

# A Holistic and Institutional Analysis of Islamic Education

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## Introduction

Knowledge is the source of economic, social, and political energy as well as divine enlightenment. An individual or a nation succeeds only by gaining and using beneficial knowledge. Gaining useful knowledge and using it for a proper cause for the pleasure of Allah is emphasized in Islam. The Qur'an mentions repeatedly the importance of knowledge (Qur'an 30:22, 36:36, 39:9, 58:11). The Prophet also emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge in many contexts: "A person who follows the path of acquiring knowledge, Allah will make easy for him/her the passage to paradise" (Muslim) and "A person who goes out of his/her house in search of knowledge, he/she is on Allah's way till the person returns" (Tirmidhī).

The Prophet encouraged Muslims to be unrelenting in their search for useful knowledge and considered an *'ālim* (learned person) superior to an *'ābid* (worshiper) (ibid.). In the Qur'an, Allah reserved higher ranks for people of knowledge (Qur'an 58:11). The Prophet said: "Wisdom is the lost property of the faithful, who deserve it most wherever it may be found." Muslim scholars accepted all useful knowledge that is consistent with Shari'ah (al Fārūqī 1992).

We acquire knowledge through formal and informal education systems. Schools, colleges, and universities are institutions that provide formal education. In addition to schools and universities, we gain knowledge from such informal sources as the family unit, social groups, and personal undertakings. Islam made the acquisition of

knowledge a priority for all Muslims, and scholars and students are blessed in Islam (Tirmidhī). Knowledge, however, has to be useful to the cause of the creation and to the praise of the Creator. Islamic knowledge benefits human society, complements nature, and advances spiritual gain.

While such contemporary Muslim scholars as I. R. al Fārūqī (1987), Siddiqui (1991), and Safi (1992) have researched the Islamization of knowledge and the secular–religious duality of education, these topics are not the focus of this paper. We will deal with the contingency or situational approach in Islamic education, examine the educational processes used to gain knowledge of Islamic principles, and propose behavior modifications in accordance with these principles.

## *Dīn al Islām*

Islam is not a religion in the ordinary sense of the word. It is a *dīn*: a complete code of life that is integral and that is to be adopted in its entirety. Islam combines our activities in this world and in the hereafter (Qur'an 2:200-203; 3:22) and requires us to acquire knowledge that will benefit human society in both worlds.

The Qur'an and the Sunnah, as sources of the Shari'ah, provide a unified knowledge. Without knowledge of the Shari'ah, the power of Islam as a complete code of life and the integrity of Islam remain unknown. The unity, integrity, and balance of Islam enable a Muslim to fulfil the mission of life with the pleasure of Allah. Imagine being a professional in the fields of medicine or engineering without having the proper qualifications. This may bring disaster to oneself and to society. Similarly, an ignorant Muslim harms not only himself/herself but also to the Muslim society.

The lack of Islamic knowledge among the vast majority of Muslims is the primary cause for not practicing Islam. In a recent survey, Yousif (1992) showed that more than 80 percent of Muslims living in Canada are "less committed" and "least committed" to practicing Islam. He commented that this apparent lack of commitment to Islam will intensify a future identity crisis for Muslims if a proper institutional base is not created and maintained.

