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Islamic Social and Moral Education: A Comparative Study with the Western View

We attempt to introduce the Islamic approach to social and moral education in terms of three basic elements of human nature in Islamic view: a divine inclination (fitrah), dignity, and freedom. Relying on this account, three principles of Islamic social education are extracted: protection and promotion of individuality; critically analysing tradition, and overcoming self-centeredness. These principles provide a foundation by which to engage with Western social education. We argue that there are strong similarities between Islamic and Western Social education. It is argued further that even though there are some differences between the two viewpoints, this does not prevent reaching a rich dialogue between the two approaches.

1 Introduction

Social and moral education is the discipline that focuses on the interrelation of persons and the values that govern relationships. According to Smith, „social education is the conscious attempt to help people to gain for themselves, the knowledge, feelings and skills necessary to meet their own and others developmental needs.“ (1982, 24). Islamic educational theory focuses on a combination of moral, rational and spiritual principles to cultivate a balance between souls of people and their relationships with God, on the one hand, and with fellow human beings, on the other hand. We would like to outline the main facets of Islamic social education and then compare it to Western social educational theory. This is in order to facilitate beneficial dialogue between two systems of education which have similarities but also some differences. This is crucial today when there is an apparent intellectual and political conflict between Islam and the West where Islam is portrayed as *the Other*; Emon argues:

“Well before the onset of the twenty-first century, academic and popular debates have either implicitly or explicitly positioned Muslims, Islam, and Islamic law as the paradigmatic *Other* to be managed and regulated through policies of multicultural and human rights. This is especially the case in societies identified by such labels as western, liberal, democratic, or some combination thereof” (Emon 2012, 1).

It is therefore hoped that this paper, which is exploratory and intends to lay the grounds for further research, will spark interest in how Islamic educational tradition can engage with Western educational tradition and vice versa.

Ali bin Abi Talib (hereafter Bin Abi Talib) was the fourth Muslim Caliph, cousin of Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law, having married the Prophet's daughter, Lady Fatimah al-Zahra. Our primary focus will be on the narrations of Bin Abi Talib (d. 40/661) with specific reference to the classical compilation, *Nahj al-Balagha* (The Peak of Eloquence). Considering that Bin Abi Talib is a primary reference point for scholasticism and spirituality in the Islamic tradition, we argue that he offers an effective starting point by which to analyse the Islamic worldview of social education. *Nahj al-Balagha* is a compilation of Bin Abi Talib's sermons, letters and sayings. It was compiled by Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. al-Husayn al-Musawi, popularly known as Sharif al-Radi (d. 406/1016) (1) and contains approximately 241 sermons, 79 letters, and 489 utterances of Bin Abi Talib. (2)

2 Islamic View on the Nature of Human Sociality

There are three basic elements¹, that form the foundations of human sociality based on Islamic view: divine inclination (*fitrah*), dignity, and freedom. In terms of *fitrah*, it is held that human beings have an underlying intuitive knowledge about God and hence an inclination toward Him (see Yusuf Ali 2009, 30:30; 7:172). This underlying inclination is not always active rather, it can become hidden beneath social relationships and apparatuses that do not harness it. Referring to *fitrah*, Bin Abi Talib states in sermon 1 of *Nahj al-Balagha*: "Then Allah sent His Messengers and series of His prophets towards them to get them to fulfil the pledges of His creation, to recall to them His bounties, to exhort them by preaching to unveil before them the hidden virtues of wisdom and show them the signs of His Omnipotence..." (Al-Razi 2007, vol 1, 28f.). This shows that *fitrah* requires unveiling and harnessing which is instigated by God's Prophets who show human beings their moral, intellectual, and social worth.

The second element is dignity. All human beings have dignity by virtue of being creatures of God and all deserve to be respected. In Bin Abi Talib's famous letter to Malik al-Ashtar to whom he gave the governance of Egypt, he states: "Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects, as well as affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them since

1 (1). Al-Razi, M. (2007). *Nahj al-Balagha – Ali bin Abi Talib's Sermons, Letters, and Sayings – Arabic and English*. Translated by Syed Ali Raza. Qum: Ansariyan Publications. Please note that in this paper, we have modified his translation. For discussions on *Nahj al-Balagha*'s authenticity, see 'Ali Naqi-un-Naqvi's preface in Al-Razi, *Nahj al-Balagha* xi – xxxiv and Shah-Kazemi: *Justice and Remembrance*, 1-10.

(2) For information on its compilation, see: Modarressi: *Tradition and Survival*, 13 – 15.

they are of two kinds: either your brother in religion or one like you in creation" (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 434). Islam, therefore, values human beings in terms of the origin of their creation, God, who does not distinguish between any of His creatures except by their piety.

