

How Can Education Be Islamic? Al-Attas and Al-Farūqī's Frame works in Contemporary Debate

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Abstract

The field of Islamic education has seen a major development in the last decades: theories, methods and curricula have been developed to create an educational framework that would be authentically Islamic. However, its developments seem to have remained interest of Muslim pedagogists and thinkers, and not of the wider academic community. In our essay we will briefly outline classical problems in Islamic education, introduce two of the most influential theoretical frameworks – elaborated by M.N. al-Attas and I. al-Farūqī – and discuss their contemporary effects. Both epistemological grounds and concrete applications will be presented.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Pedagogy, Islamization of Knowledge, al-Attas, al-Farūqī

1. Introduction

The educational challenges of the contemporary world have put Muslim pedagogists in front of a predicament: either to retreat to the traditional forms of Islamic education or to develop new frameworks to incorporate Western knowledge. The reformist efforts which chose to tread the second path have given rise to the field of “Islamization of Education”. In contemporary Western pedagogical discourse, however, Islamic educational thought is not viewed as an epistemological or pedagogical novelty, and it is common to read that “Islam did not generate, as it didn’t feel the need to, a pedagogical conceptualization – a pedagogical ‘discourse’ – comparable to the one of modern and post-modern Christian Europe” (Granese, 2010: 286). The purpose of our essay is to provide the Western scholar of educational research the tools to understand the current field of Islamic educational thought, both in terms of difference with Western thought and with Classical Islamic paradigms of education. We will be first highlighting the main phases of Islamic educational thought, and then compare the two most important paradigms of contemporary Islamic pedagogy, respectively attributed to Syed Muhammad al Naquib al-Attas (b. 1931) and to Isma‘īl Rāji al-Fārūqī (1921-1986). The last part of the article will be dedicated to the latest, contemporary developments in the field, as well as to a critical discussion.

1.1 A short history of Islamic pedagogy

The history of educational thought, in the Islamic world, is closely related to the development of its theology (Schmidtke, 2016)–for theology provides the basic dogmatic content of education, as well as a framework for the relative importance and holiness of different subjects – as well as political institutions – as the main learning institution of Islamic learning, the madrasa, as well as the standardization of its curricula, have been a mainly political achievement (Makdisi, 1981). To simplify, it is possible to divide the development of Islamic pedagogy in three phases (Bocca-Aldaqrē 2018: 32-54): its foundation (VIII-X century), codification (XI-XIV century), and stagnation (XV-XIX century). In the foundational period, essays were written where topics of pedagogy were intertwined with juridical and social considerations. For example, the works of Ibn-Saḥnūn and al-Miskawayh (Cook, 2010) mix discussions about the liceity of paying money to a teacher and ethical considerations, with pedagogical topics such as the programs of study and the appropriate methods for teaching, respectively. The period of codification, instead, is characterized by a formulation of “pedagogical orthodoxy”. The basic curricula are more or less comparable across the Muslim world, and works like al-Ghazālī’s “o Son” are fully formed pedagogical treatises.

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Other later authors, such as Ibn Khaldun, devote considerable attention to child education in their works, criticizing the habits of rote learning and advocating for the development of critical thought in students (Wartini, 2015). The third period, the one of stagnation, is characterized – as many other areas of Islamic thought of the same period (al-Alwani, 1991) – by a lack of innovation and even of composition of new works. Authors limit themselves to summarize older treatises, transposing them in poetry or commenting them (al-Ramlī, 2013). The end of this period is marked by the birth of different movements of reform (Coulson, 2017: 182-201) that have appeared in the Muslim world. Although Islamic reformism is a well-known topic in western history of ideas, the pedagogical aspects have not been yet explored.

