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Islamic Concept of Education Reconsidered

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Abstract

Islamic concept of education has been analyzed by some authours in parallel to the contrast assumed between Islam and the liberal tradition. Hence, given the rationalist tendencies of the liberal tradition, an almost indoctrinatory essence is assumed for the Islamic concept of education. However, it is argued here that rationality is involved in all the elements of Islamic concept of education. It is claimed here that an Islamic concept of education could be suggested which includes three basic elements of knowledge, choice and action. Then, it is shown that, according to the Islamic texts, all the three elements of education have a background of rationality.

Key Words: 1- Islam 2- Education 3- Rationality
4- Knowledge 5- Choice 6- Action 7- Liberalism

1. Introduction

In a more recent volume of *Comparative Education*, Halstead(8) has introduced "An Islamic concept of education". As the author admits, Islamic concept of education still needs to be analyzed and its components be shown. In what follows, a critique will be advanced on the above-mentioned analysis of Islamic concept of education and some related views on which it relies. Then, an alternative view will be suggested.

2. Islamic Education: A Critique

Halstead, in his above-mentioned essay, has shown a new endeavour for disclosing somewhat unknown dimensions of

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Islamic concept of education. Claiming a contrast between the liberal and Islamic conceptions of education, he tries to give an explanation of the latter. He appeals to three Arabic words, *tarbiya* (cause to grow), *ta'dīb* (to refine, to discipline), and *talīm* (to instruct), in order to analyze the Islamic concept of education. According to him, these words refer to three basic dimensions of education, namely individual development, social and moral education, and acquisition of knowledge respectively. In this analysis, he relies partly on al-Attas's (4) suggestion, particularly in the case of *ta'dīb*.

Let's begin with al-Attas whose contribution to explaining Islamic concept of education has been considered important (8, p. 521). Al-Attas (5) has denied that the Islamic concept *tarbiya* and the related word *rububiya* could be considered as candidates for showing the dimensions of Islamic concept of education. He claims that the root of these words, namely *rabā* (to grow) indicates physical upbringing without any reference to the basic elements of the real education like knowledge, intelligence and virtue. According to him, God's *rububiya* does not include knowledge, rather it refers to the same meaning of physical upbringing.

However, he could not maintain this awkward result till the end of his book. Hence, he admits that a knowledge-related meaning could penetrate in the concept *rabb* but he claims that this meaning refers merely to the possession of knowledge rather than transference of knowledge which is essential in education. He mentions evidence for his claim from the word *rabbani* used in the Qur'an to refer to the scholars of the Jews. According to him, this word refers to a scholar who possesses knowledge and adopts the view that it might be a Hebrew word rather than Arabic being derived from *rabb*.

Al-Attas suggests that the Islamic concept *ta'dīb* could adequately refer to education. This is because, according to him, unlike *rububiya* it has reference to knowledge and, in addition, the Prophet of Islam has used it to refer to his being educated by God where he, using the word *ta'dīb*, says: "My Lord disciplined me and well disciplined me." (*ibid*)

However, al-Attas's argument is not convincing for a number of reasons. Firstly, his insistence on delimitting the meaning of *rabb* to physical upbringing and negating its inclusion to

knowledge is untenable and inconsistent with its usage in the Qur'an. *Rabb* is used in the Qur'an in relation to knowledge and this indicates that knowledge refers to a component of the meaning of *rabb*: "...Our Lord! Thou embracest all things in mercy and knowledge..." (1, 40: 7)

Al-attas would respond that here the relation of *rabb* to knowledge indicates merely its possession by God. However, delimitting the meaning of *rabb* to possession is not convincing on the ground that management is also one dimension of the meaning of *rabb*. This management includes both physical and mental aspects. This point is quite clear in the very tradition on which al-Attas has put his burden of argument. When the Prophet attributes *ta'dīb* to the *rabb*, this clearly indicates that the former is a deed of the *rabb* and if, as al-Attas claims, *ta'dīb* has an indication to knowledge, then it follows that the meaning of *rabb* includes providing knowledge. This point has been used more than once in the traditions. A further example is the request of The Prophet from *rabb* to increase his knowledge: "Lord! Increase my knowledge." If indeed providing or increasing knowledge has no relevance to *rabb*, then the usage of *rabb* in this request would be misplaced. It is clear that in the Islamic texts the names of God are used properly in relation to the request concerned. When, for instance, a person requests for God's forgiveness, he or she mentions the relevant name 'qaffar' (The Forgiver).

