Moreover, the Islamic curriculum is comprehensive which deals with total facts of existence like divinity, servitude and the universe. Conceptually, it is not confined within the limits of citizenship; in contrast, it addresses humanity at large and carries constants that aim at safeguarding man and society from disintegration and collapse.

As far as the learner is concerned, casting balance between his spiritual, material and social needs is mandatory.[14] While modern secular curriculum takes primarily into account the exegies of the labour market and looks at the individual as a human capital and a work force, the Islamic curriculum looks at man as an *amanah* (trust) that should be taken care of in all aspects, especially on the spiritual level. These elements address all changes that normally

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[9] *ummah* means the community of believers.

[10] Colin J. Marsh, Key Concepts for Understanding Curriculum. 4 th edn, Routledge: New York, 2009, P 4

[11] Ghazi Enayah, *Usūl al-Infāq al-'Ām fi al-Fikr al-Māli al-Islami: Dirāsah Muqāranah* [Principles of General Spending in the Islamic Financial Thought: Comparative Study] (Beirut: Dār Al-Jīl, 1st edn, 1989), 25

[12] Lewis Bernard, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985), 21

[13] Ali Ahmed Madkour, (The Concept of Islamic Educational Curriculum) in The Education Conference Book: Planning, Implementation Recommendations and abstracts of Presented Papers. A Conference on Towards the Construction of A Contemporary Islamic Educational Theory, eds. Fathi Malkawi and Hussein Abdul Fattah (Amman, Jordan 1992, International Institute of Islamic Thought), 131

[14] See, Ahmed Fuad al-Ahwani, Al-Tarbiyah fi al-Islam (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif)

occur in a Muslim individual's growth. In fact, setting goals and objectives in the Islamic curriculum helps in designing an appropriate criteria for content, experiences, teaching methods and instruments and a successful evaluation after that. This is a process which brings the individual learner to the goal of Islamic education that is happiness in this world and in the hereafter.

Taking this into consideration, Islamic curriculum is still looked upon as godly inspired. Ali Ahmed Madkour argues that an "Islamic curriculum is a divine curriculum or plan with regard to source and aim. It eminates from the Islamic conception of the universe, man and life. Therefore it provides the human "learner" with a number of constant divine acts, criteria and values which guide his work and contribution to life in developing and promoting this life in accordance with Allah's plan. Without these acts man cannot understand the reality of his existence,or his role therin, not to mention the source and aim thereof." [15]

Religious Foundations of the Islamic Curriculum
When the Prophet Muhammad was educating his companions, he implanted the moral norms of truthfulness, trust, purity and decency into them. Concurrently, he trained them to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. God says: {*Ye are the best of Peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah…*} (3: 110). Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong represents the first step towards attaining the social change needed by mobilizing all social, political and religious agencies; in Islam, there is no distinction between what is social, political or religious. Therefore, all activities happening in a Muslim society should be interconnected and complementing each other. The main aim is to protect the religion and ensure its continuity, and education is the main agent to realize this prime aim. As for the main characteristics of the Islamic curriculum, they are all tailored around its main objective which is to transform the life of a Muslim into one that is tied to god's pleasure. Therefore, the Islamic curriculum must be comprehensive and inclusive. Considering that the message which human beings had received from god is all-inclusive, it did not care about some thing and neglected some other things; in contrast, it included every thing that mattered to man's existence. Thus, the Islamic curriculum shall reflect this basis.

Divinity of source and fate, universality, integration, comprehensiveness, flexibility, balance and realism are candid charateristics of Islamic education. Hence, any discussion that addresses the curriculum of Islamic education must recall all of them. A look at the characteristics of divinity indicates that the origin of the provisions of Islam and its directives is god and that they have nothing to do with the whims of human beings, a character that distinguishes the theory of Islamic education from secular theories which mainly originated from human caprices, and always subjected to lot of amendments, hindrances and mutations. The characteristic of divinity implies that god is the most knowing and creator of every thing. In other words, he is the source of all knowledge. Any form of interferance from man is decisively repudiated because he is unable to develop an inclusive and comprehensive educational system. The characteristic of divinity guides man to seek a single lord who has no partner, who is a perfect source of commands and interdictions. Man can also obtain god's guidance from his holy book {*This is My path, straight, so follow it. And do not follow the other paths, lest they divert you from His path. All this He has enjoined upon you, that you may refrain from wrongdoing*}(6: 153) and the tradition of his prophet Muhammad, and this ultimately cleanses his intention and makes it exclusively dedicated to please god.

