



## **Towards Redefining Education: an Islamic Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of education generated from the secular, western and atheistic theories has characteristically fallen short of addressing the whole of personality since the essence is totally cut off from the spiritual roots and therefore the outlook needs to be redefined in light of the alternative which the Islamic notion of education has provided. This alternative cannot be fully appreciated without referring first to the aforementioned theories. Therefore, the paper first provides a detailed review of the western perspective and aim of education. Given this necessary background the paper proceeds to highlight the significance of the Islamic outlook on education by providing a detailed analysis of the concept, the distinguished features and finally the objectives supposed to be achieved as per the Islamic perspective.*

**Keywords:** Education; Western Education; Islamic Education; Ta'leem; Tarbiyya; Ta'adib; Islam, Prophet.

### **Introduction**

Ideally a given philosophy of education is supposed to help formulate goals and ideas of the best personality needed for society. But most goals of the western, secular and atheistic theories of education are worldly and utilitarian rather than human welfare oriented for they focus on the development of all dimensions of the individual except the spiritual one resulting in harm and injustice to personality. The western perspective of education, for instance, which is a brainchild of the reductive and capitalist world view of western civilization keeps knowledge and values in two separate compartments and does not appreciate any form of knowledge which is not gained by sense perception. It strives principally for the development of the rational self putting heavy emphasis on relativism – knowledge and truth are not absolute and exist in relation to culture, society or historical context, hence neglecting the ethical values. Furthermore its approach is anthropocentric implying that it has exploited education to serve the needs of economic development treating education merely as an economic investment which has produced a materialistic personality in the individual who consequently treats religion and spiritual needs as merely private and not basic to human life and lastly the instructor in this system of education is a mere propagator of information rather than an educator. John Taylor Gatto an American author and school teacher by profession in his book entitled *The Underground History of American Education* in the second chapter 'An angry look at modern schooling' writes:

From the beginning there was purpose behind forced schooling, purpose which had nothing to do with what parents, kids, or communities wanted. School was looked upon from the first decade of the twentieth century as a branch of industry and a tool of governance (**Gatto, 2001**).

John Gatto further quotes President Woodrow Wilson explicitly stating:

We want one class to have a liberal education. We want another class, a very much larger class of necessity to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit them to perform specific difficult manual tasks (**Gatto, 2001**).

Whereas on one hand western civilization claims its educational foundations are based on the teachings of Jesus who is reported to have said, “*Man shall not live by bread alone*” (Matthew 4: 4), on the other hand it believes that economic well being is the only key to progress in all fields of human activity, hence obscuring the real aim of attaining knowledge. It is within this framework during the last two centuries that the western citadels of learning have been carving their curriculum.

### **Education Redefined: The Islamic Alternative**

The Islamic outlook considers education not only a vital dimension of basic human rights but a fundamental prerequisite to fulfilling *huquq Allah* (rights towards God), *huquq al ibad* (rights towards fellow humans), *fara'idh* (obligations) and *mas'uliyah* (responsibilities). Qur'an has made it explicit that the knowledgeable and the ignorant can never be equal:

..... Are those equal, those who know and those who don't know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receives admonition (Al-Qur'an, 39:9).

Moreover the significance of the *hadith*:

Seeking knowledge is compulsory on every believer! (**Al-Qazwini, 2007**) consists in the fact that while believers are entitled to forgo their rights but they are not entitled to abandon an obligation implying that seeking knowledge is more of a responsibility than a human right. This approach makes the Islamic philosophy of education entirely different to the abovementioned theories. The concept of education in Islam does not imply knowledge (*'ilm*) only but a process through which this knowledge (*'ilm*) is inculcated and in this process knowledge stands at the apex of the value system. A unique characteristic of education is that every Muslim in any field of knowledge is considered an educator (*mu'allim*). Islam's approach towards education aims at developing a comprehensive understanding of life. Hence the genesis and aspirations of education in Islam transcends the narrower scope of other systems and concepts of education. Referring to the view of Syed Naquib al-Attas, the educationist J.M Halstead affirms that there exists such profound and absolute difference between the Islamic view of education and the western one that they cannot be reconciled (**Halstead, 1995**).

