

The Equilibrium In Islamic Education *

By

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The theme of this special edition of *Religion and Education* (R&E) on "Issues of Islamic Education" is *taqwa*. *Taqwa* is an Arabic word often translated oversimply as "piety," but which bears the meaning of "a conscious balance between the individual, the society, and the limits set by Allah or God as the source of value and knowledge". Since I was asked to be guest editor of this edition, three overarching issues have been formulating my thinking about it, from selecting the theme to the significance that this edition of R&E may have for the debate over education in the country as a whole.

The first issue is how to achieve a balance between the belief systems of individuals (often referred to as religion or philosophy) and this country's universal schooling system which has traditionally intended, to a large degree, to meld diverse individual views into the "common-ground" of a "pluralistic" social framework.

The second issue is questioning the efficacy of "teaching about religion" and "teaching a religion." This issue comes out in particularly sharp relief in teaching about Islam as a belief system, and about Muslims, in a "neutral" manner when many teachers have little or no knowledge of Islam, and what they have too often represents an inaccurate picture.

The third issue, which is the core of this edition, is how to introduce a discourse on "Islamic education" when females have traditionally been perceived as lacking the full privilege to interpret Islam. The centrality of Muslim women's and girls' education and acculturation (Barazangi and Kahf articles) to Islamic education may seem contradictory, and perhaps difficult to understand by those whose knowledge of Islam is limited to the perception that males are the only "legitimate interpreters" of

Islamic texts or the perception that females are "oppressed by their patriarchal religion."

The challenge facing Muslim educators--and those Muslims who would educate others about Islam, and those non-Muslims who would learn about Islam and attempt to teach it--is two-fold. On the one hand, teaching about religion--particularly about Islam--has been relegated to courses in history, social sciences, area studies or world religions (al Faruqi and Webb articles address the higher education dilemmas). This relegation makes "religion" seem as if it is something of the past, draining the living experience of it, even when some, particularly Muslim educators, have made great strides not to let that happen (Douglass, Shabbas and Alkhateeb articles). On the other hand, Muslim educators are trying to restore the relationship between "value" and "facts," or soul and mind. The constitutional framework that separates "teaching about religion" from "teaching religion" may have resulted in a split between teaching and educating. This matter is being addressed by introducing "Islamic education" as an alternative measure (Abd-Allah and Muhammad articles). The demand that teachers be "neutral" when teaching about religion and its "sacred language"--or values in general-- can reduce teaching to the transmission of "facts" and reduce religion to a sterile "factual" entity. This reduction seems to disregard the endowed human need to have a value system that is learned in a particular language and taught within a specific historical and cultural environment (El-Khatib and Emerick articles) using specific instructional material (Ghazi & Ghazi article). We educators--Muslims or non-Muslims--have missed the practice of the basic principle for clear cognition and constructive behavior, autonomous morality.

Whatever we call this process of imparting knowledge, the problem lies in the fact that we continuously talk about change, but only expect change to take place with the "other" without changing ourselves first. The Qur'an (the Islamic sacred text) states that God will never change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Chapter 13: Verse 11). How can we, for instance, teach about Abrahamic religions equitably when some of us still perceive the "Other" as unbeliever or a sinner without attempting to understand the basis of the particular

action or the practice of the particular tenets of the faith or the philosophy we find objectionable. When the majority of us still consider our own standard interpretations and practices as the measuring stick for how others think and what they "ought to do"--instead of considering to facilitate for them the learning to think autonomously--then we have not yet acknowledged our shortcomings as human educators. It is true that various teachings and philosophies have set certain limits, but these teachings also remind us that the judge of our work and intention is not our own criterion, but the guiding principle of "*Taqwa*," or the equilibrium between autonomy and heteronomy. How constructive is this balance in our own character and interaction with ourselves, others and nature, is what makes us human. We need a constant reminder to recognize our human limitations, and so our job is to figure out how to strike this balance, not to dictate the criterion to each other.

To recognize that Muslim learners in the US need different schema from that of non-Muslim learners is as significant as realizing that these Muslim learners also need different schema from that of Muslims anywhere else. How we may bring an equilibrium between the Islamic sacred text, the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic pedagogy, and the prevailing views and practices of education in the United States, based on Piaget, Dewey and others is one step forward. To recognize the centrality of Muslim women's Islamic higher learning and active agency in interpreting the Qur'anic pedagogy is the first step toward equitable Islamic education.

I am concerned with integrating these and other views into a [balanced] pedagogy for Muslims and for teaching (about) Islam in the United States at the turn of the 21st century . That is, a pedagogy in which there is equilibrium between the need for deciding what are the most "sacred texts" and the need for determining how best we may prepare the next generation to consciously think about, and to effectively act within the parameters of these texts. One of the focal points of Piaget's social theory is the concept of equilibrium. "Equilibrated exchanges among adults," writes Rheta

DeVries, "are those in which discussants share a common framework of reference (which may be political, literary, religious, etc.), conserve common definitions, symbols, etc., and coordinate reciprocal propositions. Piaget (1941/95) calls this phenomenon 'reciprocal valorization' by 'co-exchangers' within a particular scale of values." (*Educational Researcher*, 1997, 26: 11).

Valorizations--being "affective and cognitive," and eventually social--represent the "equilibrated exchange" that the contributors (the valorizers) in this special edition of *Religion and Education* hope to achieve. That these educators/valorizers were invited to contribute--for the first time in the history of the journal of *Religion and Education*--to the discussion of educational issues that are not Christian-related, is a major achievement towards "reciprocal valorization." As important, recognizing a representation of these valorizers' frame of reference is as significant for recognizing that the learners who identify themselves with Islam as a worldview (encompassing both religion and culture) or with Muslims as a cultural group have special need.

Depending on the reader's frame of reference, this special edition of *Religion and Education* may achieve either a "cooperative equilibrium" or results in a constraining system that I would call "window-dressing tolerance." I am not 'reading history backward' when I bring to the readers' conscious the fact that "equilibrium" is the only measuring stick, according to the Qur'an, by which a human character is judged, and by which a course of study is declared "Islamic" or non-Islamic." *Taqwa* is the only criterion that distinguishes individuals (Qur'an, 49:13). It is only when education achieves this balance that we can call it "Islamic."

To focus on whether Muslim/Islamic schools are imparting "Islamic education" or "religious education," and what is being projected as "Islamic" is to understand the relationship between two domains in the pedagogy of moral judgment and "religious education," particularly in "pluralistic" societies like the US. The relationship between the ontological domain (the beliefs about the nature of reality) and the intellectual domain (the causal and associational standards by which we investigate

reality) are almost absent in the American Muslim educators' debates, and are rarely discussed in contemporary educational debates. Is there a relationship between the absence of such discussions and the misunderstandings that surround Islam, Muslims and Islamic studies? How does this relate to the prevalent views of Muslim women's and girls' education and acculturation? I challenge the reader to find the connection.

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