



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### **The 'Islamic' in Islamic Education: Assessing the Discourse**

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#### **Introduction**

If one were to comb through the extant works from the first few centuries of the history of Muslims to find a book entitled, 'Islam and ...', one would likely be searching in vain. For example, the bibliographical work of al-Nadim (1970, original in the tenth century) does not carry any such title. If a similar search were made today, however, one could fill an entire library with books carrying titles such as Islam and Democracy, Islam and Capitalism, Islam and Science, Islam and the West, and, certainly, Islam and Education.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this indicates a significant shift in the understanding of the very idea of Islam. At the very least, it indicates that Islam, in these contemporary writings, is an object of study or an idea to be juxtaposed with other ideas (Iqbal, 2002). What are the implications of this approach? What is its historical context?

'Islam and education' is a strand within the trend of relating the idea of Islam to other social, political and intellectual ideas. In this sense, the discourse is part of a widely advocated call for the Islamisation of various aspects of society – economics, knowledge and science, politics, etc.

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crucial for mankind. No other system can save human beings from destruction and





“Islam, after all, makes it a duty for everyone to seek knowledge and discover facts, and increase the welfare of mankind.” (Sardar, 1989, p. 25).

“Islamic in the phrase ‘Islamic education’ means that education is intimately related to Islam, which God completed and perfected over fourteen centuries ago.” (Ould Bah, 1998).

In line with the apologetic approach, the idealised conception of Islam is sustained by a reference to a supposed glorious age. For instance, while bemoaning the divide between the secular and the religious in contemporary educational systems, Hewitt (1997) claims that the Islamic concept of knowledge is unitary. In addition to quoting some Qur’anic verses, he claims that, in the past, Muslim scholars were trained both in religious scholarship and in scientific and philosophic fields, which he sees as an example of the practice of the unitary concept of knowledge in Islam. He shows no interest in alternative explanations of why scholars mastered many fields of learning; for instance, the possibility that the mastery of many or all of the fields of learning



training, a reasonable percentage of marks have been allocated to the observation of *ibadah* and Islamic morals and values. “Each prayer of the day should have a credit of one mark and each Friday prayer, two marks.” (p.233)

If macro-level proposals suffer from this lack of creativity, so do the micro-level suggestions. In his over promised title, ‘Putting Statistics in its place: Implications for teaching in Islamic institutions of higher learning’, Ratnawati (2003) regurgitates the familiar arguments about the



The following passage from the interview is an illustration of the interviewees' differing standpoints. In the excerpt, Ms. Hasan is responding to Ms. Manji's assertion that while literalism with regard to a religion's sacred book is found in all the major world religions, only among Muslims is it part of the mainstream.

Hasan: Unlike Irshad, I think that Islam is a religion of moderation. It says in the Qur'an there is no compulsion in religion; you know that religion is a matter of your choice and is a matter of freedom. I disagree with Irshad that literalism is a part of mainstream Islam. I don't think that moderate Muslims are literalists. In fact, most Muslims belong to a school of Islamic thought that believes that the Qur'an is a living document . It even says in the Qur'an, shouldn't they keep looking again and again to the Qur'an ...

Manji: Asma, you know what it says in the Qur'an but really how many Muslims know that that's what it says and more than that how many Muslims actually practice that? I think the kind of Islam that you are describing is Islam in theory. And let's face it, everything is wonderful in theory but you need only open your eyes and take a look at what's happening on the ground among Muslims to know that what you are describing is quite sanitised ...



different set of questions from those that are asked today. For scholars, questions are a tool and the quality of their scholarship is integrally linked with the type of questions they pose. If the question posed is, ‘What is the Islamic concept of knowledge?’ it can easily push one to seek a unified, ahistorical concept of knowledge in a unified, ahistorical notion of Islam. The use of the term ‘Islamic’ as an adjective can become a totalising notion constructed to describe Muslims and their cultures.

However, a question focused on the social actors, the Muslims, allows for the recognition of historical, cultural and social forces that shape societies. If the question is, ‘How have Muslims understood knowledge?’ then we are likely to search for context-based answers that would show that, since their earliest history, Muslims have had a healthy diversity of views with regard to this important epistemological issue. While all Muslims referred to the basic texts (i.e., the Holy Qur’an), their answers were also shaped by their socio-cultural world, theological positions and intellectual dispositions. Thus, one soon realises that there is no single unitary concept of knowledge in Islam; rather, there are many concepts of knowledge held by Muslims in different times and places and that these concepts were interacting with each other and with other pertinent concepts, giving them both a level of stability as well as fluidity.

The focus on the ‘Islamic’ in current discourses on Islamic education thus needs to be revisited. Not as an abstract idealised concept but rather, focused on the concrete historical agency of Muslims. Such a shift might help a better understanding of how Muslims dealt with the intellectual and educational issues of their times. It may show that, while retaining their ideals, Muslims have worked with people of other faiths to engage with problems of their times, be they in practical matters such as medicine or irrigation, in governance and administration, or in intellectual matters. Such findings could both enrich our knowledge and, more importantly, liberate Muslims to seek pertinent solutions.

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