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[15]Ali Ahmed Madkour, p. 131

Therefore, virtuous morals, values and learning what benifits man in this life and in the hereafter are central philosophical foundations of the Islamic curriculum. God says: {*Say, "My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright religion, the creed of Abraham the Monotheist, who was not a polytheist." Say, "My prayer and my worship, and my life and my death, are devoted to God, the Lord of the Worlds No associate has He. Thus I am commanded, and I am the first of those who submit*} (6: 161-163). The curriculum of Islamic education must be based on clear Islamic religious foundations, which aim to develop man's morality and train individuals to be good members of the society, and benefit humanity in general.

As part of the features of Islamic curriculum, universality and integration indicate that learning shall cover all needs of individuals and society. Individuals must acquire a minimum amount of knowledge from each field, and because it is practically impossible to excel in every field of knowledge, it is indispensable for each individual to specialize in one particular area. For example, teachers of *tasfir* (exegis) who deal with verses relating to the creation of the human being and stages of human development must refer to this matter from both religious and biological points of views. Such approach ensures the comprehensiveness and integration of the knowlege which is provided in our curriculum.

Balance is another essential characteristic, not only of education and the Islamic curriculum, but also of the Islamic approach towards human life at large. God says: {*So devote yourself to the religion of monotheism-the natural instinct God has instilled in mankind. There is no altering God's creation. This is the true religion, but most people do not know.*} (30: 30) The components of the curriculum (objectives, content, instructional strategies, and evaluation) ought to be blanced, and avoid any excessiveness of one component over the other ones.

The feature of flexbility is necessary from the Islamic point of view. It takes into account that although the curriculum aims to achieve its objectives to the fullest, there is always a flexibile consideration to the existing factors that may influence the implemetation of the curriculum and hence necessitate some modifications and changes in order to achieve its goals.

Realism is another characteristic of the Islamic curriculum because Islam itself is a message that is compatible with human innate and capabilities. It deals with man's real nature, problems, weaknesses and strengths, and avoids intellectual uncomprehensive abstracts or ideals that have no place in human life. For example, in the circle of ethics, the humankind always favoured people with honesty, trustworthiness and other aspects of integrity, and renounced corrup people who are dishonest and hypocrite. Islam is no different, as it ordains morality and encourages all forms of virtuous behavior that is emmanuated from human innate *fitrah*.[16] Because man is born in a pure state[17] as the prophet stated, humans need the assistance of learned men to gain knowledge and develop virtues.

The above mentioned characteristics are normally embedded in the Islamic curriculum and manifested in the following principles:
1. The faith, submission and servitude of man to god, and that the ultimate goal of man's existence on earth is to worship him.

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[16]*fitrah* means the primordial human nature.

[17] Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Every child is born with a true faith of Islam (i.e. to worship none but Allah alone) but his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Magainism (Zoroastrianism)…" al-Bukhari, 2:441)

2. Islam is the true and straight message that God has chosen to his servants.
3. God has honored man and given him a definite preference over all the other creatures. God says: {*We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and greatly favored them over many of those We created.*}(17:70)
4. Faith or *aqidah* is the bound for human rallying, not ethnicity or gender.
5. Life is an abode for work and tests, and the hereafter is the abode for accounting.
6. Man is god's vicegerent, and earth's wealth is subservienced to him {*God has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds, that He will make them successors on earth, as He made those before them successors, and He will establish for them their religion-which He has approved for them-and He will substitute security in place of their fear. They worship Me, never associating anything with Me. But whoever disbelieves after that-these are the sinners.*}(24: 55)
7. The belief in the entire revelation in that it is the source of knowledge, and that reason is a tool for this knowledge.