The third element is freedom. According to Bin Abi Talib, freedom is the defining quality of human beings because they are not under the dominion of anyone except God. He says in letter 31: "Do not be the slave of others for Allah had made you free. There is no good in good which is achieved through evil and no good in comfort that is achieved through (disgracing) hardship" (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 358).

The aforementioned three elements constitute a human being's unique inner intellectual and moral assets. When people construct their social relations with these assets, they enter a very complicated network of relationships; a network that provides these assets with different actualities and possibilities. The interconnectedness of people in the framework of social relations shows that the outcome of the assets can be determined in the mutual relationships that one forms. Referring to this interconnectedness, Bin Abi Talib says to Jabir b. Abdullah Ansari:

"O' Jabir, the mainstay of religion and the world are four persons: the scholar who acts on his knowledge; the ignorant who does not feel ashamed of learning; the generous who is not niggardly in his favours; and the destitute who does not sell his next life for his worldly benefits. Consequently, when the scholar wastes his knowledge, the ignorant feels shame in learning and when the generous is niggardly with his favours, the destitute sells his next life for worldly benefits. O' Jabir, if favours of Allah abound on a person the people's needs towards him also abound. Therefore, he who fulfils for Allah all that is obligatory on him in this regard will preserve them (Allah's favours) in continuance and perpetuity, while he who does not fulfil those obligations will expose them to decay and destruction" (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, no. 372, 758).

This statement clearly shows how different groups of people can influence others within mutual relationship. Given the two points that firstly, persons have inner assets and secondly, social relations provide ways for the realization of these assets, one should be aware not to reduce persons to *tabula rasa* or conversely, ignore the power of social relations by overrating the individuals' inner assets and autonomies. Instead, Bin Abi Talib's view indicates that individuals and society have a relative independence of each other. According to this relative independence, it is not the case that an individual have a mere social identity since their inner assets are deeply embedded within them. No doubt, society is where these assets surface but the point is that social conditions provide the environment for the appearance of the assets instead of being the condition of their existence.

Therefore, the inner assets are regarded as potentialities that might be threatening to bad social conditions which comprise them. Although the actualization of these potentialities needs new social relations within a society, the existence of these

potentialities is like a ticking time bomb in corrupt social environments. As far as the relative independence of society is concerned, one should be aware not to reduce society to a mere contract between individuals. This shows that the Islamic conception of human sociality is based on a balanced relationship between individuals and society.

3 Principles of Islamic Social Education

Having discussed the key elements of sociality, we can now draw the principles that constitute social education from the Islamic perspective. These are as follows: the protection and promotion of individuality; critical analysis of tradition, and overcoming self-centeredness.

3.1 The protection and promotion of individuality

Islamic social education must protect but also promote the individuality of human beings. This reflects our point about human beings possessing unique traits – *fitrah*, dignity and freedom – which must be allowed to flourish in any society. As far as *fitrah* is concerned, the individuality of a people appears in their private relationship to God. Although private, this relationship has social implications since it can preserve a person from blind absorption in actions of a large majority of people. If the majority acts in an immoral way, one can isolate oneself from their actions. Referring to this, Bin Abi Talib states in sermon 222: “There are some people devoted to the remembrance (of Allah) who have adopted it in place of worldly matters so that commerce or trade does not turn them away from it. They pass their life in it” (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 200). This shows people have the ability to value transcendental goals when they do not get caught up in mundane worldly affairs.

Dignity, the second asset of a human being, plays a key part in social education because it gives a person self-esteem. Social education should never undermine a person’s worth; rather, this worthiness should be promoted so that a person becomes a confident participant in society. The importance of self-esteem is implied in a statement of Bin Abi Talib where he explains to his brother Aqil why he is persistent in a particular decision he made: “The crowd of men around me does not give me strength nor does their dispersal from me cause any loneliness.” (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 376). This shows that dignity is a core aspect of social education because people who realize their self-worth will be in a better position to understand what they want in their social relations and will be persistent in actualizing themselves.

In the case of the third element, freedom, Islamic social education requires that the individuality of people be respected by recognizing their freedom of choice.

Choice here refers to the personal views, skills and creativity of a person which define his/her manner of participation in society. This kind of freedom is crucial to promote an active and intelligent participation within social groups in society as opposed to a blind and passive participation. Bin Abi Talib elegantly refers to this point where he mentions one of the characteristics of pious people in sermon 193: „Even if they are found among those who forget (Allah), they are counted among those who remember (God) but if they are among who remember God, they are not counted among the forgetful“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 98). The second part of this statement indicates that it is not enough for a person to be amongst good people; what is crucial is *how* to be among them. A mere blind following of good people does not guarantee that one is in the right place; rather, one should consciously and intelligently choose to be amongst righteous people.

