



The Westernization of Islamic Education

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Abstrak: Seiring dengan meningkatnya cengkeraman kolonialisme Amerika di dunia muslim, yang diawali pada tahun 1991 dengan menyerbu Irak, dan memperoleh momentum pasca-9/11 dengan pendudukan Irak dan Afghanistan, ada banyak upaya Barat untuk mereformasi kurikulum sekolah dan merevisi buku teks. Dari Arab Saudi hingga Indonesia, para pejabat Amerika menekan pemerintah setempat untuk menghilangkan apa saja yang dianggap mereka sebagai menyokong "kekerasan dan terorisme". Di saat yang sama, disadari bahwa sistem Barat sendiri sedang mengalami kebangkrutan. Persoalan ekonomi global, kerusakan ekologi, kejahatan dan ketimpangan sosial, semakin memusingkan pihak Barat. Artikel ini mencoba melacak asal-mula westernisasi pendidikan Islam, sambil menawarkan alternatif pemulihan vitalitas pendidikan Islam, yang kemungkinan besar bergantung pada nilai ketimuran yang ramah dan berbasis komunal. **Kata Kunci:** *Westernisasi, Amerika, pendidikan Islam.*

Introduction

With the increasing American colonial presence in the Muslim world, beginning with the 1991 war against Iraq and gaining momentum on the heels of 9/11 with recent invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been numerous efforts aimed at reforming school curricula and revising textbooks. From Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, American officials have been pressuring local governments to eliminate anything that the Americans say promotes "violence and terrorism."

At a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in 1993, opposition members of the Kuwaiti parliament framed this in terms of teaching a "new American religion." In Afghanistan, Kabul is crawling with American and European consultants, many of whom are involved in reforming schools according to the latest educational fads. Several efforts have been made along the same lines in Iraq, though the efforts are slowed by the war of resistance and corruption among the Western consultants themselves.

The same types of pressures are mounting all over the Muslim world, coupled with American military threats. These efforts at reform are seen as "Westernization of Islamic education." While that might be true, it is certainly not new. In fact, if we are serious about understanding this issue, we will need to look back to earlier instances of Western colonialism in the Muslim world, which has had a profound impact on education, and which involved local players as much as foreign invaders.

To fully grasp the impact of Westernization, it is necessary to briefly survey how Islamic education worked prior to colonialism. An important factor in traditional Islamic education was its informality, in both form and content. Even within a single locale, there was a wide variety of schools, institutions, and other opportunities to learn. In Egypt, for example, where the great Islamic university of Al-Azhar was



established, the wide variety of sultans, scholars, bureaucrats, and Muslim community leaders involved with constructing and maintaining institutions of learning, ensured that there would be diversity among those institutions and that no single structure would dominate the others. While some of the later rulers attempted to institutionalize schooling and bring it under control of the state, those efforts did not take root until after the colonial incursions of the early 19th century.

An important feature of informality in education was the student-teacher relationship. Before institutionalization, teachers were not salaried by the state; they made or inherited their livelihoods independently of their academic activities. There were also no diplomas or degrees; instead, students received an *ijazah*, an informal recommendation from a leading scholar to teach the knowledge he or she had learned. Only in an institutional setting, either when introduced in Egypt partially under the Mamluks, or, more broadly during the colonial period, were these informal and personal authorities replaced by a system of formal and hierarchical qualifications and certificates.

The Islamic approach to educating religious scholars, though utilizing books, primarily emphasized oral sources and transmissions. In such a system, a book is only a valid medium of study in so far as it has been learned by way of a living authority. This learning involved, among other things, students essentially writing their own books based on recitations by the teacher and developed through discussions with the teacher. This oral mode of learning and inquiry is embedded in Arabic, the language of Islam, with its tri-consonantal root system brought to life by what is literally called the “movement” (*harakat*) of vowels. The precise meaning of words in such a language can only be ascertained by listening to them being spoken. Written texts, therefore, are secondary. In fact, some medieval Muslim scholars considered it scandalous to base one's education solely on books. This is illustrated by the informal study sessions that students engaged in when the teacher left, which involved reading out loud, for, as one scholar put it, “what the ear hears becomes firmly established in the heart.”