A quick glance at the above mentioned principles may lead to the presumption that the concept of Islamic curriculum is actually about the learning of religious subjects only. However, a closer look at the definition and historical practices of the Islamic curriculum demonstrates that it transcends the limited space of pure religious subjects to embody every useful knowledge.

Islamic Curriculum: Historical overview
Although it is equipped with a powerful conceptual framework, it is quite difficult to talk about a constant and unified version of Islamic curriculum that was implemented across the Islamic history. Nevertheless, the evolution of the Islamic curriculum can be traced in the following stages:

Stage of infancy: Standardization of the Islamic curriculum during the life of Prophet and the four guided califs (610 AD to 661 AD)

Inspired by the divine guidance of revelation and pivoted by the principle of *tawhid* (monotheism), prophet Muhammad began his mission by engaging his companions in an intensive revolutionary process of refinement, enlightenment and education. His aim was to remove pre-Islamic habits and behaviors which his followers inherited from their forefathers.

Very little is known about educational activities during the early Muslim period. *Hifz* (memorization), *tajwid* (modulation of recitation) and *tafsir* (explanation) of Qur'an verses most likely constituted the core of all learning activities. The first ever educational institution in Islam was the house of *al-Arqam ibn Abi al- Arqam* in Mecca, where the prophet held secret meetings with his earliest followers before god commanded him to proclaim Islam openly and bring his revelation to the public. Later, mosques played a prime role in educating and purifying people from the misdeeds of the pre-Islamic era, in particular the mosque of the prophet which was built soon after migrating to Medina in 622 AD. In fact, mosques had always been utilized from the early days of Islam as the main educational institutions. The curriculum was manifested in a "soul without a body" form, in which the content, methods and objectives did exist, but without formal institutionalization. Learning the Qur'anic revelations and prophetic traditions was embedded in the oral tradition, and similar to the

verses of good poetry, revelations of the Qur'an inspired the people of Arabia.[18] The oral tradition of Qur'anic recitation became, with rote learning and good poetry, the best pedagogical vehicles to preserve verbatim accuracy and transfer it to the next generation. The method by which the companions of the prophet learned was destined to be recognized as a principle by which the instruction was to take place.

> The students were required to learn from their teachers through their (words of mouth). This was how the principle of audition (*sama'*) came to be regarded as the premier method, by which the transmission of knowledge had to take place. This method implied inter alia that no one was supposed to transmit that which he or she had not himself or herself heard from the teacher directly, on whose authority it was transmitted.[19]

The *Khulafa al-Rashidun*[20] who succeeded the prophet after his death in (632 AD), demonstrated a great spiritual and ideological devotion to his legacy. However, due to the relatively short period, political turmoils and most importantly their preoccupation with reinforcing the foundations of the young Muslim state especially with "the establishment of Islam in other lands through the *futuhat*... [therefore] a wide range of problems presented themselves for solution, which the Muslims of the Prophet's time had never had confronted before."[21] The four caliphs looked upon the need for law as a priority task to be accomplished.

Education did not witness major development, and remained as part of *da'wa* call. The form and substance of the curriculum did not change a lot throughout their era. Mosques in particular continued to play a vital role in the learning activities. The curriculum was more of a spontaneous character; it depended on the imminent and committed companions who were keen to spread the call of Islam by educating people in the same manner that the prophet had done before. They played the role of master-scholars, and were responsible for what they taught, when they taught and with which objectives they taught.

Diversity of Islamic curriculum in the post classical era (661 AD to 1450 AD) of Muslim history

After a period of political uncertainty, Hasan ibn Ali handed over power to Muawiya ibn Abi Sufian. The latter established the Umayyad dynasty (661–750) with its capital in Damascus. The Umayyads remained in power for 88 years before being overthrown by the Abbasids (750–1258). In the Umayyad era, teaching activities were mainly undertaken by the remaining companions and pious *tabi'in* (predecessors of the prophet) who maintained a teaching approah similar to the approach adopted by the companions.

