

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

From the Prophetic Era to Ottoman Times

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Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd.



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Introduction

The aim of this book is to map and evaluate the evolution of Islamic education as a social phenomenon from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ to the end of the Ottoman Caliphate. In it I will attempt to investigate what particular social role education played in the history of Islam, insha'Allāh. It is well known that knowledge, both revealed and acquired, and the quest for this knowledge have played a vital part in forming Islamic civilisation. Therefore, it is important to ask a number of questions regarding this crucial quest for knowledge. For example, what is the basis of this pursuit called 'Islamic education'? How has Islamic education evolved throughout history and what social impact has it had on various societies? Have these various historical social changes throughout the ages had an effect on how Islamic education was perceived and presented? How does this affect contemporary Islamic education and its role in society?

There are currently many fine works which introduce the reader to the political history of Islam. In contrast, very few books have been written dealing with the history of Islamic education; some of these have spoken about a minor component of Islamic education, whereas others have not looked at it chronologically or socially, but rather

they have compacted centuries together without any social analysis.¹ Therefore, this book will attempt a chronological survey of Islamic education focusing on social analysis of the different epochs. Since this is a very wide area of study, the book has been restricted to cover only the major Sunni Caliphal Islamic educational centres of Islamic history from Madīnah to Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and finally Istanbul. This edition of the book will therefore not be able to cover fully the social history of Islamic education in Moghul India, Safavid Iran and Muslim Spain even though these places will be touched upon. The study will demonstrate that it is not possible for the educational system of a civilisation with a life-span of over a thousand years to remain stagnant and totally devoid of any change, either positive or negative. I aim to identify and demonstrate evolutionary changes in Islamic education throughout the history of Islam.

Western historians and educators have long maintained that the instruction and preparation of young people for society is a major concern of mankind.² According to some sociologists, the word 'education' is synonymous with the word 'socialisation', meaning 'the learning of practices by which an individual becomes a member of an existing society'.³ Education has an influence on every aspect of society. As a result it may be argued that if education changes in a society, that society as a whole will change. R. E. Sullivan explains this phenomenon by stating, "If anything happened in any historical period to change the character of education, it follows that the period has significance in the total stream of human history."⁴

¹ See: Ahmad Shalaby, *The History of Muslim Education*, (Karachi: Indus Publication), 1979 and Mehdi Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education*, (Colorado: University Of Colorado Press), 1964.

² Williams Boyd (ed.), *The History of Western Education*, (Edinburgh: Black), 1966, p. 1.

³ W. Outhwaite and T. Bottomore, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth Century Social Thought*, (USA: Blackwell), 1993, p. 188.

⁴ Pierre Riche, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: From the Sixth through the Eight century*, (Colombia: University of South Carolina Press), 1978, p. xvi.

Therefore taking the above principle into account it is surprising that the mass of historical work by Westerners relating to the history of education seems to be totally unaware of the history of Islamic education. In most works on the history of education there seems to be a major gap of one thousand years involving educational theories and advances from the Muslim lands. In works such as *A History of Education* by Franklin Verzelius Newton Painter, it is possible to see an astonishing jump from the fall of the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century to the Italian Renaissance in the twelfth century.⁵ The total exclusion of the contribution made in the field of education by Islamic civilisation from the time of the Umayyads to the Ottoman Caliphate is simply staggering.⁶

In the light of there being little or no mention of Muslim education in Western history books, there is a need to comprehend the similarities and the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim perceptions of the nature of education. The definitions of education by Islamic scholars are as numerous and diverse as the various concepts that Western scholars have of education. The major difference between the two groups of educators seems to lie in what they perceive as the appropriate way to educate the individual and what that entails. Western civilisation historically commenced in Greece, where Plato presented the first theory of education in the West. This theory of education, not being derived from divine revelation, was based purely on rationalism, whilst in Islamic civilisation the various theories of education were based upon the newly revealed *dīn* of Islam in seventh century Arabia.⁷ Consequently, that meant that theories regarding Islamic education were derived not only from the human intellect but also from divine revelation. It is from this revelation that Muslim scholars coined and expressed the purposes of Islamic education.