2. Frameworks of modern Islamic education

Modern Islamic education originates from the dissatisfaction of Muslim pedagogists and educators with the lack of innovation and relevance of traditional curricula, which created a fracture in many Muslim societies. Some pupils continued attending madrasas, studying religious sciences and becoming imams or *'ulama'*, and therefore perpetuating this type of tradition of learning, while others attended secular schools – whose curricula and style was usually a direct replication of the respective colonizer country's school – gaining usually better socio-economical perspectives for their professional development. The necessity of making education at the same time deeply Islamic and competitive, instead of just adding an Islamic varnish to Western models is shared by virtually all Muslim pedagogist; however, it is possible to identify different epistemological centers, and therefore methods and paths to reach this objective. The first step towards a creation of an Islamic philosophy of education has been, in 1977, the First World Conference on Muslim Education, held in Mecca. The purpose of the meeting was diagnostic: the critical situation of Islamic education was well-known to all participants, what was still left to do was to identify the causes and counteract them effectively. Although the colonial past was not too distant for many of the participants, it was necessary was to avoid accusations to the West, and adopt an approach as pragmatical as possible. The acts of the conference (Al-Attas, 1979) are a precious tool to understand early interests in Islamic education.

The work was followed up by several other related publications, which became known as the “Islamic Education Series.” *Crisis in Muslim education* (Husain & Ashraf, 1979) highlights the conflicts between tradition and modernity in social as well as natural sciences; *Education and Society in the Muslim World* (Khan, 1981) relates educational problems to wider issues of the Muslim lands, such as mass media consumption, as well as discussing the educational situation of Muslims in the West. Finally, *Curriculum and teacher education* (Al-Afendi & Baloch, 1980) identifies two parallel paths that Islamic education has to work on: developing curricula – for both students in the Muslim lands and in the West – and educate the teachers – therefore working in the Universities, in faculties of education and Islamic studies alike. After having identified the main challenges, several figures have started working at a comprehensive theoretical view of Islamic education. The most important thinkers have been al-Attas and al-Farūqī, whose educational ideas we will illustrate now.

2.1 Al-Attas and the ISTAC

Syed Muhammad al Naquib al-Attas has been the editor of the acts of the First World Conference on Muslim Education, which we pinpointed as the official beginning of modern Muslim educational thought. A key figure in Malaysian Islam, the effects of his thought – both philosophical and educational– are widespread in the Muslim world (al-Attas, 2010). His work *The Concept of Education in Islam* (al-Attas, 1980), is perhaps the beginning of the modern field of theoretical Islamic educational (Halstead, 2004). Several important issues are highlighted in this work; in our short analysis we will limit ourselves to three of them: the definition of education, the role of the University, and the effect of Western thought on Islamic education.

Let us start with the definitional effort. Al-Attas argues that, going back to the Quranic roots of Islamic thought, the most appropriate Arabic term to refer to education would be *ta'dib*, and not *tarbiya*. What might seem like a purely philological distinction hides instead a theoretical differentiation: *ta'dib* contains a strong moral connotation – from the same root derives the Islamic discipline of *adab*, or good manners – while *tarbiya* is a more direct translation of the Latin *educere*, from which the English word ‘education’ derives. Islamic education, for al-Attas, has a strong metaphysical grounding: “recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence” (Al-Attas, 1980: 21) Another reason for suggesting that Islamic Education should be identified with *adab*, is the coexistence, in this term, of knowledge (*'ilm*) as well as concrete actions (*'amal*).

This idea of al-Attas, although very influential, has not been accepted by the unanimity of Muslim pedagogist. The main academical criticism to this theory has been the fact that the term *ta'dib* is absent in the Qur'an, and that virtually all classical Islamic educational thought has instead referred to the term *tarbiya* to talk about Islamic education (Noaparast, 2012). The second key aspect of al-Attas' educational theory is his vision of what a University should be. In his view, learning should rotate around three "metaphysical poles": religious (or obligatory) sciences, rational-intellectual-philosophical sciences (also called communal obligations), and finally cohesive sciences, i.e. those that should bring together the other two categories to create a holistic experience of learning. This model should, in al-Attas' framework, overcome the dichotomy between religious and secular learning that is so widespread in the Muslim world. Al-Attas' view of the ideal University has not remained purely theoretical, rather has found application in the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Institute is both a University and a research facility, and has produced a wide variety of publications on the topic of Islamization of education. The final aspect of al-Attas' theory of education regards the influence of the West and its ideology on the Islamic world. He believes that even "rational" sciences, although they are based on experimental data, are not without ideological superstructures. This is the aspect in which "Islamization of knowledge" should happen. Muslim scientists, philosophers, and pedagogists should identify foreign elements in quantitative sciences and then proceed to remove them, creating a type of knowledge containing no elements contrary to the Islamic worldview.