The concentration of the informal curriculum was mainly on preserving the authenticity of the second sacred source of the *shari'a* i.e. the *sunna.* In fact, the two dynasties which ruled the Muslim lands for 6 centuries approximately witnessed a very fast growth of the Islamic

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[18]Anzar, U. (2003). Islamic education: A brief history of madrassas with comments on curricula and current pedagogical practices. *Paper for the University of Vermont, Environmental Programme*.

[19] Ahmed, Munir D. "MUSLIM EDUCATION PRIOR TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MADRASAH." *Islamic Studies* 26, no. 4 (1987): 321-49. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20839857.

[20]"*al-Khulafa al- Rashidun*", is a term used in Sunni Islam to refer to the 30-year reign (632-661) of the first four successors who ruled the Muslim community following the death of prophet Muhammad, namely: Abu Bakr al-Siddiq , Omar ibn al-Khattab , Othman ibn Affan , and Ali ibn Abi Talib

[21]Ismail R. al Faruqi& Lois Lamya al Faruqi. The Cultural Atlas of Islam. Macmillan Publishing Company. New York. Collier Macmillan Publishers Canada. 1986. Pg. 274

empire, rapid expansion of its borders and mass conversion of various ethnicities into Islam paved the way for rich theological, legal and political debates in the first five centuries of Muslim history, especially during the Abbasid era. Subsequently, a variety of educational models emerged in Muslim lands based on denomination, institution, and epistemology.

Major theological sects such as Sunnis, Shi'a, and Khariji developed their own interpretation of the sacred texts, and these differences were expressed through various educational institutions that included mosques, colleges, libraries, debate gatherings, and *dar al-hikmah* (House of wisdom).

It is hard to talk about one homogenous Islamic curriculum at the post classical era of the history of Islamic education. However, it is safe to divide its development into two main stages:

a. *Curriculum in pre-madrasa stage*
Due to the dominance of moral values, it is often believed that Islamic education in medieval Islam was of liberal spirit rather than of institutions. Among the guiding moral principles of the Islamic educational culture at that time was that the attainment and dissemination of knowledge is a divine injunction which must be undertaken by man, and that keeping knowledge for oneself is an inappropriate attituted as knowledge is a trust which god consigned to man and he ordained him to deliver. Heinz Halm points out to one aspect of such morality as reflected in the attitude of Ismā'īli teachers, "In search of a worthy pupil to whom he can transmit the good of knowledge entrusted to him, our 'teacher' travels through the world."[22]

Such dimensional morality towards education permitted the teaching and learning activities to take place everywhere. Indeed:
> Wherever a man who knew how to read met another who was not quite so
> fortunate, yet willing to learn, a school was organized. It may have been under a
> palm tree, in a tent, or in a private house; nevertheless it was a school.[23]

Likewise, liberal and flexible[24] learning spirit was reflected in the curriculum, and opportunities to learn were available to all Muslims regardless of their legal affiliation**.**
> Apparently, teaching and learning in medieval Islam was not regarded by both
> *shuyūkh* and *tullāb* (students) as a *wazīfah* (job) for the former and potential
> source of income after graduation for the latter. On the contrary, they took
> teaching and learning as a noble mission in life, which brings social veneration in
> this life and Allāh's reward in the other.[25]

Teachers were fully in charge of what to teach, to whom and with what objective in mind. Hence, affiliated to educational institution did not matter as much as with whom one had studied, a qualification certified not by an institutional degree but by a personal license (*ijaza*)

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[22] Halm, Heinz, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Limited in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1st edn., 1997), 20-21
[23]Khalil A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*, [New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1926), 12
[24]Muborakshoeva, Marodsilton. *Islam and Higher Education: Concepts, challenges and opportunities*. Routledge, 2013. P, 24
[25] Tahraoui Ramdane, *Education and Politics: A Comparative Inquiry of the Fatimids and the Ayyubids in Middle age Egypt*. Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011. P, 161

issued by a teacher to his pupil. Whether lessons took place in a new *madrasa*, or in an older mosque, or for that matter in someone's living room, was a matter of supreme indifference.

