

## **Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought: A Compendium of English-Arabic Texts**

*Bradley J. Cook and Fathi H. Malkawi, ed.*

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Over the past decade, discussions on Islamic educational thought have become popular mainly due to the political situation particularly as it concerns the interaction between Islam and the West. However, regardless of political considerations, most Western scholars seem to have paid less attention to Islamic education as a concept worthy of attention. In this context, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought*, which is a recent publication on this topic, plays an exceptional role. Making some of the major classics on Islamic education available in parallel English-Arabic texts, this volume is an indispensable compendium for students and scholars alike.

The main editor, Bradley J. Cook, has a lot of practical experience in the field of Islamic education. In addition to his academic endeavors and remarkable publications on education, Cook has had the advantage of teaching in a number of Muslim countries including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, where he also held several executive positions. With the assistance of Fathi H. Malkawi, a Jordanian-born educator, Cook has managed to make a good selection of texts on a variety of educational subjects, which reflect both educational rules in classical Islamic thought and the holistic attitude of Muslim educators who consider learning as part of the moral and spiritual growth of those reading this volume.

The introduction of the book is an exposition of some basic ideas in Islamic education. Going through a brief historical survey of educational institutes in Islam, it explains major methodological concerns and the objectives of education for Muslim educators. The selected texts are arranged chronologically from Ibn Saḥnūn in the ninth century, to Ibn Khaldūn in the fourteenth century, a period which has come to be known as the golden age of Islamic civilization. The authors come from different parts of the Islamic Empire – such as North Africa, Iraq, Syria, and Persia. Most of authors are well-versed in Sunni jurisprudence with the exception of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', who is claimed by Ismaili Shias, and Ibn Miskawayh, who served the Shi'a Būyid viziers.

The first text, which is by Ibn Saḥnūn, is of historical importance because it is the first handbook of teaching in Islamic history. It reflects the

legal point of view of its Mālikī writer in emphasizing the rules of conduct for those who teach the Qur’ān. The text by Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ has a unique position in the book since the authors are more concerned about the philosophy of learning and less with the details of how a teacher teaches. They believe that “those who seek knowledge and search for the real natures of things should first know what knowledge is. . .” (24). Qābisī’s view on education is interesting from a political angle. He considers the education of children to be the responsibility of the state, and he takes a critical stand on the educational practices of his time. Ibn Miskawayh is highly concerned about children’s “refinement of character,” which is possible through proper education. Good education can not only lead to intellectual growth but also worldly happiness. For him, early education has the benefit of training the youth “to love virtue” and form the habit of self control. This is a necessary condition for reaching “the high ranks of philosophy” and “seeking proximity to God,” as well as “enjoying a good condition in this world,” such as “a fine reputation” (86).

Al-Ghazzālī’s text emphasizes the essential relationship between knowledge and action, which culminates in religious devotion. As he says, “The sum total of learning is to know the meaning of obedience and service [to God]” (96). The selected text is mostly focused on the meaning of learning in the Islamic context. Al-Zarnūjī deals mostly with the ethics of education – such as respect for knowledge and the abstinence from evil during learning. Despite his poetic style, Al-Zarnūjī offers practical tips – for example, on how to strengthen your memory by “eating twenty-one raisins, red ones, each day on empty stomach” (150). Next is Ibn Jamā’ah, who in comparison to other scholars, shows the most systematic way of formulating educational rules and regulations. Rather than philosophizing about knowledge, he addresses concrete classroom situations. For example, he stresses that a teacher “should protect his class from clamor, for error is married to clamor. . . (167). The last text in the book is a selection from Ibn Khaldūn’s *al-Muqaddimah*, which is one of the greatest classics in the history of Islam. This selection offered on education not only sets forth pedagogical techniques, but also gives invaluable information about different methods of instruction in several key Muslim cities of the time.

All in all, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* has some merits, the most important of which is exposing the readers to original writings by classical Muslim scholars. This effect is reinforced by the high quality of translations which, though faithful to the original language, does not sound too pedantic. Moreover, the translations are equally comprehensible and exact, despite the fact that they are done by different people at different times. And finally, the editors have been very judicious about the notes on the texts. In many cases, they go beyond simply filling

the gaps, and provide comparative explanations that are extremely helpful to readers at all levels.

However, the attitude of the editors toward the West-Islam relation, as implied by the introduction, fails to reflect the whole truth. In the section “Inadequacies of Western Secular Education from an Islamic Perspective” we read that Islamic theorists believe that Westernized philosophy of education exerts “dissonant influences” on education in Muslim countries due to the liberalist and secular attitude of the former. It is also said that “secular education strives principally for ‘critical rationality’ . . . ,” while Muslims along with Christians in the West object to the claims of critical rationality” xxix). Unfortunately, this may create a picture to the readers of an impenetrable wall between Islamic education – which in the introduction, is associated with an absolutist tradition on one side, and education in the secularized “relativist” West on the other. Such ideological formulations of apparently “essential” differences may act as a deterrent against mutual understanding and collaboration between the two educational systems.

There are also a few things that could have made this volume more comprehensive if they were included. First would be an explanation on why some major writers of the classical period do not have a place in the selection. For example, al-Jāhiz, a contemporary of Ibn Saḥnūn and the first Islamic scholar, is not included. Written from a Mu‘tazili point of view, al-Jāhiz’s *The Book of Teachers* could introduce more variety into the Mālikī atmosphere of the *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought*. Moreover, al-Jāhiz’s focus on higher education could complement Ibn Saḥnūn’s text, which addresses the elementary instructors. This volume would also have been more comprehensive with the philosophical outlooks of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sina on education. There are also some great scholars in the field of Islamic education who are surprisingly left out of the bibliography – such as Sebastian Günther, Wadad Kadi, and Tahir Abbas, to mention a few.

These shortcomings are very few with respect to the significant mission Cook and Malkawi have managed to accomplish in this fantastic volume. These texts which were produced during the golden ages of Islamic civilization can open the door to a better understanding of Muslim traditions with regard to education. *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* is indispensable to anyone interested in educational ideas in Islam.

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