⁵ Franklin Verzelius Newton Painter, *A History of Education*, (BiblioBazaar), 2009.

⁶ See: John Adamson, *A Short History of Education*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press), 1991.

⁷ Hamza Y. Hanson, *Lambs to the Slaughter*, (California: Ithya Production), 2000, p. 14.

The majority of scholars agree that three Arabic terms express the meaning of education in the Islamic sense. Two of these terms are taken from the Qur'an and the third is derived from the *ḥadīth* literature.⁸ The first term '*tarbiyah*', which means 'fostering growth', derives from the Qur'an and its root is '*rabā'*', which means to 'increase and grow'.⁹ In the Qur'an Allah ﷻ says:

وَأَخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذَّلِيلِ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا ۝

*"Take them under your wing, out of mercy, with due humility and say: 'Lord, show mercy to them as they did in looking after me when I was small'."*¹⁰

The first term therefore indicates that Islamic education is there to nurture a person. The second term for education used in the Qur'an is '*ta'lim*' and it comes from the root word '*ilm*', which means 'knowledge'.¹¹ It has been used in the Qur'an in:

الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ۝ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ۝

*"He who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know."*¹²

This term specifically means the imparting of knowledge. The last term, '*ta'dīb*', derives from the *ḥadīth* reporting that Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said:

⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, (London: KPI), 1987, p. 123.

⁹ Zaid bin Ngah, *The Practice of the Prophet Muhammad in Tarbiyah: Its significance for the formation of the first Muslim community*, (M.Phil: University of Birmingham), 1996, p. 34.

¹⁰ Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Qur'an : a New Rendering of Its Meaning in English*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers), 2011, Sūrat al-Isrā' 17:24.

¹¹ Ngah, op. cit., p. 35.

¹² Ibid., Sūrat al-'Alaq 96:4-5.

أَدَّبَنِي رَبِّي فَأَحْسَنَ تَأْدِيبِي

My Lord educated¹³ me and then made my education¹⁴
most excellent.”¹⁵

The root of ‘*ta’dīb*’ is *adab*, which in a wider sense implies good manners and ethics.^{16,17} The *ḥadīth* narrated by Jābir ibn ‘Abdullāh ؓ illustrates beautifully the meaning of manners and ethics as education. Jābir narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, “Enjoining all that is good is a *sadaqah*.”¹⁸

The traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ contain numerous sayings concerning knowledge and education. He ﷺ himself called upon individuals to educate themselves when he said, as is narrated by Anas ؓ, “The quest for knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim”^{19,20} and Abū ad-Dardā ؓ narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The learned

¹³ *Addabani* [‘educated me’] is from the same root as *ta’dib*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ ‘Abd ar-Rahman al-Qasim (comp. and ed.), *Ibn Taymiyya Fatawa*, Vol. 18, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah), 1398 AH, p. 375 and also see Muhammad al-Zarkashi, *Ibn Taymiyya Fatawa*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah), 1406 AH, p. 160. Also see: Syed M. Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*, (Jeddah: Hodder and Stoughton), 1979, p. 144.

¹⁶ *Adab*, in addition to ‘good manners and ethics’, means ‘literature’ or the ‘literary and philological sciences’ as we will see later in the book. The high importance of literary studies in Islam is because without them the student will have a poor grasp of the Arabic language and thus make gauche mistakes in his understanding of the Qur’an and the *ḥadīth* - Ed.

¹⁷ Ngah, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁸ Muhammad ibn Ismail ibn al-Mughira al-Bukhari, Muhammad Muhsin Khan (tr.), *Sahih al-Bukhari – The translation of the meaning of Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitāb al-Adab*, No. 50, Vol. 8, (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan), 1984.

¹⁹ Abu Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah al-Rabi al-Qazwini, *Sunan Ibn Majah, Kitāb al-‘Ilm*, No. 224, (Beirut: Dar al-Maarifah), 1996. Also see: Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah Khatib at-Tabrizi, Abdul Hameed Siddiqui (tr.), *Mishkat al-Masabih, Kitāb al-‘Ilm*, Vol. 1, No. 218, (Lahore: Islamic Publication Ltd.), 1979, p. 136.