> No institutional structure, no curriculum, no regular examinations, nothing approaching a formal hierachy of degrees: the system of transmitting knowledge, such it was, remained throughout the medieval period fundamentally personal and informal, and consequently, in many ways, flexible and inclusive.[26]

Halaqah [27] in the pre-*madrasa* stage was a favoured teaching method by the existing learning instititutions such as Kuttab, whole market sellers, bookshops, libraries and mosques in particular. It was reported that the early education system in al-Azhar mosque in the Fatimid era was mainly in the form of *halaqah* which encompassed the classes of *fiqh* (Islamic Law) according to the *Ismā'īli* creed and Shī'a knowledge of religion, philosophy and monotheism. Later, Arabic language, medicine, mathematics, logic …etc were also introduced. The learning experience at al-Azhar could be summed up in the following:

> There were three kinds of classes which met at the mosque: (a) groups of pious people who wanted to learn the Quran and its interpretation, (b) circles of students sitting on the floor learning religious sciences: and (c) formal lectures delivered by the chief of the propaganda hierarchy himself. These lectures were called "sessions of wisdom" (*majalis al-hikmah*). It is reasonable to believe that the linguistic, literary, legal and Quranic studies were taught at al-Azhar as well as logic and certain amount of mathematics and astronomy.[28]

b. *Madrasa stage*

Though the liberal spirit and culture of learning remained a main trait, the Islamic learning in this stage started to be tainted by the ideology and religious affiliation of the sponsors especially with the establishment of the *madrasa*.[29] However, many historians of Islamic education think that with the rise of *madrasas,* the curriculum started to be articulated in a more formal manner.

In fact, though the second era of the Abbasid Empire was politically gloomy because of the emergence of separatist rival states such as the Fatimids (909-1171), Zinghids (1127-1174), Seljuks (1137-1157), and Ayyubids (1174-1250), there were some positive outcomes of those political developments.

There is a belief that many Muslim regions emerged better after their break away from the central caliphate in Baghdad, for every regional capital developed itself into an important center of knowledge and arts. The rulers of the regions emulated the caliphs of Baghdad in

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[26]*Madrasas* Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity, Jonathan Berkey, 43. [Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education], edited by Robert W. Hefner, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Princeton University Press, 2006.

[27] It was around the *shaikh* or the master that the study circle or *halqah* (Literally: circle, or ring) was formed. Upon his death, the original study circle would eventually dissolve, and his students would either attach themselves to other *shaykhs* or form their own study circle. See, Ephrat Dapha, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni 'Ulama of Eleventh Century Baghdād* (New York: Sunny Press, State University of New York, 2000), 76

[28]Bin Salamon A.S., *Azhar and Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Al-Rahmaniah, st edn, 1988), 11

[29]*madrasas* were colleges in which *fiqh* was taught according to four Sunni denominations. They were often supported by endowments of charitable trust (*waqf, ahbas*). Before attending *madrasas*, potential candidates had to memorize the whole or some considerable parts of the Qur'an and able to read and write. Qur'an, sciences of Qur'an, *hadith*, sciences of *hadith*, *fiqh*, Arabic, history, Genealogy, poetry, narratives, proverbs and maxims, medicine, astronomy, languages were among the subjects that medieval *madrasas*offered.

their donations and gifts[30]. They honored their capitals by bringing in scholars and writers. Hence, instead of having one important center for knowledge and arts, it turned to have many important centers.[31] Another factor which contributed to formalizing learning in *madrasas* was the financial support. "Pensions were offered by the sovereign to jurisconsults, learned men generally and students."[32]

However, the split among institutions of learning, rigid membership and intense rivalries between different groups of Muslims led to a serious intellectual controversial development that was the closure of *bab al-ijtihad* (independent juristic reasoning), and the exercise of *taqlid* (imitation). The doctrine of *taqlid* in particular, as expressed by the *madhahib,* served to further weaken the authority of *ulama* (scholars) and cement the status of the ruling elite as the supreme controllers of intellectual, social and political life.

Because it has been politicized and used to intensify the religious schism, the Islamic curriculum at this turning point witnessed a real set back as it lost much of it flexibility and liberal character. On the other hand, some believe that "by pinpointing a doctrinal and judicial curriculum for each *madrasa*, and appointing one eminent *shaykh* to teach that particular *madhab*"[33] the curriculum of the different *madrasas* was provided with a sense of direction and focus.

