

Education

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American Muslims do face misconceptions, yet their view of the woman as morally dependent, hence socially and politically non-central to issues of Islamic and multicultural education is indeed problematic. How is it plausible for a morally dependent individual to instill the character of an autonomous spiritual and intellectual Muslim who can integrate effectively in a 'pluralistic' society? A change in the paradigm of moral or religious education – beyond multiculturalism – may be the solution.

In 1998, a special edition of *Religion and Education* (*R&E*, 25, 1&2, Winter 1998, St. Louis, MO: Webster University), a journal of the National Council on Religion and Public Education, focused on 'Issues of Islamic Education in the US', suggesting a transformation in the framework of investigating moral or religious curricula if we seek significant changes resulting from the contemporary 'educational reform' movements. As issues of character building and religious identity are making a visible dent both in educational assessments and religio-ethnic cultural studies, a main concern comprises cross-cultural understandings of education that take religion, values, character, or morals as a sub-text, particularly when a woman's morality is viewed as a proxy to that of her male household.

The theme of this special edition of *R&E* is *taqwa*. *Taqwa* is an Arabic word often oversimply translated 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.' As the guest editor of this edition, three overarching issues formulated my thinking on it – from selecting the theme to the significance that this edition of *R&E* may have for the debate over education in the US 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 the US 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 do know too often offers an inaccurate picture. The third issue, which was the core of this edition, is how to introduce a discourse on 'Islamic education' from females' perspectives – only two of the thirteen contributors are males – 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 Mohja Kahf's articles) to Islamic education – and even their very contribution to this edition of *R&E* – 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'.

Challenges and responses

The challenge facing Muslim educators – and those who would learn or educate others about Islam – is twofold. On the one hand, teaching about religion, particularly about Islam, has been relegated to courses in history, social sciences, area studies or world religions (Maysam al Faruqi and Gisela Webb's articles address the higher education dilemmas).

This relegation makes 'religion' seem as if it were something of the past, neglecting the lived experience of it, even though some, particularly Muslim educators, have made great strides not to let that happen (Susan Douglass, Audrey Shabbas and Sharifa Alkhateeb's articles). On the other hand, Muslim educators are trying to restore the relationship between 'values' and 'facts', or soul and mind, while nonetheless ignoring their discrepant practices concerning women's autonomous morality. The US constitutional framework that separates 'teaching about religion' from 'teaching religion' may have resulted in a split between teaching and educating, but more problematic is the Muslims' splitting between the female's ability to consciously choose Islam as her worldview or belief system and her ability to cognitively participate in the interpretation of this belief system.

The first matter is being addressed by introducing 'Islamic education' as an alternative measure (Salwa Abd-Allah and Zakiyyah Muhammad's articles). The demand on teachers to 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 human need for a value system that is learned in a particular language and taught within a specific historical and cultural environment (Mary El-Khatib and Yahya Emerick's articles) using specific instructional material (Abidullah Ghazi and Tasneema Ghazi's article). The second matter, the conscious choice of the belief system needs to be addressed further.

We educators – Muslim or non-Muslim – have missed the practice of the basic principle for clear cognition and constructive behaviour, autonomous morality, especially when we continue to rely solely on male interpretations of Islam and of woman's morality from her male household.

Prospects of change

No matter what we call this process of imparting knowledge, the problem lies in that we continuously talk about change, expecting change by the 'other' without changing ourselves first. Some refer to the Qur'an as stating that God will never change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Qur'an, 13: 11). How can we, for instance, teach about Abrahamic religions equitably, or about other worldviews, when some of us still perceive the 'other' as inferior without attempting to understand the basis of the particular behaviour 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 facilitating them to learn to think autonomously – then we have not yet acknowledged our shortcomings as human educators. Various teachings and philosophies have set certain limits, yet 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 this balance is 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 a different schema from that of non-Muslim learners is as significant as realizing that these Muslim learners also need a different schema from that of Muslims anywhere else. How we may bring an equilibrium between the ideals 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 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 – both males and females – and for teaching (about) Islam in the United States at the turn of the 21st century. This implies a pedagogy in which there is equilibrium between the need for deciding the moral, religious, as well as secular foundations of multicultural education 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 foundations.

One of the focal points of Piaget's social theory is the concept of equilibrium. 'Equilibrated exchanges among adults', writes Rheta De Vries, '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).

The equilibrated education

Valorizations – being 'affective and cognitive', and eventually social – represent the 'equilibrated exchange' that the contributors (the 'valorizers') in this special edition of *R&E* hope to achieve. As important is recognizing a representation of these valorizers' frame of reference – being predominantly feminine and paradigmatically different from those who follow precedent (*muqallidun*). Also significant is the realization that learners who identify themselves with Islam as a worldview (encompassing both religion and culture) or with Muslims as a cultural group have special needs.

Depending on the reader's frame of reference, this special edition of *R&E* may achieve either a 'cooperative equilibrium' or result in a constraining system that I would call 'window-dressing tolerance'. I am not 'reading history backward' when I bring to the readers' awareness the fact that equilibrium, *taqwa*, in the Qur'an is the measuring stick by which a human character is judged (Qur'an, 49:13). By extension, I argue that

taqwa can also be the criterion by which a course of study is declared 'Islamic' or 'non-Islamic'. It is only when education achieves this (conscious) balance, this equilibrium, 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 judgement 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) is almost absent in the American Muslim educators' debates, especially when women's perspectives and participation in jurisprudence and consultative community affairs are concerned. Furthermore, these are rarely discussed in contemporary educational debates. Is there a relationship between the absence of such discussions and the misunderstandings that surround Islam (and Muslims)? How does this relate to the prevalent views of Muslim women's and girls' morality, education and acculturation? I challenge the reader to find the connection. ◆