²⁰ Both men and women are intended by the *ḥadīth*.

are the heirs of the prophets, and the prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham; they only leave knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion.”²¹ Other *ḥadīth* mention specifically education as it relates to ethics and manners, for example, ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ neither spoke in an insulting manner nor did he ever deliberately utter evil. He used to say, “The most beloved to me amongst you is the one who has the best character and manners.”²² The majority of these reports were recorded under the title *Kitāb al-‘ilm* [‘The Book of Knowledge’] in a variety of *ḥadīth* collections, thus reflecting the intimate and important connection between character, good behaviour, courtesy and knowledge.

Islamic education has been described as a tool of the society whose purpose is to help a person become an ethical, moral and spiritual being; a person that is multi-dimensional and has a direction that is positive and healthy.²³

The three Arabic terms for education and their relative importance have not always been equally balanced throughout history. The idea of disciplining the soul, the mind and the body has from time to time in history been overruled by the idea either of simply disciplining the mind and imparting knowledge or conversely just fostering spiritual growth.

Perhaps the best way to define the word ‘education’ is to demonstrate the relationship between the three indispensable foundations that make up the basic education of any civilisation, i.e. the teacher, the student and the aim or philosophy of the education provided. The term ‘Islamic education’ is sometimes misinterpreted when looked at from a Western point of view, for it is often misunderstood to be

²¹ Abu Dawoud, Ahmad Hasan (tr.), *Sunan Abu Dawoud, Kitāb al-‘ilm*, Chapter 1369, No. 3634, Vol. III, (New Delhi: Al-Madinah Publications), 1985, p. 1034.

²² Muhammad bin Ismail bin al-Mughira al-Bukhari, Muhammad Muhsin Khan (tr.), *Sahih al-Bukhari - The translation of the meaning of Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of the Companions of the Prophet, No. 104, Vol. 5, (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan), 1984.

²³ Hanson, op. cit., p. 14.

a complete interconnected system run by a religious establishment. In addition, the misunderstanding of the term ‘Islamic education’ is further exacerbated by the false impression that this kind of education only provides for instruction in ‘religious’ sciences and does not cater for the sciences that are not revealed. Arguably, this is not the case with education in Islamic civilisation.

In all examples of education during the early Islamic period, as in other civilisations, there was self-evidently a relationship between the student, the teacher and the philosophy of education. However, learning ethics and morals, education, and the acquisition of knowledge (whether religious or not) were private and un-systematic activities. Hence, no single educational authority granted qualifications, if any existed. Moreover, education was not under state control. It is astonishing that, in comparison with our contemporary period, classical Islamic Caliphal government allowed unprecedented and consequently unequalled freedom to the populace, as illustrated by the following passage:

Other than collecting taxes, the government did not interfere in the daily affairs of society. People were born, educated, married; they made their living and bequeathed their wealth; they engaged in trade and other kinds of business – all without interference from the central government. Virtually all of daily life was under the purview of Islamic law, articulated and administered by legal scholars who operated for the most part independent of the central government.²⁴

In different periods of Islamic history it is possible to find a high number of elementary schools that taught pupils how to read, write and calculate. However, these were all separate from each other and

²⁴ Tamara Sonn, *Islam, A Brief History*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), 2010, p. 50.

were mostly independent of state authorities. At higher levels of education, students had to travel long distances to various teachers in order to learn from them. There were higher education institutions in the later 'Abbasid period which became famous for various sciences and scholars. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that education in Islamic civilisation was not based on one system, but on many independent methods of education imparting knowledge from various sources. In the majority of earlier cases, educational authorities did not give out qualifications, but instead the teacher or the scholar decided when the student had learnt what he required. It is also important to keep in mind that to acquire knowledge during the era of early Islam, one could only learn from teachers/scholars; there were few books, since paper was in short supply and indeed almost non-existent until approximately 751 CE, when Muslim armies encountered the Chinese who taught them the art of paper-making.²⁵

One of the aims of this book is to show how various educational institutions changed over time and evolved into other institutions with different curricula and administrations. Therefore, it is very important to understand from the outset that when talking about the history of 'Islamic education', I mean the 'history of education in the Muslim world'. In other words, it is a social history of how peoples of the Islamic civilisation were educated.