3.2 Critical analysis of tradition

The second principle of Islamic social education is to confront the tradition in a critical way. Tradition, which is from the Latin word *traditionem*, means delivery, surrender, a handing down and a giving up. There is an inherent sense of passing down norms, habits, culture and history from one generation to another. Together, these form a nation's historical experiences which define a society and provide meaningful identity to people. Because of the cohesive and collective meanings which a tradition provides for the formation of human relationships, the tradition should be a key source for social education. However, tradition is a mixture of truths and superstitions which makes critical analysis of tradition a crucial matter. If one were to believe in myths and act on them as truths, the firm conviction of people may be dangerous if that myth is harmful to social behaviour. It is therefore important to discern which parts of tradition are truthful and beneficial, a point which Bin Abi Talib makes as follows:

“O' my child, even though I have not reached the age which those before me have yet I looked into their behaviour and thought over events of their lives. I walked among their ruins till I was as one of them. In fact by virtue of those of their affairs that have become known to me it is as though I have lived with them from the first to the last. I have therefore been able to discern the impure from the clean and benefit from the harm” (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 342).

What is important in this statement is firstly, the attempt to empathize with society's predecessors to be able to understand what they were thinking and doing. Secondly, a selective encounter with their heritage is adopted in which right and wrong, as well as useful and harmful, are distinguished. At a more technical level, Bin Abi Talib has stated, „when you hear a tradition, test it according to the criterion of intelligence not that of mere hearing, because relaters of knowledge are numerous but those who guard it are few.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, no. 98, 580-2).

3.3 Overcoming self-centeredness

The third principle of Islamic social education deals with self-centeredness which is a fundamental hindrance for social education. There are different features of self-centeredness including ontological, cognitive, and emotional aspects. Ontological self-centeredness means that people take themselves as the pivotal point in the world and hence interpret God's actions in their own terms. As an illustration of this Bin Abi Talib states, „If someone is not grateful to you, that should not prevent you from good actions because (possibly) such a person will feel grateful about it who has not even drawn any benefit from it, and his gratefulness will be more than the ingratitude of the denier; And Allah loves those who do good.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 634). When a person is ungrateful to you, it is normal to feel despondent but by taking God as the driving force behind the action, one's despondency turns into the resolve to continue to do good for God's pleasure.

The second feature of self-centeredness is cognitive. In this case, people are not able to see things from others' perspective or if they are able to do this, they do not take others' viewpoints seriously. Overcoming this sort of self-centeredness requires that social education provides people with the ability of seeing things from others' viewpoints in order to save them from cognitive deviation. In relation to this, Bin Abi Talib says to Malik al-Ashtar:

“Then do not keep yourself secluded from the people for a long time because the seclusion of those in authority from the subjects is a kind of narrow-sightedness and causes ignorance about their affairs. Seclusion from them also prevents them from the knowledge of those things which they do not know and as a result they begin to regard big matters as small and small matters as big, good matters as bad and bad matters as good while the truth becomes confused with falsehood” (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 460).

The last feature of self-centeredness is emotional which includes biases and subjective interests. Here, self-centred people are those who cannot consider what is (un)desirable for them as (un)desirable to others, *ceteris paribus*. This kind of self-centeredness cannot be reduced to the cognitive one. It is not the case here that people are short of realizing others' situations; rather, they might be able to realize that but still be emotionally self-centred based on their deep-rooted biases. In order to make sure that fairness occurs in social relationships, one should isolate their own emotions as much as possible in order to recognize other people's needs; that is why Bin Abi Talib informs his son, al-Hasan (d. 50/670):

“Bear yourself towards your brother in such a way that if he disregards kinship you keep to it; when he turns away, be kind to him and draw near to him; when he withdraws, spend for him; when he goes away, approach him; when he is harsh, be lenient; when he commits wrong, think of (his) excuse for it so much so as though you are a slave of him and he is the benevolent master over you. But take care that this should not be done

inappropriately and that you should not behave so with an undeserving person" (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 360-362).

Therefore, social education from the perspective of Bin Abi Talib constitutes three principles: protection and promotion of individuality; critically analysing tradition; and overcoming self-centeredness. In our view, this forms the bedrock of Islamic social education and may positively enhance human relationships.

4 A Comparison between Islamic and Western Social Education

Having outlined the key principles of Islamic social education, it is important to compare them to the salient features of Western social educational theory in order to foster greater dialogue on education between Islam and the West. As far as Bin Abi Talib's view of social education is concerned, three principles were extracted: the protection and promotion of individuality, critically analysing tradition, and overcoming self-centeredness. In terms of the first principle, protection and promotion of individuality, there is a strong similarity between Islam and the liberal approach in the West. This is because in the latter, as in the former, the individual has been given a central position. Concentrating on British authors, we can refer, for instance, to Collin Wringe who is well-known for his works on moral education. Wringe and Lee outline the key facets of the West's liberal approach to the individual (Wringe, 1995, 56; Lee and Wringe, 1993, 77) as follows.