In its literal sense the Islamic concept of education involves three terms each differing in connotation but embodying various dimensions of the educational process - *ta'leem*, the most widely used word for education in a formal sense coming from the root *'alima* (to know, to be aware, to perceive, to learn) relates to knowledge being sought or imparted through instruction and teaching. *Tarbiyya*, derived from the root *raba* (to increase, grow, to rear) implies a state of spiritual and ethical nurturing.

*Ta'adeeb*, derived from the root *aduba* (to be cultured, refined, well-mannered) implies the social dimensions of a person's development of sound social behavior. Syed Naquib al-Attas

refers to *ta'adeeb* as something encompassing the spiritual and material life of a person that instills the quality of goodness which is sought after (**Al-Attas, 1979**). According to him a person can be considered educated only if imbued with *adab* - someone sincerely conscious of responsibilities towards God and someone who understands and fulfills obligations to one's own self and others in society with *adl* (justice). Education is therefore *ta'dib* - the instilling and inculcation of *adab*, the subject matter of which is *akhlāq* (ethics and morality). In the two popular Arabic dictionaries, *Lisaan al-Arab* and *Al-qamus al-muheet*, these three terms basically mean increasing, growing, reforming, cultivating, or purifying one's knowledge so that one is a well-balanced person inculcated with *adab* (morality) (**Al-Attas, 1979**). Therefore all the three lexicons refer to different aspects of the process of education. They are interrelated in their concern for humans, society, and the environment which in turn are all related to *Allaah* and represent the scope of education in Islam, both formal and informal (**Erfan & Valie, 1995**). Therefore education as envisaged in the context of Islam is a process which involves a person in entirety - the rational, spiritual and social being. Prophet Muhammad (*sa'as*) invoked: O Allaah! You have made good my creation; therefore make good my character! (**Al-Bukhari, 1999**).

This *hadith* implies that the term education refers not only to intellectual growth but broadly includes moral development. Prophet Muhammad (*sa'as*) summarized his educational vision and mission when he said:

I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals! (**Al-Bukhari, 1999**)

The Holy *Qur'an* also connects teaching with purifying one's soul:

He it is Who sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His verses, purifying them (from the filth of disbelief and polytheism) and teaching them the Book and Al-Hikmah (the legal ways, orders, acts of worship of Prophet Muhammad)..... (Al-Qur'an, 62: 2).

Philosophically the concept of education in Islam is theocentric, i.e., God and His will as also His law, His Pleasure and Displeasure are the sole determining norms in terms of which educational policies and programmes for securing the transformation of man in the light of higher ideals would be attempted, so that no man's will but God's will shall come to prevail. As for knowledge, it is gained in order to actualize and perfect all dimensions of the human being. Acquiring knowledge is not intended as an end but a means to stimulate a more elevated moral and spiritual consciousness. The teaching and learning (*ta'allum*) of the natural, human and applied sciences alone does not constitute education. There is some element in knowledge which if not inculcated will not make its teaching, learning and assimilation an education (**Al-Attas, 1980**). The very purpose of seeking knowledge is to inculcate goodness in humans and not to produce just a good citizen as in case of the secular outlook. Here 'good' precisely means a human possessing *adab* encompassing the spiritual and material life. Therefore education, as envisaged in the context of Islam, is a process which involves the complete person - the rational, spiritual and social being. Hence Islam has made it a divine duty to seek education for intellectual and spiritual upliftment. The *Qur'an* warns:

They are losers who besottedly have slain their children by keeping them in ignorance (Al-Qur'an, 24: 141).