It is also important to point out that early Islamic civilisation was not alone in possessing an education system that was not state controlled, an idea so alien to the contemporary world. Historical research shows that certain aspects of the Byzantine education system were very similar to that of the later Islamic world. Since the Islamic world inherited much of the Eastern Byzantine social system, it is highly plausible that some characteristics of Byzantine education may have influenced the Islamic educational system.

²⁵ S. M. Imamuddin, *Arabic Writing and Arab Libraries*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers), 1983, p. 7.

Looking at the education of Byzantium we find it comprised of three stages: primary, intermediate and higher education.²⁶ However, much like the education of the Muslims, the organisation of education in Byzantium was far removed from the education of today. In the Byzantine period, pupils would be sent to a teacher throughout all three stages and not to a building that was designated as a school. Teachers normally either rented a place or used their own house as a place of teaching. Primary level pupils were sent to a teacher known as a *grammatistes* (elementary teacher). At secondary-level, the pupils were yet again not sent to a designated building but to the *grammatikos*,²⁷ and finally those who wanted to continue their higher education went to a *sophist* who was also referred to as the *rhetor*. These people did not grant degrees. If the student wanted to learn, he had to travel to different places to find a suitable *sophist*; all types of higher education in Byzantium were only found in the big metropolises and so learning at this time was synonymous with travel. If a Byzantine student wanted to study law he would go to Beirut, whereas the study of medicine would lead him to Alexandria ; philosophy was studied in Athens and Alexandria and if a student wanted to learn art, letters and literature, he would go to the city of Gaza.²⁸ This way of acquiring knowledge and education increased considerably during Muslim times.

So these are the essential elements that came to comprise Islamic education. Thus, the term 'Islamic education' in this book indicates a distinct system of education in which all the religious and non-revealed sciences were taught and refers to all the institutions utilised for educational purposes from the time of the Prophet ﷺ to the Ottoman period.

²⁶ Cyril Mango, *Byzantium, the Empire of New Rome*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson), 1950, p. 125.

²⁷ N. H. Baynes and L. B. Moss (eds.), *Byzantium: An Introduction to East Roman Civilisation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1949, p. 204.

²⁸ Mango, op. cit., p. 126.

Higher Education in the 'Abbasid Period

The Mosque and the Khan

During the era of the early Islamic civilisation, the distinction between elementary education and higher education was very clear and the mosque was the main educational centre for higher education. The mosques were used as schools to teach adults Islam and literacy. By the Umayyad period two types of mosque emerged: '*al-masjid*', the local mosque for the five daily prayers, and '*al-masjid al-jāmi*' the major mosque at which the *Jumu'ah* prayer was held. The mosque curriculum grew to teach the revealed sciences and *adab*. In the 'Abbasid period, the majority of the local *masājid* began to be utilised for study circles concerned with law and jurisprudence.³⁶ In addition, during the early 'Abbasid period, *adab* was taught extensively at the local mosques; the *masjid al-jāmi* also included various study circles concerned mostly with jurisprudence but also *adab* studies.

The confirmation of the existence of such a higher education system is often found in various books written by later Muslim scholars concerning social issues, especially relating to the biographies of scholars or the categorisation of the sciences. In *at-Tārīkh al-Baghdādī*, the author, while writing the biographies of the scholars who lived or visited this city, also notes the importance of various mosques and their educational use in the new city of Baghdad. Although some mosques were well known for being educational centres for particular subjects, this did not mean that these mosques were not used for other sciences as well. As has been seen in earlier chapters, the first centre of Islamic education was the Prophetic city of Madinah, followed by the cities of Basra, Kufa and Damascus. By the 'Abbasid period, Baghdad had become

