# Compassionate Transformation as the Ethical Core of Islamic Pedagogy

Education is a value-laden process that closely reflects the wider cultural reality of a given society . In this sense, the 'Islamic' in 'Islamic Education or Islamic pedagogy' can be simply taken to refer to a distinct educational perception grounded within the teachings of Islam and its wider value framework. Thus, there is an inevitable theological hermeneutics present in the qualification of the educational process as Islamic. By bringing the core Islam ic values to bear on the meaning of education, the theological framework springs from a deeper understanding of Islam itself. If this theological dimension is disregarded or naively taken for granted, the 'Islamic' in the expression will function as an ideological heuristic that inaccurately leads to a monolithic and dogmatic conception of education within Muslim faith. Above all, understanding education within Islamic sources or 'interpreting education Islamically' are human activities that are inevitably limited, contextual and subject to critique and revision. Islam has become a world civilization precisely because its core spiritual values have shaped diverse cultures , and, in turn, Islam itself has become creatively interpreted and articulated within the different historical, cultural and geographical landscapes.

Scholars have found it difficult to conceptualize this process, in which both Islam and the indigenous cultures have been reciprocally reinterpreted to bring about new 'Islamically meaningful patterns of creative syntheses' in history. M. Hodgson (1977), in his monumental study of Islamic history, *The Venture of Islam*, coined the term 'Islamicate' to account for the inevitable presence of a theological core present in diverse historical expressions of Islam by people of different races and cultures. More recently, S. Ahmed (2015), while acknowledging the significance of core 'Islamic' religious ideas in bringing about cosmopolitan Muslim civilization, unsuccessfully and, in many ways, naively tried to attribute this creativity to certain 'liberal and enlightened' historical expressions of Islam (i.e. Balkans to Bengal in the period 1350–1850, when apparently literature and philosophy reigned supreme and the sense of normative Islam was rather dim), almost totally disregarding the creative impulse within foundational Muslim sources themselves. Incidentally, it must be noted that this latter work fails to go behind beyond the insights already suggested by one of the last great Christian scholars of Islam , W.C. Smith (2004), to account for the dynamics informing the historical emergence of Muslim civilization and its subsequent reification and decline.

However, some feel that the concept of 'Islamic Education' implies dogmatism, and so they argue that it is a misleading and narrow description. Instead, it is suggested that the expression 'Muslim education' is a broader

and better depiction, as it takes the direct religious and dogmatic faith association away. However, changing the definition of education from 'Islamic' to 'Muslim' is simply a semantic ploy, as 'Muslim' education implies that education is interpreted by Muslims who, by self-definition, need to make sense of their world as Islamically meaningful . Unfortunately, there is a deeper motive behind this hair-splitting semantics, often from the minority sects whose syncretic Muslim self-definition came from a significant process of deconstruction of traditional Islam in favour of such differentiation. By necessity, both of the expressions 'Islamic Education' and 'Muslim education' require association and engagement with Islam . What is important is to have a self-reflective theological awareness so that the descriptors 'Islamic' and 'Muslim' are not merely employed to serve a process of ideological reification (Sahin 2014).

Islam belongs to the monotheistic family of Abrahamic faith traditions. The Divine revelation, the Qur'an, and its embodied presence in the life of Prophet Muhammad, the *sunna/hadith*, constitute the heart of Islam and define the core of religious, moral and spiritual authority for ethnically/cultura lly diverse Muslim communities across the globe. Naturally, perception of education and wider educational culture and institutions within Muslim societies have been shaped by the deeper faith value s. As such, it is important to explore briefly how education is interpreted and perceived within core Muslim sources to demonstrate the interwoven character of education and compassion within Muslim faith.