Franz Rosenthal in his book *Knowledge Triumphant: the Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* observed:

In Islam, the concept of knowledge enjoyed an importance unparalleled in other civilizations as the concept of knowledge has been given a divine status hardly matched elsewhere **(Rosenthal, 1970)**.

The command to read a portion of the Qur'an every day, suggests in itself, the assurance of literacy which the prophet wanted among both men and women.

- **Education: the Cornerstone of Early Islamic Community**

Education can be envisioned as one of the cornerstones of Islamic civilization and its backbone, Islam. Although Islam emerged in a largely illiterate society, the revelation that lay at its foundation, *Quran*, called itself "The Book". Contrary to popular misconceptions the Quran ushered in an age heralding a quest for knowledge by providing a fresh impulse to awakening energies in the pursuit of intellectual growth which was not confined to any particular gender. The pre-Quranic Arab sense of pride and dignity of the *Aiyyaam I Jahilliyah* (The Age of Ignorance) resting on the patriarchal insistence on the might of the sword was soon replaced by the power of the pen. This is evident from the fact that the Quran instilled a desire for deliberation, reflection, and yearning to learn:

.....and say: my Lord increase me in learning (Al-Qur'an, 20:114)

Further in several instances in the Quran, human beings are asked to extend their reason, intellect, and senses so that they may develop an insight into God's creation and give it a thought. The word *'ilm* (knowledge) and its derivations in the Holy Quran have occurred 805 times, the word *albab* (minds) has occurred 16 times and the word *aql* (reason) and its derivatives have occurred 49 times. According to Akbar Ahmed *'ilm* is also the most often used word in the Quran after the word Allah **(Ali, 2014)**. In order to make a systematic use of thinking believers must learn and therefore the Prophet (sa'as) emphasized:

The learned are the inheritors of the Prophets **(Al-Qazwini, 2007)**.

Islam not only called for continuous work in seeking knowledge, education, research, and study but also called upon the believers to propagate that knowledge. Prophet Muhammad (sa'as) emphasized:

The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr **(Al-Barr, 2000)**.

The Prophet (sa'as) also commanded:

Acquire knowledge because one who acquires it in the way of the Lord performs an act of piety; who speaks of it, praises the Lord, who seeks it adores God; who dispenses instruction in it, performs an act of devotion to God. Knowledge enables its possessor to distinguish what is forbidden from what is not; it lights the way to heaven; it is our society in solitude. With knowledge, the servant of God rises to the heights of goodness and to a noble position, associates with the sovereigns of the world and attains to the perfection of happiness in the next **(Al-Barr, 2000)**.

The Prophet encouraged education both by word and action. In his endeavor to spread education among the Muslims, he used to release educated prisoners from among the unbelievers on a condition that they would teach some of the Muslims to read and write. He considered education to be the foundation of *dunya* (earthly life) and *deen* (earthly life and hereafter). He asserted:

Whoever desires the world must acquire learning and whoever desires the hereafter must acquire learning, and whoever wishes both must also obtain learning.

Humanity is two, the teacher and the taught; there is no good in anything besides these.

All the above-mentioned traditions glorify the superiority of the learned and magnify the undeniable divine nature of education in the Islamic weltanschauung.

### **Objectives of Gaining Knowledge in the Islamic Theory of Education:**

In a recommendation made by 313 Muslim scholars in the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah in 1977, the following aim of education was consensually provided:

Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of man's spirit, intellect, the rational self, feelings and bodily senses. Education should, therefore, cater for the growth of man in all its aspects: spiritual, both individually and collectively, and motivate all these aspects towards goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large (**Husain & Ashraf, 1979**).

Man according to Islam is composed of soul and body.....he is at once spirit and matter....man possesses spiritual and rational organs of cognition such as the heart (*qalb*) and the intellect (*'aql*) and faculties relating to physical, intellectual and spiritual vision, experience and consciousness....His most important gift is knowledge which pertains to spiritual as well as intelligible and tangible realities (**Al-Attas, 1979**).