As for al-Attas's point that the word *rabbani* refers merely to the possession of knowledge by the scholar, there are textual counterexamples. In the following vers from the Qur'an, not only is *rabbani* used in relation to teaching, rather than possession of knowledge, but also it is used in relation to *rububiya*: "...Be worshippers (*rabbanis*) of the Lord because of your teaching the Book and your reading (it yourselves)." (1, 3: 79)

There are also some points in relatio to al-Attas's suggestion as to the word *ta'dīb* being an adequate candidate for showing the dimensions of education. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the word *ta'dīb* and even the derivatives of its root *aduba* is not used in the Qur'an at all.

Secondly, contrary to what al-Attas says, it is not the case that *adab* and *ta'dīb* are more comprehensive than *rabb* in referring to both knowledge and action. *Adab* does not necessarily indicates

knowledge involvement. That is why this word can refer to punishment as well as animal training and hence, contrary to what al-Attas says, it is not specific to humans. Thus, it is mentioned in traditions (ahādith) that “All debauchery is wrong unless in disciplining horses.” (13, p. 216).¹

Finally, contrary to al-Attas, not only *ta'dīb* is not better than *rububiya* in showing the dimensions of education, but it is in fact a subsumption for *rububiya*. This is because *ta'dīb*, at best, refers to ethical and social aspects of education, without including instruction of sciences and the like. This point will be explained further in the next section.²

Now, we can turn to Halstead's suggestion. First, we need to recongize methodological aspects of his view. Relying on Islamic religious texts as resources for exploring the basic elements of Islamic concept of education, Halstead takes an objective standpoint in so far as the methodology of understanding these texts is concerned: “The goals of education are laid down by revealed religion and therefore have an objective quality; they do not vary according to individual opinion or experience.” (8, p. 519)

However, as the recent debates in hermeneutics have shown (17), texts need to be interpreted and by penetrating interpretations different views appear. Even if we avoid radical standpoints in hermeneutics which, following Nietzsche, claim that ‘everything is interpretation’, there is still a far cry to the objective view caliming that meaning is over there in the text. In the actual fact, the discrepancy among Muslim scholars throughout the history of Islam shows that such an objective quality is not defensible. What Halstead himself refers to in the history of Islam shows this well: while Mu'tazilite (rationalist Muslims) believed that the Islamic teachings should be based on reason, the orthodox theologians of al-Ash'ariyya held that whatever revealed from God is reasonable.

This kind of discrepancy appears in the realm of Islamic education as well. For instance, while Halstead himself relies on al-Attas's suggestion on *ta'dīb*, unlike him and rightly, I suppose, delimits this suggestion to one dimension of education, namely social and moral aspect of it. And what is at stake in the present essay is a further sign of discrepancy in understanding and interpreting the Islamic texts.

The second point in Halstead's interpretation of Islamic concept of education is that he equates it with indoctrination. This is in congruence with what advocates of liberal education claim about religious education (including Islamic education) in general. Hirst (10), for instance, has claimed that not only is the phrase of 'religious education' meaningless, but also where it refers to the realm of practice, it indicates indoctrination.

In trying to show a sharp contrast between liberal and Islamic conceptions of education, Halstead also claims that the latter, unlike the former, does not embrace critical view on what is revealed: "Independence of thought and personal autonomy do not enter into the Muslim thinking about education, which is more concerned with the *progressive initiation of pupils into the received truths of the faith.*" (*ibid*, emphasis added) This indicates that education is not a rational matter in which pupils are required to think and judge on what is taught, rather they need to just follow what is revealed from God. In other words, education is the same as indoctrination.

This interpretation of education is based, in turn, on a view of the nature of religion in general and Islam in particular. This view that I would like to call it encyclopedic takes that Islam includes all kinds of true knowledge and information that people need: "...the divine revelation expressed in the shari'a provides them with the requisite knowledge of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and the task of individual is to come to understand this knowledge and exercise their free will to choose which path to follow." (*ibid*, p. 524).