The Arabic word *tarbiyah* is the most commonly used concept to express the educational process in Muslim culture. *Talim/tadris* (teaching), *ta'dib* (moral disciplining), *talqin* (instructing), *tazkiyah* (purifying), *islah* (reform) and *suluk* (psychospiritual formation) are also used to describe different aspects of the educational process. The word *tarbiyah* in Arabic is directly linked with three interrelated verbs: *rabba/rababa* (to care, look after, nurture, facilitate growth, reform and guide) and *rabaa* (to increase, nurture and facilitate) (Ibn Manzur 1989). As such, *tarbiyah* is fundamentally a person-centred process that includes all activities that contribute to one's upbringing: physical and spiritual nourishment, care and guidance. The Qur'an contains clear references illustrating these multidimensional educational processes by using explicit *tarbiyah*-related vocabulary (17:24; 22:5; 26:18). A close etymological analysis of *tarbiyah*-related words will reveal what I call the 'cloud–grass theory of education' in Islam : that nature itself has the capacity to educate (Sahin 2014). In short, facilitating a growth process by looking after, nurturing and guiding those who are to be educated are central to the meaning of *tarbiyah*. Like in any genuine educational process, as distinct from indoctrination or mere training, *tarbiyah* strongly implies presence of

moral principles ensuring a mutual balance and respect between the authority of educator and the autonomy of the learner (Sahin 2015).

Incidentally, *educare* , the Latin origin of the English word 'education', also has the etymological meanings of springing up into existence, nurturing and leading. Similarly, the word 'pedagogy', today mainly used to describe teaching methods, in its original Greek literally meant 'to lead the child', which is remarkably close to the meaning of care upbringing suggested by *tarbiya*h. Both *tarbiyah* and education (*educare*) strongly indicate the process of facilitation and leading thoughts out, rather than pushing information in. One of the names that God chooses to describe Himself in the Qur'an is *Al-Rabb* (the Divine educator). *Al-Rabb*, conventionally translated as 'the Lord', carries the original etymological meaning of looking after, caring for and guiding. That is why al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d.1108), a well-known classical Muslim scholar whose moral and educational insights inspired Al-Ghazzali (d.1111), observes in his classical Qur'an dictionary (2003:184) that *al-Rabb* is directly linked with *tarbiyah* (education), which he defines as 'the gradual, stage-by-stage developmental process informing an organism's growth until the complete actualization of its potentials'.

Imagining God as an educator has significant implications, because the Divine–human relationship is essentially framed as an educational process embedded within deeper ethical values of care, gratitude, compassion and respect for human and Divine rights and dignity. Classical Muslim theologians recognize this educational Divine–human engagement with the concept of *rububiyyah*. The Qur'an offers an educationally grounded rational and ethical justification for God's call to humanity and the Divine intervention in human history. The core narrative in the Qur'an is based on the premise that God not only creates but deeply cares about His creation. God gifts humanity with life and, as such, deserves recognition and gratitude. The Qur'an depicts those who reflect on creation as whole and develop awareness about God's favours, willingly acknowledging this and showing gratitude by worshiping Him alone, and thereby leading a life of gratitude towards humanity and wider creation. The saying attributed to the Prophet summarizes this point well: 'those who cannot be grateful to other human beings cannot show gratitude to the Creator'. The Qur'an depicts those who chose not to acknowledge God's favour and right to be recognized become the ungrateful ones, the *kuffar*, a word often crudely translated into English as 'the infidel'. Thus, God as an educator remains curious as to how humanity will respond to His act of compassionate generosity. The ambivalence informing human existence—that is, the power of human free will that could bring about good or evil, the incomplete character of human condition that requires care, guidance and looking after—renders human existence educationally significant (Sahin 2017).

It is important to stress that al-Rabb (Divine educator) is among the 99 names of God revered within the Muslim faith. Muslim tradition further depicts God's educational interaction with humanity with his pedagogic significant attributes of love (*Al-Waduud*), compassion (*Al-Rahman*) and forgiveness (*Al-Raheem*). Diverse educational traditions within Islamic culture inspired by this these theological foundations stress the significance of the ethical and moral principles defining the interaction between the teacher and the learner . It must be stressed that in Arabic, the word 'compassion' is feminine and comes from the literary root *rahm,* womb where a new life is nourished. Thus, the intense feeling of compassion is modelled upon the bond of care and love between a mother and her offspring.

In order to recognize the moral dimension of underpinning educational practice, Muslim intellectual traditions have developed a distinctive concept, *adab*, which refers to the manners and moral principles that need to be observed by teachers and students . Muslim scholars have written specific books on ethics of teaching and learning (*adab al-taleem wa al mutallim*) that have gradually led to the creation of a new knowledge genre in its own right. As will be explained shortly, *adab* also refers to nurturing civility, compassion and aesthetic and literary taste and sensibilities, thus is often taken to refer to the humanities in general.