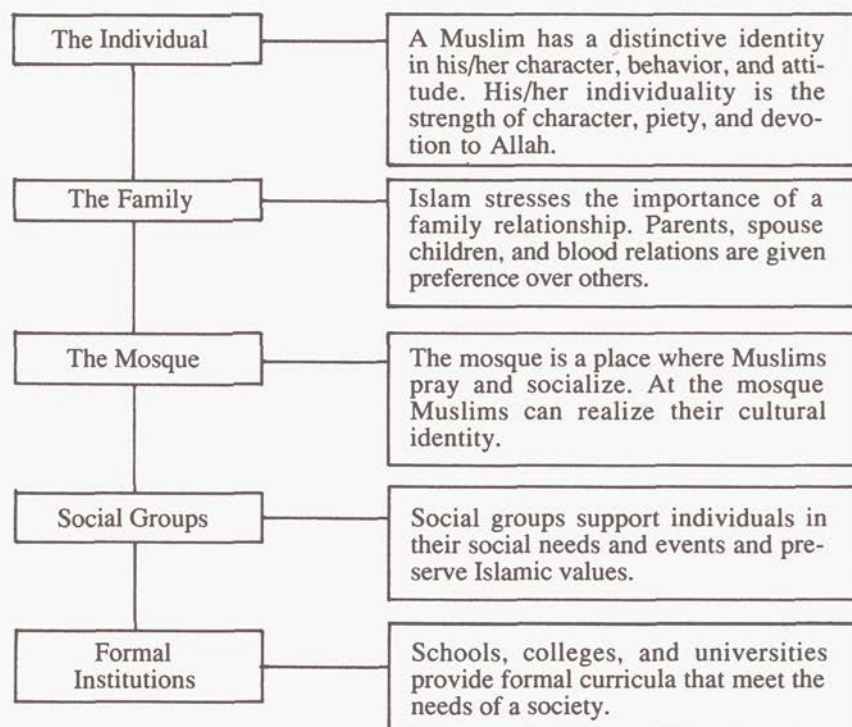
## **Educational Institutions in Islam**

Education in Islam is as pervasive as Islam itself. It does not begin in the school or end in securing a job, but rather is viewed as a con-

tinuous process. It is mentioned in the Qur'an that "only the knowledgeable people can appreciate Allah's greatness" in His creation. The appreciation of Allah's greatness is an ongoing pursuit for human beings.

Education in Islamic life consists of a host of hierarchically related interacting institutions. These institutions have a far-reaching influence on the life of a Muslim to become an *'ālim* (a person with useful knowledge). Monitoring the roles of these institutions to preserve and accept what is good and to eliminate and reject what is bad will help maintain the integrity of Islamic life. The table below shows the interacting relationships of these institutions.

Table 1: The Hierarchy of Islamic Education System



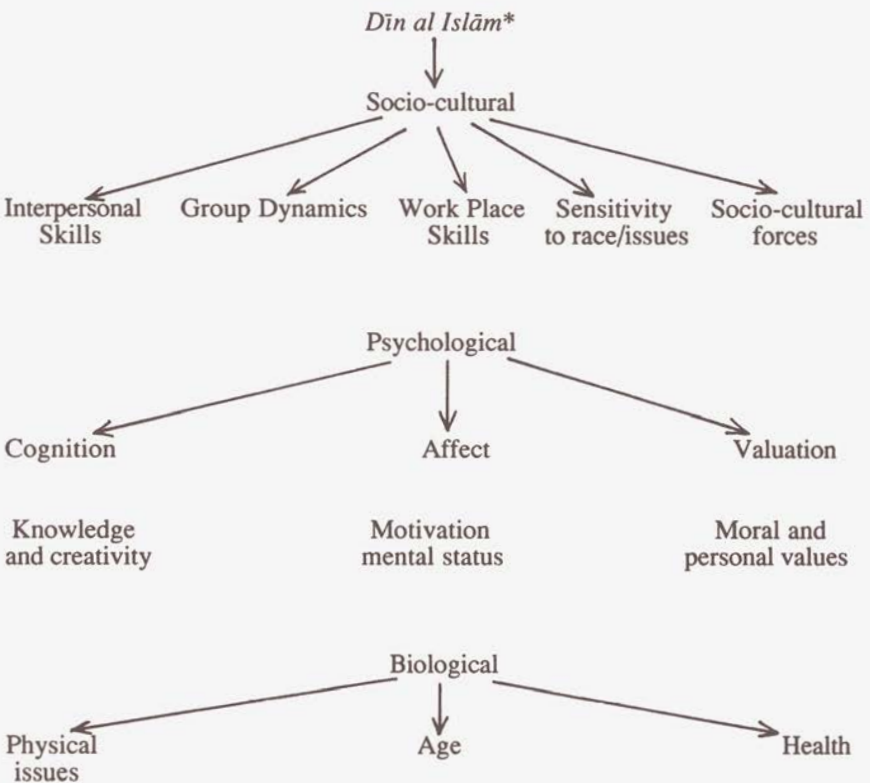
There are other formal social, political, and religious organizations that need to be recognized. These were excluded from the model because they are not universally common organizations. Some of them perform useful roles in spreading Islamic education and some do not consider the significance of material life in the praise of Allah.