2.2 Al-Farouqi: *tawhīd*

In parallel to al-Attas' theoretical work and implementations, Isma'īl al-Fārūqī was approaching Islamic education with different methods. The central term for Islamic education, for al-Farūqī, is the concept of *tawhīd*. The term is borrowed from Islamic dogmatic (*'aqida*) as well as theology (*'ilm al-kalām*), where it is used to connote Islamic monotheism. Literally, *tawhīd* means "reunification", and when applied to the concept of the Divine means "affirming and declaring that God is one" (Nakamura, 2001: 27). In an educational context, al-Farūqī operates a definitional shift, affirming that "*Tawhīd* is the affirmation of the unity of the sources of truth. God is the Creator of nature from whence man derives this knowledge." (al-Farūqī, 1983: 45) This epistemological basis is indeed crucial. In a way, it makes islamization of knowledge something a step further than al-Attas' idea. Not only it is necessary to remove foreign ideas from Western curricula, as al-Attas suggested, rather to remold the whole of knowledge, following three dimensional axes: knowledge, life and history. By unity of knowledge, Farūqī means abolishing the dichotomy between rational (*'aqlī*) and revealed (*naqlī*) disciplines, a classical distinction operated by scholars such as ibn Khaldūn (Bocca-Aldaqre 2018: 65). This idea is radically different from both classical Islamic educational theory and from al-Attas' view. While for traditional Islamic pedagogy revealed sciences are the basis or the guide following which to develop experimental knowledge, or to orient reasoning, for al-Farūqī this distinction just represents another form of dualism and is as such contrary to the principle of *tawhīd*.

The second type of unity to be sought by Islamic education regards life, meaning accepting that every science would be "value-loaded", and therefore it would be incorrect to think about disciplines with a clear moral value, compared to others without it. The last type of unity concerns history: al-Farūqī aims at eliminating the distinction between individual and social sciences. It is necessary, in his vision, to create disciplines that would be at the same time humanistic but would be able to keep into account the communitarian (*umma*) dimension of the Islamic model. The overall aim of the Islamization of knowledge, both by al-Attas and al-Farūqī, is the same: not only to increase Islamic content in a curriculum or in an idea of learning borrowed from the West, but to rediscover Islamic tradition (especially the Quranic roots, as in much of reformist Islamic thought), overcoming its historical limits, and therefore creating something new.

3. Contemporary developments

Although very influential, the idea of "islamization" of knowledge has also undergone heavy criticism. For Fazlul Rahman (Rahman, 1988), for example, knowledge is created already Islamic: God puts it in the mind of man, and therefore creating maps and diagrams of knowledge would be a useless pursuit. Another important criterion, to evaluate the effort of islamization of education, is asking whether, after the development of the educational frameworks we have described, something actually did change in Islamic education? While in the Muslim world it is now common to talk about "Islamic education" as a factual discipline (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004), in the West no radical theoretical difference is identified between classical Islamic pedagogy and the Islamization of education movement. In 2017, the ISTAC – al-Attas' institute – published a special issue of the journal *al-Shajarah* on the theme of education.