The rise of the *madrasa* as one major centre for Islamic higher learning transformed the Islamic curriculum and it marked with the following characteristics:
1. Holistic: Generally in medieval Islam, knowledge was not fragmented as modern knowledge seems to be, and the present sharp specializations had not existed yet. As such, a scholar like Ibn al-Haytham[34], regarded as the "father of modern optics", was a physicist, mathematician, ophthalmologist, philosopher and theologian of high caliber at the same time. In spite of opposition from traditional scholars, especially jurists and *muhaddithin* (traditionists)[35], the rational or ancient sciences continued to be taught in formal and informal learning circles. *In madrasas* Arab sciences and and 'old non-Arab sciences'[36] were taught parallel to each other. Grammar, ethics and dogmas, history and literature belonged to the former and philosophy, natural science and medicine to the latter.

[30]One example of the excessive spending of region Muslim rulers is the Fatimid ruler called al-Hākim who ordered the decoration of the al-Hākim mosque. It was reported that "A preliminary estimate of the cost of the lamps, chains, mats, etc. came to 5,000 pieces of gold. Early in Ramadan he presented a *tannūr* of large candelabrum to the old Mosque in Fustat. This *tannūr* weighed 100,000 drams and had 1,200 lights... the Khalif presented the mosque at the same time with 1,290 copies of the Qur'an, some of which were written in letters of gold." See, De Lacy O'Leary, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate* (London: Routledge, 2nd edn., 2000), 167

[31]Ahmad Amin. Dhohr al Islam (The Noon of Islam). First Part. Second edition. MaktabatLajnat al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamahwa al-Nashr. 1946. P. 93 and 95.

[32] Goerge Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and in the West*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, dn., 1981), 162

[33]al-Syed al-Baz al-Urayni, al-Sharq al-Adna fi al-Usur al-Wusta: al-Juz' al-Awal, al-Ayyubiyun, [Near East in the Middle Ages:1st Volume, The Ayyubids], (Dar al-Nahdha li al-Tiba'awa al-Nashr, Cairo: without edition, 1967), 220.

[34]Abu Ali al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Haytham, latinized: Alhacen or deprecated: Alhazen was born in Iraq, most likely in Basra in 965. He made significant contributions to the principles of optics, as well as to anatomy, engineering, mathematics, medicine, ophthalmology, philosophy, physics, psychology, visual perception and to science in general.

[35]*muhaddith* is an Islamic title, referring to one who profoundly knows and narrates *hadīth*, the chains of their narration, and the original and famous narrators. Furthermore, a *muhaddith* can tell true *hadīth* from forgeries.

[36] For more on the division of knowledge in the 10th century, see: The History of Philosophy in Islam, By T. J. Denboer, Biblio Bazaar, LLC,11-Jan-2008), 34.

The curriculum of Muslim education at that time reminds us in its extensive and intensive nature of curriculum programs of modern advanced systems of education. It was not unusual to find instruction in mathematics (algebra, trigonometry and geometry), science (chemistry, physics, and astronomy), medicine (anatomy, surgery, pharmacy, and specialized medical branches), philosophy (logic, ethics, and metaphysics), literature (philology, grammar, poetry and prosody, social sciences, history, geograpgy, political disciplines, law, sociology, psychology), and jurisprudence (theology, comparative religions, history of religions, study of the Qur'an, religious traditions [hadith] and other religious topics). They offered advanced studies in prefessions, for example law and medicine.[37]

2. Progressive: Ssyllabus were taught according to a progressively developed system of learning in which pupils graduated from preparatory, elementary and advanced stages. Khalil Totah commented on the content of the curriculum, in which Arabic and theological sciences took a considerable share:

Looking on the Arabic curriculum as a whole, it seems narrow and rigid in the elementary stage and varied in the advanced. Certainly, grammar, literature, theology and jurisprudence claimed most of the time to make it one-sided and perhaps literary-theological in character.[38]