## The Individual: A Person-in-Environment Holistic View

Scholars classify human functions as biological (breathing), psychological (thinking), and sociological (living by a moral code). Islam stresses a balanced relationship between these functions (see table 2). The Qur'an provides guidance to satisfy and regulate these functional needs of an individual.

In the holistic view, these functions are integrated hierarchically (Feibelman 1954; Werner 1957), and so any disturbance in one level affects other parts of the totality. This view stresses the value of an integrated system without showing how the integration is achieved. Evidently, a unifying or integrating force is missing in the holistic view. To fill this void we added *dīn al Islām*, which will contribute to the process by serving as a unifying force based on Islamic values.

Table 2: Level of Integration



\* *Din al Islām* is added by the author

Once we accept the Qur'an and the hadith as the sources of integration as regards one's biological, psychological, and sociocultural functions, we can avoid those conflicts and disturbances that may arise within these functions. For example, the Islamic code of behavior prescribes modesty and piety in group or individual behavior and places the rights of the "other person" over the rights of the "self" (sociocultural integration). Islam deals with moral and personal values and motivates an individual to do good deeds and to praise Allah (psychological integration). Within a broad framework, Islam moderates one's physical and health issues so that he/she avoids harmful food and physical activities and enjoys what is good and beneficial to life (biological integration). Islamic traditions do not reject the good things of other cultures, provided that they do not contradict Shari'ah (I. R. al Fārūqī 1992).

In its design of an effective education system, the holistic view considers all human functions, but not their spiritual aspects. A holistic Islamic perspective, however, does include the spiritual contents. The Qur'an and hadith remind us of the effects of our deeds on our soul (*nafs*). In Islam, an individual is a material as well as a spiritual being. If one does not gain spiritual success along with material prosperity through the unity of Islamic values, the mission of life is not complete. Islamic life, through divine guidance, has moral superiority, provides guidance in order to eliminate functional disturbances, and improves the total quality of human life. By addressing the biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects of human life, Islam embodies the principles of total quality management (TQM) of individual functioning.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, there is a tremendous moral uncertainty in secular culture due to a lack of unity on values. Whose values are important to an individual: friends, teachers, parents, or leaders? What values should an education system promote? This crisis of values was behind many previous political and social disasters and is behind the increasing present-day violence, drug use, teenage pregnancy, and other activities that harm society. Islam provides a complete code of life and removes any moral uncertainty. Therefore, there is no crisis of values in an Islamic system. If we believe in and implement true Islam in our lives, it can bring peace, security, and power (Qur'an 24:55) to an individual or a nation (Rahman and Al-Buraey 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> Total Quality Management (TQM) is a contemporary management philosophy applied in many successful businesses. TQM emphasizes elimination of waste, continuous improvement, customers' satisfaction and using statistical techniques.

In a society where material success is the prime consideration and influences the values of its people, it is easy to be less committed to Islam, which emphasizes the spiritual aspects of life. Islam links spiritual contents to material success. Many Muslims today have lost this link and, as a result, their participation in Islam has become minimal and confined to participating in a few rituals that engender no spiritual growth or moral upliftment.

Scholars agree that the lack of knowledge about Islam is the primary reason for the absence of dynamism in Islamic life. Unfortunately, most Muslims' knowledge of Islam is based on hearsay and family traditions, for its practice has become separated from practical life. Most people spend the early part of their lives learning a profession and the latter part earning a living and ignoring the spiritual content of life. If this spiritual content is missed, nothing matters in the end, for as Allah has stated: "The life of this world is but goods and chattels of deceptions" (Qur'an 3:185).