In Islamic educational theory, the general objective of gaining knowledge is the actualization and perfection of all dimensions of the human being since man is intended to act as the vicegerent of *Allaah* (*Khalifat Allaah*). Indeed it is obedience which is the sum mum bonum of man's existence, as is illustrated in the *aayat*:

I have not created jinn and mankind except to serve Me (Al-Qur'an, 51:56). Therefore, while education does prepare for happiness in this life, its ultimate goal is the abode of permanence and all education points to the permanent world of eternity (*al-aakhirah*) (**Nasr, 1984**). Hence according to the Islamic theory of education gaining knowledge is inseparable from the spiritual life. Acquisition of knowledge is good only if it serves to engender virtue in the individual and elevate the whole community. The *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (sa'as) are the immutable sources for all aspects of both temporal and spiritual life. *Qur'an* is the basis of both moral and general education, and the Holy Prophet (sa'as) the perfect example of *al-insaan al-kaamil* (the Perfect Human). Hence the function of education as Al-Attas remarks is to produce men and women resembling the Prophet (sa'as) as near as possible (**Al-Attas, 1985**).

If the goal of education is the balanced growth of the human character, the heart (*qalb*) which is the seat of the spirit and affection, conscience, feelings, and intuition should receive equal attention to the intellect (*'aql*), reason (*mantiq*) and man's rational dimensions. To ascertain truth by complete reliance on reason alone is restrictive since both spiritual and temporal reality is two sides of the same sphere. Indeed the highest form of knowledge is the perception of God (*idrak*) which cannot be realized in any other way than through faith (*imaan*). Hence to favour reason at the expense of spirituality hampers balanced growth. Technically, education in Islam encompasses a whole lot more than just becoming knowledgeable and literate. Becoming an educated person does involve reading, writing, and comprehension but it also includes possessing *husn-al-akhlaaq* (good manners), good character, moral upbringing, the ability to learn from experience, emphatic interpersonal relations with others, and a strong desire to please the Divine. The Qur'an emphatically asserts:

... verily only those of His servants fear Allah who have the knowledge, verily Allah is Mighty, Most Forgiving (Al-Qur'an, 35: 28).

Prophet Muhammad (sa'as) relayed that the best parents are those who provide the best of education which includes the best of manners (Al-Bukhari).

The objective of seeking knowledge is also well deliberated upon by some prominent Muslim educationists. The two prominent medieval thinkers, for instance, Ibn Miskawih and Al-Ghazali asserted that knowledge and education nourish both the soul and the mind; Allama Iqbal observed the reading of history and learning lesson from it as a basic necessity of education; Al-Ibrashi emphasizes purity and sincerity leading to character building as one of the main objectives of education; Baidawi discusses three types of education -first type as "charismatic education" in which religion gets the supreme position, the second type as "education for culture" in which social distinction is emphasized and the third type "specialist education" in which a special knowledge or skill is provided; and lastly Seyyed Hossein Nasr has asserted that while education does prepare humankind for happiness in this life, its ultimate goal is the abode of permanence and all education points to the permanent world of eternity. To sum up, the prominent Islamic educationist S.A Ashraf says,

Separating the spiritual development of the human being from the rational and temporal aspects of the person is the main cause for the disintegration of the human personality (Ashraf, 1993).

## Conclusion

Education from the Islamic perspective is a twofold process – acquiring intellectual knowledge through the application of reason and logic, and spiritual knowledge which is derived from divine revelation and spiritual experience. Both of the processes have been obligated in the divine revelation as well as prophetic traditions, and so provisions are to be made equally for both. Education is not meant to be an end unto itself but only a means to stimulate a more elevated moral and spiritual consciousness leading to faith and righteous actions. Education in

Islam transcends the narrower scope of other concepts of education and has a temporal as well as a supratemporal goal.

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