This points to another key component of precolonial education: the primacy of memorization. After a core of fundamental materials was memorized and could be easily reproduced, students would then be encouraged to develop their ability to critically apply the memorized materials to specific academic and legal problems. This method of training enabled Muslim scholars to produce rigorous critical responses to both ancient and contemporary texts, and it was common to organize academic exchanges around the criticism and disputation of controversial questions.

Mamluk Formalization

However, even with this strong and vibrant legacy of informality in Islamic education, it would be unfair to say that institutionalized formal education came only with Western colonization. The Mamluks had already begun some formalization of religious education in Cairo by creating a network of institutions, many of which were endowed by the government. This was partly in the name of ideological hegemony, since Al-Azhar was established as a Shiite center of learning, and the Mamluks sought to bring it more into the Sunni ideological sphere.



In the form of stipends and other payments, the government endowments were distributed primarily to the educated classes and the urban elite, who began to slowly take over the responsibility of passing on the corpus of Islamic learning. At the same time, this creeping institutionalization never led to complete formalization of the educational process, and a strong legacy of informality guaranteed a vigor and an openness that was missing from Western institutions throughout the same period.

Despite the early attempts at institutionalization, Muslim centers of learning did not cater only to an elite class of intellectuals. Many local people worked as functionaries in the madrasahs, as muezzins, assistants to Friday Prayer leaders, readers of poetry in praise of the Prophet, or as language teachers, writing teachers, and scribes. These services also entitled them to study with some of the most prominent scholars of the day. Even so, there was some tension, highlighted in a treatise by Ibn Al-Hajj (d. 1336), who chastised the learned elite of the day for dressing ostentatiously and alienating ordinary people from higher learning.

Most schools also kept numerous people on staff who recited Qur'an, and, during certain times of the year, recited hadith from a number of well-known compilations. As one recent scholar has noted, "The prominence of organized groups of Qur'an readers at virtually every school may suggest that one of the principle reasons why the academic and nonacademic spheres mixed so harmoniously was that these were more than mere institutions of education. They were also centers of public worship." The recitation of hadith was a widely acceptable community activity involving both men and women from all walks of life, and the teaching of this crucial branch of Islamic knowledge resided in a very open world that drew no rigid boundaries between academic instruction and religious devotion in which large and diverse groups of Muslims could participate.

Laying the Groundwork

To summarize Islamic learning in Egypt up until the colonial period, one could outline several components of traditional education, which was relatively consistent from Al-Azhar University in urban Cairo to small rural mosques and other places of village learning, although similar patterns could be found throughout the Islamic world. Muslim learning of the period most often occurred as part of the practice of a particular trade, profession, or craft and was not distinctly separate as institutionalized schooling.

The legal profession, for example, was centered on the local masjid, while other professions and trades were studied within their own contexts. Professional learning was not distinctly separated into rigid categories of students and teachers. Various relationships between teachers and students existed between many members of the vocational or professional group. As a recent historian has noted, Muslim learning at the time "did not require overt acts of organization, but found its sequence in the logic of the practices themselves."

Among the first educational institutions that Muhammad Ali established were military schools, which confined and restrained students and which were administered by both French and Egyptian



military officers and academics, many of whom had been trained at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. The new school system quickly supplanted many of the traditional centers of learning, causing the British Orientalist E. W. Lane to remark in the 1830s that, "Learning was in a much more flourishing state in Cairo before the entrance of the French army than it has been of late years. It suffered severely from this invasion; not through direct oppression, but in consequence of the panic which this event occasioned, and the troubles by which it was followed." (Heyworth-Dunne). As one of the first modern autocratic rulers of the Muslim world, Muhammad Ali was concerned with training a technocratic elite that would help shore up his power and establish order; there was no room for debate or consultation.