3. Methods of teaching: In the relative absence of official educational agencies which supervised, developed, and assessed the teaching and learning of pedagogical processes, medieval Muslim *shuyūkh* (master scholars) and *fuqaha'* (jurists) filled that vacuum and exercised authoritative relationship with their students. They enjoyed extensive power to choose what, when and how to teach. The triumph of learning and the mark of precedence between graduates were always about personal connection one graduate got with a prominent *shaykh*. As evidence of their authority, attestation of graduation in the Islamic middle ages was not attributed to the institution which students attended, but was an *ijāzah* (license) that only the master scholar can grant to the students who satisfactorily completed intensive training in one particular subject or text. The name and reputation of that particular scholar determined the value of the graduate's *ijāzah*.

This method of learning from a teacher, who learned from his teacher, who learned from his teacher, illustrates the fundamental importance that medieval Muslims placed on direct personal interaction between teacher and pupil. Once a scholar determined that his pupil had mastered a given text, he granted him (or her) an ijāza (Diploma) certifying that he (or she) was now qualified to teach that particular text to others. Because of the emphasis on these interpersonal interactions, we find scholars and students travelling hundreds, even thousands of miles to study with the leading lights throughout the medieval Islamic world.[39]

4. Freedom, flexibility and fostering thinking: In the golden centuries of Islam, religion encouraged freedom of inquiry. Scholarship and intellectual excellence were held in high regard, and students were encouraged to debate their views with their teachers. Libraries, both public and private and even the courts of the caliphs and the palaces of kings were centers of open and free inquiry by scholars, who often received financial aid to pursue their interests.[40]

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[37]Mahdi Nakosteen, History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D.800-1350. University of Colorado Press. Boulder Colorado, 1964, without edition), 52.

[38]Khalil A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*, 52.

[39]Lindsay, James E., *Daily life in the Medieval Islamic World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1st edn., 2005), 196

[40]Mehdi Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1964), 57

Despite having the above mentioned positive characteristics, critics highlighted several shortcomings of the *madrasa* establishment, such as the the visible politicization of state sponsored *madrasas,* in which the curriculum served as a tool which added more fuel to the sectarian schism. The rigid adherence to the *madhahib* amongst the groups and schools reached the point that lectures were delivered and books were written just for the sake of championing one particular school or showing disagreement (with another one). These polemical disagreements often led to clashes and troubles.[41]

It is important to note that in both stages, mainstream Muslim intelligentsia and the public approached knowledge with a presumption that religious knowledge is superior to the secular counterpart. Minor intellectual poles i.e. philosophers, Ikhwan al-Safa and Ismailis, adopted a less orthodox approach by favouring a blended curriculum which included religious, philosophical, literary and scientific subjects. As for the medium of instruction, and despite some competition mounted by both Persian and Turkish languages, Arabic remained of superior prestige and continued as a lingua franca.

The Current State of the Islamic Curriculum

An extreme tide of regression in the Islamic intellectualism and intelligentsia began to accumulate in the tenth century BC which was in contrast with a European intensive educational and rational travail of renaissance, pragmatism, scientific exploits, industrialization, and reforms that ultimately revitalized and transformed Europe. The new order was culminated by the European military colonial offensive against the Muslim world in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the era of Western colonial rule, secular institutions came to supersede religious schools in importance throughout the Muslim world. However, *madrasas* were revitalized in the 1970s with the rising interest in religious studies and Islamist politics in countries such as Iran and Pakistan.[42]

A number of historical, cultural, social and political factors complicated the efforts of educators and activists to rejuvenate the *madrasas'* role and reclaim its glorious past. The broader meaning of this establishment as a center for knowledge, freedom, and an arena to acquire higher religious sciences, philosophy, astronomy, medicine and logic has long been forgotten. Eventually, *madrasa* curriculum was restricted in most cases to the teaching of religious subjects such as Qur'an, *hadith*, speculative theology, *fiqh* and Arabic.