The heterogeneity of contents shows how much the activities of ISTAC evolved from being simply a development center for a theory of education; many are the contributions with a practical objective. For example, one of the contributions (Preece, 2017) proposes a method for teaching religious subjects in English; the aim is exploiting learning a purely linguistic competence to deepen religious practice and learning. This highlights the shift that the ISTAC has gone through in the latest years. From a purely philosophical and epistemological effort, primarily interested in metaphysics and secondarily in education, it has followed the methods of contemporary pedagogical research. However, the theoretical nucleus of the islamization of knowledge remains the same; the latest work published by the ISTAC, *Islamization of Modern Science and its Philosophy. A Contemporary Civilization Discourse* (Ali, 2016), even though aims at facing contemporary issues in the islamization of knowledge, makes no changes in the theoretical framework. The fundamental narrative remains the same: Muslim pedagogists have to identify, inside contemporary science, those elements that are foreign to Islam, and develop instead a “truth-based” science, which is a more neutral synonym of Islamization of knowledge.

Another contemporary development in the field of Islamization of knowledge is the IIT. An initiative connected to the thought of al-Farūqī, it focuses on pedagogy, developing intensive courses, teacher training, and exchanges with numerous Universities and Institutes. The IIT, differently from the ISTAC, has kept the nucleus of its teaching in the field of religion. It created the discipline of “Islamic Studies Pedagogy”, which is a suitable methodology for the teaching of religion, with a strong focus on social problems specific to Muslims in the contemporary US context. On the theoretical side, instead, the IIT has proved much more diverse than the ISTAC. One of the latest monographs published on the topic of Islamic education (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017), *Rethinking Reform in Higher Education: From Islamization to Integration of Knowledge*, starting from specific observations on contemporary philosophy of science, arrives to a completely new reading of what Islamic education means. For the authors, the main challenge is to overcome dualism, and to achieve a type of knowledge which would be both integrative and inclusive, borrowing the terms from the philosopher Jearn Gebser. This work is a highly innovative theoretical framework for Islamic education philosophy which, although maintaining the same objectives of al-Farūqī’s reading of *tanhīd*, moves towards a more integrated view of Islamic education: an entangled whole of knowledge and values. This is, perhaps, what defines the identity of contemporary Islamic educational thought. This concept, indeed, exited the field of Muslim pedagogists, and entered into the discourse of theologians and thinkers. For al-Qaradawi, for example, “a lesson of physics or of chemistry, or of geography, if it is presented by a Muslim teacher and from a Muslim point of view, has an effect on the student that is greater than a formal lesson of religion”². Therefore, contemporary Muslim educational thought is moving away from the term “islamization” of knowledge, and towards the seeking of an “harmonization”.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the modern concept of Islamization of education should be start from an examination of the tradition of Islamic pedagogy. To summarise the subdivision we proposed, it is possible to identify a beginning – in which the theological nuclei of educational thought were pointed out – a development – in which orthodoxy was codified – and then a decline – similar to what has been described of other Islamic disciplines – in which no new ideas have been developed, and Islamic thought encountered a sort of stagnation. The two modern frameworks of Islamic education that have been compared in this article are an attempt at finding an authentic Islamic solution to pedagogical problems. However, as we discussed, such approaches might not be applicable for Muslim everywhere. The main problem is the rhetorical distinction that both al-Attas and al-Farūqī operate between Islam and the West. Recent efforts (al-Zeera, 2001) try to transcend completely the more “political” or “geographical” dimensions of Islamic education, focusing instead on spiritual or metaphysical contents. However, the observation that there is something inherently incompatible between the Islamic tradition and Western Science does not necessarily have a political connotation. Even a thinker with a deeply exoteric and apolitical approach, such as S.H. Nasr, wrote that Muslims must “incorporate positive elements of modern science inside a world vision in which God reigns supreme” (Nasr, 1984) To conclude, we hope to have introduced the reader to the field of modern Islamic education, providing a context in respect to Islamic traditional educational thought.

²Vedi W. Wenzel-teuBer, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

We hope that, through the comparative analysis of two of the most influential thinkers in the field, al-Attas and al-Farūqī, as well as their reception in contemporary thought, we might have been able to show glimpses of the variety of educational approaches and the type of discourse proper of Muslim educational thought nowadays.

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