Both of these points, namely the entire meaning of Islamic education and its underlying philosophy of religion, could be challenged. Concerning the nature of Islamic education, it is doubtful to equate it with indoctrination. I have criticised this view elsewhere with reference to Hirst's above-mentioned claim in this regard (6). In addition, it is worth mentioning here that the Prophet of Islam himself in introducing the Islamic teachings prevented people from blind acceptance of their cultural heritage: "Nay! They say: We found our fathers on a course, and surely we are guided by their footsteps...(The warner) said: What! Even if I bring to you a better guide than that on which you found your fathers?" (1, 43: 22-24). This is an invitation to think about the received beliefs. This is

against indoctrination. One should not say that indoctrination in the case of ‘right’ beliefs of Islam is defensible because there is not ‘good’ and ‘bad’ indoctrinations, rather indoctrination is ‘bad’ altogether unless it be inevitable like what occurs in the early childhood where there is no grounds for rational thinking. In addition, when one talks about the ‘right’ beliefs of Islam, this ‘rightness’ need to be understood by the person who is addressed. This shows that admitting indoctrination in the case of ‘right’ beliefs is self-contradictory.

As for its underlying philosophy of religion, there is not enough space here to deal with it properly. It suffices to say that there is neither intra-textual nor extra-textual evidence to support the encyclopedic view of Islam. So far as the intra-textual evidence is concerned, there is no claims in the Islamic texts to indicate that these texts are responsible to give all the knowledge and information that humans need. In fact, religion does not eliminate reason. Neither is there any extra-textual or rational argument to support the encyclopedic view. Actually, there could not be such an argument because according to this view reason goes to holiday.

Finally, the third point in Halstead’s analysis of Islamic concept of education is his triadic structure of three Arabic words of *tarbiya* (cause to grow), *ta’dīb* (to refine, to discipline), and *talīm* (to instruct). According to him, the first word refers to individual development, the second word refers to social and moral education, and the third one refers to acquisition of knowledge. There are a number of challenges to this point.

The first challenge is that *tarbiya* is used in the Qur’an merely to refer to physical upbringing, as al-Attas (5) has also shown, rather than to the extended meaning of individual development. In analysing the word *tarbiya*, Halstead talks about it as an Arabic word. It is worth mentioning that the meaning of words in Arabic language is not determining here, rather, what is important is that to see how they are used in the Qur’an and other Islamic texts. The usage of *tarbiya* in the Qur’an shows that it refers to physical upbringing, as is seen in Pharaoh’s address to Moses: “Did we not bring you up as a child among us...” (1, 42: 18) It is clear that Pharaoh was not concerned about individual development of Moses.

The second challenge is about the passivity supposed for pupils in both *ta'dīb* (social and moral education) and *talīm* (acquisition of knowledge). Concerning the former, Halstead's support of indoctrination was criticized previously. As for the latter, he says: "Islam therefore encourages an attitude of respectful humility towards such legitimate authority and trust in the truth of the knowledge that it hands down." (8, p. 525) How this conclusion could be acceptable in Islam while the Qur'an criticizes the previous prophets' followers for their unreasonable humility toward their '*ulamā'* (the learned)? (1, 9: 31) This indicates that the followers should be critical of the learned and always be aware of the correspondence of their views to the criteria. In other words, authority in itself has no legitimacy.

Again, referring to ibn Khaldun (12), Halstead says: "Muslims have long recognized that students' education is as likely to occur 'through imitation of a teacher...'" (8, p. 525) However, following should not be blindly, rather it must be active and in accordance with criteria. This could be seen in an order given to the Prophet of Islam for following the previous prophets: "These are they whom Allah guided, therefore follow their guidance." (1, 6: 90) What is required here is not an unqualified following to say, for instance, 'follow them'; rather, it is a qualified following limited by guidance. Even though they are prophets, the subsequent prophet should only follow their guidance. This means that following should be criterion-based and hence active and selective.

3. Islamic concept of education: an alternative

It is suggested here to seek the basic components of Islamic concept of education in a word used abundantly in the Qur'an, namely *rububiya*, which refers to God as the Lord. As explained in the first section, al-Attas was right in saying that *tarbiya* (cause to grow) refers merely to physical upbringing. However, he is wrong in giving the same meaning to *rububiya*. The latter is not only used abundantly in the Qur'an, but also it has taken a central position in the endeavours of prophets in providing knowledge and development within people. That is to say, in a nutshell, the prophets invited their people to take God as their Lord and this shows the real essence of Islamic education in particular and

religious education in general. In what follows, this point will be explained further.