By the 1840s, Muhammad Ali seemed to have realized that traditional village learning and Islamic education constituted a threat to this power. Faced with local rebellion, and since the specialized French technical schooling could not be extended to everyone, the newly Westernized ruling elite of Cairo became interested in British factory schooling to use as a tool for controlling the masses. By the 1840s, Muhammad Ali's sons and successors had further entrenched modern schooling, but, while the early technical schools were first intended to build an army and experts in the military sciences, the new factory schools were geared toward producing national subjects of the newly emerging state. Muhammad Ali had begun sending students to England to study the Lancaster factory school method, and these students were instrumental in bringing the Lancaster system to Egypt in the 1840s, coinciding with an increasing British hegemony in the region in the 19th century.

A primary component of the Lancaster method was to redistribute authority by a system of monitors, thus diffusing disciplinary power throughout the school and integrating each student into the institutionally ordered system. By 1847, Western-trained local school supervisors had laid plans to establish the new schools throughout the country, forming a network of national schools, which was the sign of the times, as national schools had become the order of day to the north, throughout Europe.

In Egypt, the new style of teaching was based on instilling obedience and discipline to students and the memorizing of centrally designed and distributed textbooks and curricula. The British and their local proxies demanded this new regime of obedience and discipline, primarily to build a servile class of local clerks and administrators for the growing arm of the British empire in the region. Even the very few Egyptians who were rewarded with any positions of authority could only do so as proxies, but without any sense of initiative or leadership.

The newly Westernized school system in Egypt, as throughout most of the Arab and Muslim worlds, served two basic functions:

- To provide well-trained armies for policing Western financial investments, which also entailed training a servile ruling class and an obedient populace
- To systematically undermine and replace local culture with a Western-derived system of political and economic order

`Urabi Nationalist Revolt



By the time of the 'Urabi nationalist revolt in 1881, even local resistance to the colonial order had come to be expressed within the framework of Western terms. One of the demands of the revolt was to provide schooling—British and French style—for all members of Egyptian society, not just the technocrats who were running the country and policing foreign investments. The new nationalists seized power partly in the name of “national education,” and one of the first official acts of the new leader, Ahmed 'Urabi, was to lay the foundation stone for a new Western-style school, after giving a speech asserting the necessity of a “good education,” which by this time was almost entirely according to Westernized definitions. The revolt, however, was short lived. Alarmed at the danger to their resources and investments in the region, European commercial interests agreed to let the British navy move into Egypt and restore order.

British warships destroyed Alexandria in 1882; the British then occupied the country and installed a more compliant ruler. More importantly, national aspirations would continue to be framed almost entirely in terms of Western assumptions, demonstrating that the methods employed by the colonialists had been adopted at every level of the society, even by the anti-imperialist national liberation movement, as well as by the Islamic reformists.

Eventually, the highest religious authority of Egypt at the time, Muhammad Abduh, would seek the wisdom of the French Orientalist, Gustav Le Bon. As several historians have pointed out, the “reformed Islam” envisioned by Abduh was to be a formal system of social discipline through which the ruling elite would inculcate a new style of “political education,” which was intended to insure the stability and development of the modern state. This function of national schooling and university education was based on Abduh's reading of the French social scientists, especially Le Bon, whom Abduh admired.

In his position of the highest ranking religious scholar at Al-Azhar, Abduh called for a new restructuring of the famed center of Islamic learning. Abduh also worked toward the revision of Islamic law to conform with the new technical knowledge coming from Europe, which he, along with his mentor Jamaluddin al-Afghani, mistakenly saw as the sum total of all human knowledge. By the mid-20th century, the colonization of Al-Azhar had been completed to the point that the newly appointed rector was himself a student of another French social scientist, Emile Durkheim of the Sorbonne.

As canons replaced cannons in the Western drive for world domination, redirecting Islamic law for political and economic expediency became a technique that was used throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Western colonizers utilized this technique with great effect on Muslim peoples, and with full complicity of many local leaders. This colonial order was implemented in the guise of modern schooling, and its legacy remains today.