Based on the above described faith-based values defining educational process, in Muslim culture , the informal (home) and formal education (*makatab/kuttab:* the early years education) and higher education (*madrassa/dar al-uluum*) all started with the study of Divine revelation (the Qur'an) and the prophetic traditions (*hadith/sunna*). In many ways, education very much complements wider community activities by embodying children and young people with spiritual and moral values that act as guidance throughout their lives . This embodied moral and spiritual education has shaped professional development and vocational training, thus the meaning of education was never reduced to mere training.

As discussed above, within Muslim tradition, morality and ethics are considered integral parts of faithfulness. According to Muslim tradition, ethics defines human existence; ethics and morality are expressed with the concept of *akhlaq/khuluq*, which also means the act of creating and creation as a whole. As such, in Muslim worldview ethical competence and moral awareness characterize human existence. Furthermore, within Muslim self-understanding, human nature is depicted with the notion of *fitra*, a state of purity and neutrality in which human competence for good and bad remain potential tendencies (Sahin 2013). What is significant here is the fact that the Qur'an assigns a crucial role to human agency to accept a moral responsibility for looking after and caring for one's self. If this care and self-education is not there or neglected, the chances are

pathological and undesired developments are the natural consequences. In short, the reality of incompleteness in human condition is also educationally significant: to engage with a lifelong process self-transformation that, hopefully, results in mature self-expressions. Human nature is imbued with competence for self-transformation and dynamism; thus, it has an educational character. Any society that nurtures this transformative educational human competence and keeps it alive by institutionalizing it, ensures that its core values are continuously expressed as a civilizational presence. It is significant to note that the Qur'an not only affirms this dynamic educational character of human nature but is itself composed and articulated within a distinct transformative educational style that ultimately aims to guide humanity to transform itself for the better. Through meticulously arranged divine pedagogies, the Qur'an inspires, challenges and guides humanity on a journey of self-transformation through which human beings achieve personal fulfilment to become agents of achieving a balanced, faithful society .

The early Muslim community,, inspired by this transformative divine educational vision, imbued its spiritual devotion with a deeper reflective competence, thus becoming witnesses to the 'critical faithfulness' embedded at the ethical core of monotheism, voiced by the Abrahamic faith traditions (Sahin 2016). This educational curiosity motivated early Muslims to apply this reflective inquiry within a wider ethical awareness of care and responsibility to deepen their understanding of Islam and the world around them. Naturally, this triggered the emergence of a dynamic and holistic Islamic epistemology, initially facilitating the advent of classical Muslim sciences and gradually ensuring creativity in generating new knowledge , insights and meanings. Early Muslims' educational openness, which was a key catalyst in the initial rapid expansion of Islam , enabled them to have the confidence to accommodate the creativity of the new Muslims who brought with them diverse sets of cultural and intellectual insights which enriched Muslim civilization. Thus, Muslim faith has generated a universe of meaning for its adherents that inspired them to gift humanity with an inclusive civilization, whereby a meaningful cross-pollination of ideas and experiences was encouraged. Contemporary Muslim society urgently needs to reclaim and reconnect with this prophetic transformative educational vision at the heart of their faith, so as to initiate the positive change that they desperately need.

In this regard, as mentioned above, the genealogy of the highly complex genre of *adab* is important to reflect on. There are clear original literary and educational meanings embedded in the concept of *adab*. In the well-known works of Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d.756), who appears to have first popularized the concept, for example, *adab*, signified inculcation of literary competence essential for developing creative imaginations, good manners and aesthetic sensibilities. In the hands of early Sufi masters, *adab* meant the experience-

focused spiritual/ pastoral education and ethics of care towards one's soul. Similarly, scholars working within classical Islamic sciences used the concept to refer to manners and ethics of conducting inquiries in their own distinct fields. Gradually, due to this educational quality, *adab* became the overarching concept donating the genres of literature and humanities in general. It is unfortunate that, today, the concept of *adab* is increasingly narrowly defined as a strict process of moral disciplining and coercion. N. Al-Attas' views on education in Islam (1991), for example, illustrate this concerning limitation, rather than facilitating the emergence of creative imaginations and reflective spiritualties (Sahin 2016).