The issue of dualism in most of educational systems in the Muslim countries is another major contemporary challenge that needs to be addressed. It is manifested in a form of religious versus secular curriculum.[43]

These two challenges may potentially dwindle the efforts of reviving the Islamic tradition of learning, let alone developing it to become an alternative model that can compete and ultimately replace the western educational model inherited from the times of direct colonization. Like other developing nations, Muslim countries suffer from deep rooted cultural deficiencies and acute dependence on the West. The trends of globalization, open

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[41]Majid Irsanal-Kilani, TatawurMafhum al-Nadhariyah al-Tarbawiyah al-Islamiyah. Ibid, 175.

[42] (Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background Christopher M. Blanchard Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division CRS report for Congress) . Order Code RS211654. Updated January 23, 2007 pg.3 retrieved from:file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/ADA463792.pdf [date 9/9/2017], p 2

[43]Rosnani Hashim, Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice. Oxford University Press: 1996).

markets and technology-laden educational experience which focuses mainly on marketable skills cemented the position of the dominant western educational model and made deficiencies in Muslim educational model more visible.

Interestingly, the majority of Muslim countries prefer to refer to foreign educational approaches, mainly the western approach. This is because of the perception that these approaches are more advanced and adopt modern techniques fashioned in a more effective and professional manner, compared to *madrasa*'s Islamic traditional curriculum which is regarded as old and outdated.

> The static curricula and dated pedagogical techniques, such as rote memorization, used in many quietist schools may also produce individuals who are neither skilled nor prepared for the modern workforce.[44]

A passive pedagogy adopted by most of the religious-based establishments, which treated students as repositories of knowledge rather than active learners who were encouraged to question, discuss, debate, challenge or argue over ideas, further diminished the appeal of the Islamic curriculum. This pedagogy does not train learners in critical thinking, creative thinking and problem solving skills necessary to built positive and dynamic individuals. Thus, modes of teaching and learning methods need some fundamental changes in order to cope with the demands of the 21st era.

Inadequate conceptualization of knowledge and Islamic epistemology in the curriculum is another pertinent problem that must be addressed. Educators need to resolve issues such as what knowledge is most valuable for today's intellectual and ethical Muslims, and the issue of what appears to be a form of dichotomy between the Islamic worldview in matters related to life and existence and recent modern scientific findings in natural disciplines like biology, chemistry and astronomy.

The need to take a clear stand with regard to those issues highlights another challenge which the Islamic curriculum still suffers from the lack of academic freedom. It is argued that there is a great deal of rigidity in the Islamic curriculum which provides very little space for academic freedom and intellectualism. By focusing on religious traditional sciences, the Islamic curriculum narrows its scope, loses much needed balance and lacks integration between theoretical and practical knowledge. Such a structure is not satisfactory or holistic because it narrows the minds of the learners rather than broadening them. It neither nurtures an appreciation of the arts and literature or the affective domain, nor sharpens the students scientific or mathematical analytical abilities. The solution is to adopt a liberal or an intellectual Islamic curriculum which would allow students to explore literature and the arts, history, social and philosophical analysis.

Critics also observed that the Islamic curriculum failed to connect learners with their social milieu. Students are obligated to attend indoctrinative classes, in which topics and examples are not necessarily related to their day to day lives. Such alienation is mostly reflected in the limited growth of genuine Islamic intellectualism, and failure to have any sort of positive impact.

Conclusion

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[44] Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background Christopher M. Blanchard Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division CRS report for Congress) . Order Code RS211654. Updated January 23, 2007 pg.3 retrieved from:file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/ADA463792.pdf [date 9/9/2017]

To sum up, the challenges facing contemporary Islamic curriculum can be summarised in its inability to address or cope with the present practical challenges, whether they are purely academic that are related to curricular, instruction and assessment methods, or socio-educational, like the linking of its learning outcomes with students' real life obligations, such as job careers. Unlike *madrasas* of medieval Islam, the main quest of Islamic educational establishments of today is often restricted in the boundaries of producing individuals who observe the injunctions of the faith. As a result, the Islamic curriculum continues to make little success in motivating and molding learners into productive beings who yearn for professional success and excellence. The other major hindrance is its insistence on using traditional and often passive pedagogical approaches, by which authoritative teachers favour rote teaching that is based on dictation and repetition over debate, participation and dialogue. Such approach limits the prospects of nurturing creative impulses, and render learners into passive and submissive beings.

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