## The Family

The family provides the foundation for an individual's moral, spiritual, and material growth. Islam sets out elaborate rules for the functioning of a family and encourages marriage (Qur'an 30:21) in order to emphasize family life. Peace, security, love, and relatedness are maintained in a family established through marriage. Islam establishes clear obligations on parents to support and educate their children and makes children responsible for their parents when they need help during their old age. Allah says: "Thy Lord decrees that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor" (Qur'an 17:23). Kindness to parents, blood relations, and neighbors has been emphasized repeatedly in the Qur'an (4:36, 17:23-24, 29:8). Within the family, the mother's place is higher than anybody else's—even that of the father (al Bukhārī and Muslim). The status of parents is raised very high in Islam. It has been mentioned in one hadith that serving parents is as good as engaging in jihad (holy war) (ibid).

Duties to blood relations are also regarded as very important. The Prophet said: "A person who wants abundance in his provision and that his age be lengthened should do favor to his blood relations" (ibid.). Meeting family responsibilities in the Islamic way is *taqwā* (an act of piety) and *'ibādah* (worship of Allah). Family values are an important source of one's moral and spiritual growth.

Families need to provide an Islamic environment for themselves and their children. Many Muslim families have been successful in maintaining their commitment to Islam within the challenges of an environment hostile to Islam (Yousif 1992). Islamic scholars have recognized that an identity crisis resulting from living in secular societies can be avoided by strengthening Islamic values and practices. It is very important for children and parents to learn and to understand the Islamic way of life (Shari'ah) and to practice Islam appropriately. We should understand that performing the prayers five times a day does not complete Islam. We should take the practice of Islam comprehensively, because Islam complements and does not contradict our life and reason for living. As a result of ignorance about Islam and taking it casually in family lives, most confused parents use Islam as a sanctuary.

## The Mosque

The mosque is a place of congregation for Muslims where they can come together to share a spiritual experience and socialize. Respect, piety, brotherly and sisterly behavior, sharing, helping, and calling people to Islam usually happen in a mosque environment. Since the early days of Islam, the mosque's dynamic role as an institution of Islamic socialization has been recognized. Visiting the mosque for prayers is strongly recommended by the Prophet. According to Abū Hurayrah, the Prophet said: "Allah will prepare for him an honorable place in the paradise who goes to the mosque every morning and in the afternoon" (al Bukhārī).

Allah raised the status of the mosque as a place of purity and piety. Referring to the first mosque built by the Prophet, the Qur'an says: "There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety; it is more worthy of your standing forth for (prayer) therein. In it are men who love to be purified; and Allah loves those who make themselves pure" (Qur'an 9:108). This verse encourages us to go to the mosque in order to purify ourselves and to increase our piety and faith. Some hadiths mention that going to mosque wipes out all sins (Muslim), that time spent in a mosque is counted as prayer (al Bukhārī), and that praying in a mosque is rewarded twenty-five times (another version says twenty-seven times) more than praying at home or in the bazaar (al Bukhārī and Muslim). According to Abū Hurayrah, the Prophet said: "The best places in the habitations in the sight of Allah are their mosques and the worst their market places" (Muslim).

The Qur'an and hadith command a Muslim to visit the mosque regularly. Therefore, visiting a mosque for regular religious and social events needs to be a matter of primary importance. Many mosques have been established in the cities and suburbs of North America. As their number continues to increase, mosques will come to play a dominant role in the shaping of Islamic life by designing various programs and curricula and also by providing opportunities for increasing interaction and integration among communities. This is an important institution for the integration of Muslims. As Yusuf Islahi (1985) commented: "The mosque and the organization of congregational prayer are essential to keep the Islamic spirit active and alive and to create and sustain the feeling of Muslim nationhood and to bind the Muslims together in a body."

## Social Groups

Informal social groups, when they function as part of one's socialization process, are significant institutions. The values, norms, and goals of an individual emerge through the subcultures of these informal institutions, and their roles in the shaping of their members' lives are well known to sociologists. In the socialization process, individuals tend to select groups that support their values and beliefs.