Firstly, it should be explained that why invitation to take God as the Lord is regarded central. This is because the human's main problem lies in choosing among the lords. It is inevitable for humans to choose a lord. The human might take his or her own desires as the Lord or those of other peoples or both. Whatever is taken as the source of regulation for the person's deeds, it will be as his or her Lord. When something is taken as the Lord, it begins to shape the person's characteristics according to its own. Thus, there is a clear relationship between choosing a lord and a certain kind of actualization of one's possible states. And this is exactly the point that relates having a lord to education.

Accordingly, Islamic education could be defined as follows: "To know God as the unique Lord of the human and the world, to select Him as one's own Lord, to undertake His guidances and regulations and to avoid what is contrary to them."

According to this definition, education refers to the process of becoming divine. Three basic elements are involved in this process: knowledge (of God as the Lord), choice (choosing God as one's Lord), and action (undertaking God's Lordship throughout one's life). These three elements involve rationality.

Firstly, knowing God as He has introduced Himself in the Qur'an involves rationality. In other words, in order to know God as, to say the least, the unique Lord of the world, or that there will be a day (The Other Day) in which God will be the Lord and will evaluate humans' actions throughout their lives, one needs to understand the reasons God has given for each of the cases in the Qur'an and, thereby, to be persuaded internally without external coercion or indoctrination. As mentioned above, the Qur'an has persisted that a rational belief (including belief in God) could not be based on blind imitation of outstanding personalities or blind acceptance of given traditions. Hence, taking knowledge of the Qur'an about God not only naturally involves rationality. It also requires that one read it and think about what is stated in a rational manner.

Given that knowledge is involved as an element in Islamic education, then the pupils could and should pose doubts about the beliefs and examine their reasonableness. Thus, there could not be

authoritative beliefs that need to be taken by indoctrination. It is worth mentioning here that the Qur'an itself shows that the basic beliefs could be challenged even before God and the answer should be reasonable rather than authoritative: "And when Abraham said: My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead, He said: What! And do you not believe? He said: Yes, but thy heart may be at ease. He said: Then take four of the birds, then cut them to small pieces, then place on every mountain a part of them, then call them, they will come to you flying; and know that Allah is Mighty, Wise." (1, 2: 260)

It should be added that even though there should not be authoritative knowledge and that beliefs should be accepted on the basis of reasonability, rationality is held here in its wide sense. According to this meaning, one not only can positively be rational about what is within the realm of the reason. It is also possible that one be negatively rational and be silent about what is outside the explicit boundaries of the reason. In other words, accepting limits of the reason is itself a rational matter.

The second element, namely choosing God as one's own Lord, also involves rationality. Given that one has acquired rational knowledge about God to the effect that He is the Lord, it is naturally quite rational to choose Him as one's own Lord. Hume's well-known proclamation that there is a logical gap between 'is' and 'ought' might be reclaimed here (11). According to him, one cannot logically deduce an 'ought' from premises each containing an 'is'. It is not needed to deal with this argument in detail here.³ Given that this claim is valid, we are concerned here only about what is rational. In other words, there is a recognizable difference between something being logically valid and rationally valid. Again, rationality here refers to a wide sense of the word. Every logically valid point is rationally valid too, but not necessarily vice versa. While it might not be logically valid to follow an 'ought', given an 'is', it is usually considered rational or reasonable to do so according to the common sense. People, in their every day lives, take it to be rational to change their 'decisions' after becoming aware of some 'facts'.

This common sensical affair could also be expressed in a logical manner, that is to say according to the practical syllogism as it was formulated by Aristotle (3: 1144, b, 14-22). In a practical

sylllogism, a premise containing an 'is' is combined with a premise containing an 'ought' and then a conclusion containing an 'ought' follows. The premise containing an 'ought' in such a syllogism is usually an inner and personal obligation like 'I should experience happiness in my life' and the premise containing an 'is' declares a means-end claim that shows the dependence of happiness on some beliefs or actions. Hence, given the inner obligation, on one hand, and the reasoned statement indicating that God is the Lord of the world (and that happiness depends on being in congruence with the Lord), on the other hand, one can rationally and even logically conclude that he or she should choose and obey the Lord.