³⁶ E. Ihsanoglu and F. Gunergun (eds.), *Science in Islamic civilisation*, (Turkey: IRCICA), 2000, p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the main educational centre of the Muslim world. There were six main *jāmi'* mosques in the city of Baghdad during the 'Abbasid period.³⁷ The first to be constructed was the *Jāmi' Madīnat al-Manṣūr* built between the years 762-766 CE and named after its founder, the second caliph of the 'Abbasids. This mosque became well known as one of the greatest educational institutions during that epoch in the Muslim world. It is reported that around fifty *ḥalaqāt* were active when ash-Shāfi'ī, the famous Imām of jurisprudence, visited Baghdad half a century after the mosque's construction. The various *ḥalaqāt* contained recitation of the Qur'an, reporting and dictation of *ḥadīth*, poetry, *tafsīr* and even *kālām*, the science of 'aqīdah, but this was rare. Although it is true that *fiqh* was later taught mostly at the local *masjid*, during the early period, throughout the third, fourth and the beginning of the fifth Islamic century, *fiqh* was taught continuously at the congregational mosques. Ash-Shāfi'ī himself taught *fiqh* in one of the *ḥalaqāt* at the *Jāmi' Madīnat al-Manṣūr* and the guild of Shāfi'ī scholars continued to teach at the mosque, however, this does not mean that the other guilds of law were excluded. The Ḥanbalī scholar Abū 'Alī al-Hāshimī (d. 1037) taught *fiqh* and had a *ḥalaqah* for *fatwa* at the same mosque. The Zāhiri guild also had a few scholars teaching there, amongst them the founder of the guild, Dāwūd ibn 'Alī az-Zāhirī.³⁸ The *Jāmi' al-Ruṣafā*, the second *jāmi'* mosque in Baghdad, built by the Caliph al-Mahdī in 775 CE, was mostly used for teaching by *ḥadīth* scholars.

Most of the other mosques in Baghdad were also venues for specialised higher education. *Ḥadīth ḥalaqāt* were taught regularly by various scholars at local mosques, such as *Masjid al-Bazzāzūn* (the mosque of the fabric merchants), *Masjid Ibn Raghbān*, *Masjid 'Affān*, *Masjid Ibn Shāhīn*, *Masjid al-Baghiyyīn* and *Masjid Abū Bakr al-Hudhalī al-Baṣrī*. Other local mosques, such as *Masjid ad-Dāraqutnī*, *Masjid ar-Ruwaym ibn Yazīd*, *Masjid aṣ-Ṣaḥābah* and *Masjid Ibn Mujāhid*, where the famous Qur'an

³⁸ Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 115-120.

scholar Ibn Mujāhid taught his students the science of *qirā'ah* in the tenth century, functioned as educational institutions for the recitation of the Qur'an. Others, such as *Masjid 'Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak*, were utilised for teaching Shāfi'ī *fiqh*, in this case by the well known Shāfi'ī scholar, 'Abd al-Majīd.

During the period of Baghdad's foundation, a number of Sufi scholars appeared on the scene of the world of education. They emphasised the importance of spirituality in Islam to a society that was becoming highly materialistic. Thus, numerous local mosques began to specialise in the teaching of the sciences of Sufism, such as, *Masjid al-Shunayziyah*, *Masjid Ma'rūf al-Karkhī*, *Masjid as-Sammāk* and *Masjid al-Bāb al-Kunas*.

Various local and congregational mosques taught a number of the *adab* sciences rather than the range of revealed sciences. These *halaqāt* were taught by scholars such as the famous historian Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (838–923), who taught his students history and exegesis of the Qur'an at the *Masjid as-Sūq al-'Atīqah*,³⁹ Abū 'Abdullāh ibn 'Arafah Nifṭawayh (d. 935), who taught biography and history at the *Masjid al-Anbaryyīn*, and Abū Bakr al-Anbarī (d. 940) who taught his students lexicography, grammar, history, Qur'anic exegesis, and poetry at the same mosque.⁴⁰

However, it was not only in Baghdad that mosques were widely used as educational institutions; throughout the 'Abbasid period, various congregational mosques and local mosques outside Iraq became famous for education. The Umayyad mosque in Damascus had study circles where sciences such as Qur'anic exegesis, grammar and law were taught. The *jāmi' masjid* of Basra had study circles on grammar, taught by grammarians such as Yūnus ibn Ḥabīb (d. 778–810), al-Kisā'ī (d. 805), and al-Farrā' (d. 822). Other famous mosques for higher

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 120–134.

⁴⁰ Makdisi, op. cit., 1990, pp. 50–52.