The last point is to illustrate how moral awareness associated with compassion has not only permeated the educational self-understandings in Islam but also shaped the institutional organization of education within classical Muslim societies. Because education is essentially tied to nurturing and preserving religious, spiritual and moral authority in Muslim culture , scholars who embody these qualities are seen as institutions of educational and spiritual guidance. Therefore, as bearers of knowledge /wisdom and good moral conduct, scholars are charged with preserving and communicating the core values of Islam and the Islamic way of life to younger generations and the wider community . As educational leaders, they have attracted many young people and, through forming study circles (*halaqa*) disseminating not only knowledge , also become role models; both scholarship and experiential learning define the practice of Islamic education. What qualifies them is their knowledge, wisdom and, above all, authoritative moral conduct. As such, they have remained largely independent, free from political manipulation, but accountable to the people they serve and guide.

As discussed above, in Islam the educational process is perceived to be a deeply moral and spiritual activity shaped by a transformative and compassionate spirit of curiosity, inquiry and humility. Bringing about good human conduct and best human character defines the ultimate learning outcomes and attainment targets. Mosques are naturally homes for institutionalizing this morally responsible dynamic educational activity that has been mainly supported by the charitable donations and the religiously sanctioned annual alms giving *(zakat)*. However, Muslims, by setting up specific foundations knows as *waqf /awqaf*, ensured the sustainability of higher education (*madrassa*) often attached to the mosque complexes. The charitable foundations could be patronized by any wealthy individual (philanthropy) and ensured income generation covering the salaries of the scholars, as well as expenses of students. The learning community was left focusing only on scholarship. As such, the higher education institutions managed to operate independently with a large degree of autonomy, promoting a reflective educational culture of inquiry and learning. Therefore, higher education acted as the heart of Muslim society,, ensuring that reflective/critical educational spirit not

only preserves faith values but that they are creatively reinterpreted, authoritatively guiding the younger generations. While religious disciplines constituted the core curriculum , the higher education models fostered diverse specialisms: spiritual and moral education, as well as humanities, physical sciences, medicine, geography, philosophy, music and art, all emerged as specialisms marking the cosmopolitan nature of Muslim civilization.

When Muslim civilization began to show signs of stagnation, reflective classical scholars such Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) immediately recognized the role of the declining power of compassionate and transformative educational culture and institutions in Muslim societies. The *madrassas* became unnecessarily focused on legal training, organized alongside the different schools of legal/theological thought. With the decline of a free, reflective, educational culture, this legal training gradually became rather sectarian and monolithic. As such, the creative funding institution of *waqf* was caught up in legal procedures and endless conditions put forward by the patrons and no longer acted as a compassionate charitable foundation but a political power regime gradually suffocating the spirit of innovative educational culture within the institutions of higher learning (Kuran 2012; Makdisi 1981; Rosenthal 2007). Muslim institutions, once beacons of free inquiry that keenly observed and creatively channelled most of the ancient Greek wisdom and knowledge , began to show signs of gradual decline and inward collapse. It is true that pockets of intellectual creativity have survived (El-Rouayheb 2015), and, on the global stage, Muslims have remained politically dominant up until the early eighteenth century. However, overall, they have lost the regenerating power of a compassionate and transformative educational culture . It is ironic that many of the creative aspects of mediaeval Muslim educational culture and institutions found their way to mediaeval Western Europe, where they helped rekindle a new spirit of inquiry and culture of learning that has subsequently shaped the rest of the world.

## Conclusion

It goes without saying that contemporary Muslim societies need to rediscover and reclaim the compassionate and transformative educational heritage inspired by the core values of their faith. This seems to be the urgent task for modern Muslim societies to address if they desire to confront adequately the complex challenges facing them and their young people in particular. Presence of a compassionate/transformative educational culture , a new reflective/holistic Muslim paideia, remains essential to be able to bring about mature expressions of Islam in the modern world.

Moreover, today, more than ever, diverse cultures, faiths traditions and value systems are increasingly having to live with one another. To achieve peaceful coexistence, we need to enable a dialogue among the educational legacies of the diverse world civilizations so that our current models of higher education can become innovative, creative and, moreover, compassionate and inclusive. Modern secular Western higher education will become enriched if it creatively draws on the compassionate/transformative values and pedagogic practices embodying the educational heritage of world faith traditions. We need to facilitate a cross-pollination of ideas and experiences among the educational cultures of secular humanism, as well as faith traditions, in order more effectively to bring about a peaceful, compassionate and grateful humanity.

## References

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