The reasons for participating in social groups vary: voluntary, recreational, cultural, and nonspecific (i.e., gossip). Islam encourages charitable acts and emphasizes the importance of social groups for maintaining peace and harmony. It prescribes clearly the code of interpersonal relationships, interactions, and responsibility toward fellow human beings. For example, Allah asks Muslims to "do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your sides" (Qur'an 4:36). Islam encourages good people (people possessing *taqwā*) to seek good company. Muslims are forbidden to engage in backbiting, for: "It is like eating the flesh of your dead brother" (Qur'an 49:12). Even if a person has defects, discussing them behind his/her back is backbiting. If he/she has no defect, it is slander (Muslim). The Qur'an warns Muslims against vain conversation (Qur'an 23:3), and the Prophet said that: "Everything belonging to a Muslim is unlawful for another Muslim: his blood, his honor, and his property" (Muslim). However, many social groups are centers of gossip and backbiting, full of hypocrisy, and provide no Islamic knowledge or support for Islamic behavior. Such informal social groups can be a very powerful means of diverting our energy and attention from Islamic traditions.



## Formal Institutions

Formal institutions in a secular culture are neutral with respect to moral practices or religious beliefs. Nevertheless, formal education institutions perform pivotal roles in educating people in this era of rapidly increasing knowledge. The formal education system has the virtue of being able to structure, summarize, and organize knowledge generated through research and practice and then to deliver it to the people in meaningful ways. Therefore, Muslim participation in formal education systems in order to train themselves is a necessary condition of fulfilling our obligation to serve the creation of Allah for His pleasure.<sup>2</sup> The long-term goals for Muslims should be to create quality education institutions for themselves. Until this is achieved, Muslims should pursue education in the best schools and colleges and proceed carefully and cautiously when it comes to maintaining their commitment to Islam, an area in which the family and informal social groups can play significant roles. Even formal institutions in Muslim countries have become more ambivalent about increasing the influence of Islam in the education system.

## The Upside-Down Education System

People are trapped within an upside-down education system, for the educational goals of the society are driven by the economic objective of profit maximization. In such an economic system, one learns to raise prices in accordance with increases (or decreases) in demand. As a result, social responsibility, compassion, piety, sacrifice, and good deeds are not compatible with profit maximization theory.

An individual who lives in a society driven by contentment and the praise of Allah can achieve his/her true goal and not just end up doing something. In order to live in this society, everybody needs Allah's protection and the shield of Islam to provide moral and spiritual guidance. The Qur'an contains five hundred legal injunctions (*ayāt al aḥkām*), and these form the codes of conduct for every Muslim from birth to death. The hadith compilations<sup>3</sup> were meticulously and extensively researched and compiled by early Muslim scholars.

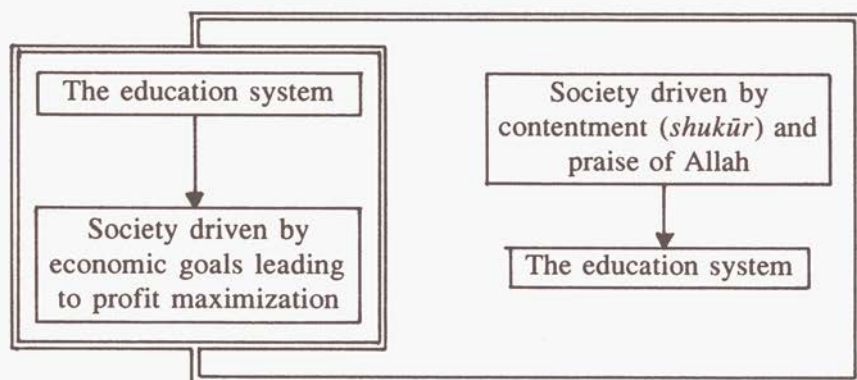
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<sup>2</sup> Until such time when complete Islamization of knowledge is possible and widely accessible.

<sup>3</sup> The word "hadith," commonly used for tradition and which literally means a saying conveyed to men either through hearing or through witnessing an event. It is also used to denote conversation. (Doi1984).