Given that the second element of Islamic education, namely choosing God as one's Lord, is rational, it follows that belief in God should also be rational. Mere habit or cultural heritage or indoctrination could not be the basis of the real belief in God. Even though these things are inevitable in the childhood, but as soon as the person reaches rational ability, the inherited beliefs should be shaken by doubts and supported by good reasons; otherwise, they could not be considered as 'beliefs' proper.

Finally, the third element of Islamic education, namely undertaking God's sayings and acting according to them, should also be rational. Thus, there should be reasons for doing the acts. That is why, in the Qur'an, in almost all cases of giving demands for action, some reasons are stated. For instance, in the case of fasting it is stated in this way: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil)." (1, 2: 183) In giving this prescription, God does not take an authoritative position, rather the reason is mentioned immediately after giving the prescription. The reason for fasting is to exercise managing inner inclinations to be able to guard against evil.

According to the third element of Islamic education, rational action is an ineliminable component of education. The two parts of 'rational action' need to be taken into account. As for being 'rational', the actions that a pupil is required to do should be shown to be reasonable. That is to say, blind actions could not have any educative value. Concerning the second part, namely 'action', it should be emphasized that education involves action, that is to say, education is not merely a cognitive or emotive matter, rather the

person should advance some deeds to be able to develop his or her capabilities. Referring to the important place of action in Islam, Rom Harré says: “Muslim moral psychology is the only traditional morality I know of with a well-articulated psychological theory of moral development. It is a conative, not a cognitive, theory ... Hence, all the will-strengthening techniques like the Ramadan fasts and the various other forms of self-denial. They are not to mortify the flesh, a kind of moral sadomasochism; they are to strengthen the will because that is the path of moral development.” (9, p. 244)

Harré is quite right in caliming of a special place for action in Islamic morality. However, as explained above, one should not conclude, as Harré statement might indicate, that this morality is not cognitive at all. ‘Rational action’, being emphasized in Islam, indicates that there should be a cognitive aspect for action. To follow the well-known Kantian phrase, we could say that this is held in Islam: “Action without reason is blind and reason without action is empty.”

Given that action should be reasonable according to Islamic education, it follows that the relationship between pupils and teachers should not be based on mere imitation of teachers’ deeds. Without any doubt, following an exemplar is a necessary part of education, but what is at issue here is that this following should be alongwith insight. The teacher should explain the reasons of his or her actions that should be followed. In this way, the authority of teacher is not for the teacher *per se*, rather it is for the reasons and criteria that accompany the teacher’s deeds.

4. Conclusion

Even though there are important differences between the Islamic and the liberal traditions of thought, it is not an acceptable view to conclude that if rationality is the basic element of education in the liberal tradition, then the real essence of Islamic concept of education should be sought in indoctrination rather than rationality. The question as to what is the essence and boundaries of rationality could be nevertheless considered an open question. As far as the Islamic view is concerned, the human reason is not considered as an omniscient entity (as some of the advocates of liberalism might calim) and, consequently, acknowledgement to the limits of human reason is itself regarded a rational matter. Nevertheless, as it is

shown in this essay, the basic elements of Islamic concept of education have a background of rationality. As the above discussion shows, by appealing to the Islamic concept of *rububiya*, an Islamic concept of education could be suggested which includes three basic elements of knowledge, choice and action. It was shown that, according to the Islamic texts, all the three elements of education have a background of rationality.

Notes

1- Anywhere *ta'dīb* and *talīm* are used as synonyms, it is usually meant by *talīm* the instruction of morality rather than instruction in general. For instance, Imam Ali says who takes himself as a leader for people, he should start with instructing (*talīm*) himself before going to instruct others. In this saying, *ta'dīb* and *talīm* are used as synonyms and it is clear that instruction refers to moral instruction. (2, Kalam: 70)

2- The root 'ra ba ba' is essential than 'ra ba va'. The latter, as well as 'ra ba a' and 'ra a ba', are derived from 'ra ba ba'. It is possible that because of overlaps among these words, the meaning of growth is mistakenly regarded for 'ra ba ba'. (16, under 'ra ba ba')

3- The distinction between fact and value was revived by Moor in the twentieth century (14). He claimed that value cannot be considered as an objective reality and referred to it as 'naturalistic fallacy'. However, Moor in his later works regarded a more considerable role for facts in values but took it as a non-natural characteristic which supervens on facts (15). That is to say, value is regarded as an epi-phenomen (7, p. 320).

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