This problem is found throughout the Muslim world where schools and universities generally run on a pattern imposed by or inherited from a formal colonial power. And adding insult to injury, the Westernized system in many places has become decrepit, plagued by overstuffed classes, poorly trained and underpaid faculty, favoritism, nepotism, and ineffective research institutions. Those students who make it through this system with any semblance of distinction are almost immediately siphoned off by



recruiters from the former colonial powers, where they are given prestigious scholarships and appointments in Western universities. In such a system, the Islamic world has given up its intellectual and moral leadership of the world, which has been given to or taken by the Western powers, led by the re-configured global imperialism of the United States.

French Influence

Although American hegemony pervaded the Muslim world in the post-war period, French intellectual sway also continued throughout the 20th century; in the mid-20th century, Sayyid Qutb and other modern Muslim intellectuals turned to the work of French philosophers like Alexis Carrel. However, during the 20th century, there was a radical shift in the use of Western thinking: Rather than accepting it as a total system of thought to be implemented, modern Islamic thinkers and activists like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt or Ali Shariati in Iran (who met Franz Fanon while studying in France) had begun to use Western discourse against itself, in some cases as part of a larger project of rediscovering and implementing a framework of thought and life grounded in Islam, while simultaneously dismantling the colonial derived system.

It is these Westernized Islamic movements that are under attack now, with Qutb's work the guiding force behind Islamic revivalism in the Sunni world, and Shariati's among the Shias, especially in Iran. And it is also this strand of thinking that has had some success in more fully throwing off the shackles of colonialism, the Islamic revolution in Iran being the most obvious case. Yet, even there, one can find an educational system that is basically still structured according to the way it had been built by the Pahlavi dynasty, albeit with a fair amount of Islamization since the revolution. But even the fiercely independent hawzah system of higher Islamic learning in Iran has given in to the pressures of modernity by offering equivalencies in modern university degrees.

School in the Modern Social Order

The same story could be told elsewhere, and the unavoidable conclusion is that school and education have become part of the modern social order, to the extent that this modern social order reflects the norms and structures of the modern world, which itself has emanated from the Western experience and spread through colonialism to globalization. School can do nothing but serve that system.

After independence from the colonial powers, the basic colonial infrastructure of schooling and universities remained. Although in places it has been, to one degree or another, "Islamized," the basic structure was not questioned: the system of certificates, the age-graded sequence, the length of the school day and class periods, and the calendar of five days a week, ten months a year, for twelve years. This has remained unchanged. What we see today, even in the guise of Islamic education, is basically the same old drab and dull colonialist-derived and Western-imposed system of schooling, with a few new local colors added.



While there is a great deal of intellectual activity around defining Islamic education, there has been much less demonstrated in practice. This is not due to a failure of ideas, but rather, it is testimony to the pervasiveness of the modern Western way of viewing the world. This view of the world is an economist view of the world, where the purpose of education is to achieve financial security; and it is a nationalist view of the world, where the purpose of education is to ensure national security.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the Western system itself has become impoverished and its chief proponents are now desperate. With problems in the global economy and ecological breakdown abroad, not to mention the increasing move by the Americans toward normalizing global warfare, and crime or social depravity at home, the Western system itself is on the verge of implosion.

The Challenge

The challenge for Muslims, and other Third World peoples is what to do in the absence of that system. For those who are concerned, there are basically three choices:

- Pretend that the Western system is healthy and prosperous, and continue to live under its illusions of supremacy.
- Wait until the Western system fully collapses and then scramble with everyone else to figure out what to do next.
- Walk out of that system now, in advance of its collapse, and work toward building another more viable way of life that is not based on greed, hypocrisy, and injustice, which have become the earmark of the Western world order today.

This new way of life, of which some different forms of education will be an essential part, will likely take shape locally, in myriad ways and according to local cultural forms and ecological systems. It will be a sustainable way of life that knows and respects limitations; it will be a way of life that is based on conviviality and community; and it will be a way of life that gives meaning to existence beyond the materialistic norms of Western modernity. It is that way of life which will give birth to its own new education.

Sources

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