Notable among them are the compilations of al Bukhārī, who selected just 7,275 traditions out of 6 million, and Muslim, who selected 9,200 traditions out of 3 million. Also highly regarded are compilations by Abū Dāwūd, al Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, al Nasā'ī, and Ibn Hanbal. The vast mosaic of the Qur'an and the hadith contain the source of the philosophy of the Muslim education system. The chart below shows the contrast between the sources of the two educational philosophies:

Illustration 1: Education Systems Contrast



The knowledge of Islamic principles increases one's faith. This increasing faith in Islam directs the value system to the right path and helps Muslims withstand moral turbulence by strengthening them with stability and peace. This upside-down education model illustrates the need for Islamization of knowledge as proposed by various scholars.<sup>4</sup>

## Responsibilities of a Muslim

So what should Muslims living in secular cultures do? Those who are ignorant of Islam can cause serious harm to their faith by prescribing and practicing behavior that is not compatible with the Shari'ah and by letting other people cite their actions as examples of Islamic behavior. Muslims who are not fully committed to Islam are either not fully convinced or lack motivation when they are confronted with the truth of Islam and of the promises of Allah and the

<sup>4</sup> Though I agree with the principle proposed by I. R. al-Fārūqī and others, but I think the method of implementation proposed is debatable.

warning of the Prophet. Here, it will be useful to mention some of the commonly mentioned reasons for such an apparent weakness in many Muslims' commitment to Islam: a) practicing Islam is not socially popular; b) it restricts one's freedom; c) it is counter to, or at least in conflict with, professional growth; and d) it is boring or does not cause joy.

Islam prescribes modesty and discourages lewdness. For example, many types of lewdness that Islam has always discouraged or prohibited are now socially acceptable. Islam grants freedom to all, with the understanding that it will be regulated with self-discipline and self-control. Islam abhors reckless behavior and advocates freedom with moderation, for its essence is self-control and self-respect. Thus if a society strays from the right path, a Muslim should not follow it.

In a secular society, people can practice any religion that does not interfere with the public interest. For example, in the United States, freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. There is no evidence that anybody has lost his/her job because of practicing a particular religion.

Joy is a matter of personal satisfaction and depends on how one wants to feel joyful. A practicing Muslim has more joy in his/her Islamic life than a non-Muslim or a nonpracticing Muslim can imagine. Faith itself is a great joy. Fasting, sharing, and celebrating during the month of Ramadan is a matter of great joy. A faithful Muslim child who fasts will be able to testify to the truth of this statement most eloquently.

Islamic educational goals should be comprehensive so that they will encompass our spiritual and worldly needs. The education system should be based on Islamic values, instead of the values being based on the education system. In other words, all components of the education system should be subsystems of the metasystem: *dīn al Islām*.

If Islam is to be the prime mover of life, then more effort is needed at the individual and family levels. To maintain their commitment to Islam, Muslims should consider seriously the institutions that affect their values. Learning about Islam can never begin too soon or too late.

## The Teacher

We have discussed those institutions that are regarded as necessary for the acquisition of useful knowledge according to the holistic perspective provided by the Islamic context. Now we need to identify the teacher role model. The best teacher was the Prophet. He emphasized

the methods and processes as much as the contents and messages. He viewed the acquisition of knowledge as a continuous process, used a direct and experiential teaching method, and presented a that was both clear and simple as regards content and presentation.

According to Doi (1984), the Prophet used three methods of teaching: a) verbal, which consisted of repeating important points three times and then listening to his Companions to make sure that they had heard and understood him correctly; b) writing, by means of letters sent kings, rulers, chieftains, and Muslim governors; and c) practical demonstration, such as showing the Muslims how to perform their ablutions and prayers, the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), and the fast of Ramadan. His method of teaching was scientific, and his use of feedback and quality control mechanisms maintained Islam in its original form after his death and up to, and beyond, our own time. As we can see, he practiced all three modes of modern teaching techniques: lectures, writing, and practical. In addition, he taught that a better Muslim is also a better person. A better Muslim is a servant of Allah and does not serve any person and thing, as everything but Allah will eventually perish.

It may be important to note here that in business management, the ideas of total quality management (TQM) and continuous improvement are recent developments. Not surprisingly, the Prophet proposed and practiced these principles fourteen centuries ago. It has been said in the Qur'an and the hadith that one has to strive *continuously* to raise his/her level of faith, which, for a believing person, is *total* and will lead to moral, spiritual, and material success. The path of the Prophet can direct people to the infinite source of energy of Islamic knowledge and success in the Islamic life.

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