The first principle is equal opportunities. Social opportunities should be provided to all individuals in an equal manner. As a case of providing equal opportunities, general education is emphasised. Thus, social education should put the emphasis on the general abilities of individuals rather than special abilities. This is because individuals will then be provided with the possibility of changing their careers in case of need.

The second principle is reciprocal reverence. Individuals, as people who have equal rights, should have reciprocal reverence toward each other.

According to the third principle, the teacher should draw the attention of pupils to ways in which morality and prudence go hand in hand i.e. it is not necessary for them to act according to their duties against their own interests; rather these two categories can coincide. In this case, autonomies of pupils are compatible with satisfying their self-interests.

The fourth principle indicates that the teacher should pave the ground for her pupils to act in a way that it leads to the benefit of others rather than harming them. Again, here the autonomy of a person is compatible with not doing harm or being useful to others.

According to the fifth principle, if pupils decide to preach moral rules, the teacher should not subvert their autonomy by the use of conditioning or by appealing to guilt or sentiment. Referring to this point, Wringe states, „To subvert the pupil's autonomy by the use of conditioning or the exploitation of guilt or sentiment (not to mention sleep-teaching or the use of drugs) is morally ruled out. To subvert the autonomy of another is itself morally objectionable, however sorely teachers in the performance of their professional role may be tempted to do this in the interests of what may seem to be the greater good.“ (Lee & Wringe, 1993, 77). The teacher can be justified in imposing social disapproval and punishment on pupils who decide to harm others. This would be better than a society in which people are rendered incapable of anti-social acts.

Finally, the Sixth principle indicates that while the idea of autonomy has been the subject of critique for some recent Western thinkers, the core of autonomy has been taken by them as a necessary part of social identity. For instance, while in his early works Foucault did not think that autonomy of individuals could be involved in the face of the strong current of 'normalization' in the modern era, in some later works he held that we could critically deal with the limits imposed on us as we could have „a permanent critique of ourselves in our autonomy“ (1984, 44). In other words, Foucault at first put emphasis on the influence of social organizations on individuals and the strength of the subsequent normalization, but later on he gave a more weight to the 'subject' in the face of the strength of social organizations. Having the capacity of critique of one's own situation, the 'subject' can distinguish between the limits that could be resisted or overcome and the ones that could not be helped. According to this new orientation of Foucault, Raaen (2011) has appealed to Foucault's concept of *parrehsia* (free speech or frankness) to show how schoolteachers can use it in their practice of professional autonomy and empowerment of their pupils. *Parrehsia* requires that the individual be honourable and frank in telling the truth which involves risk taking. As such, *parrehsia* combines care for oneself and care for others i.e., it is not only individualistic but social in nature since it involves facing social challenges. By appealing to *parrehsia*, teachers can reflect on their professional limitations and critique them. On the other hand, in terms of their relations to pupils, teachers should encourage them to refrain from flattering as a requirement of *parrehsia*. Thus, Raaen states: "Individuals' free, autonomous speech can bring new truth to people, thus strengthening their insight and making them better able to take care of themselves and others" (2011, 632).

The aforementioned principles of Western educational theory show the autonomy of the individual is paramount but avoiding harm to others is also considered as a significant principle. When we compare this to Bin Abi Talib's view of Islamic social education, there are some key similarities and differences.

4.1 Similarities between Islamic and Western Social Education

With respect to providing equal opportunities, namely the first principle, Bin Abi Talib regards it as a primary principle of governance and instruction. During his caliphate he was asked by some for inequality in distributing money. In sermon 126, he responds: „Do you command me that I should seek support by oppressing those over whom I have been placed? By Allah I won't do so as long as the world goes on and as long as one star leads another in the sky. Even if it were my property I would have distributed it equally among them then why not when the property is that of Allah.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 1, 476). This shows that he takes equal opportunity as an important part of social justice and social education.

Secondly, in the case of reciprocal reverence, in his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, the administrator of Egypt, Bin Abi Talib states that he should be benevolent to all people since they are either a brother in religion or a fellow human being: „Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them since they are of two kinds either your brother in religion or one like you in creation.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 434).

Thirdly, in the case of making self-interest and duty compatible, Bin Abi Talib in his statement to the people of Kufa says that he does not want to provide them with desirable demeanour at the price of his own corruption (al-Mufid 1993, 40: 207).

Fourth, as for refraining from being harmful to others, Bin Abi Talib in describing righteous people states in sermon 193 that one of their characteristics is that people are safe from their evils: „Indecent speech is far from him, his utterance is lenient, his evils are non-existent, his virtues are ever present, his good is ahead and mischief has turned its face (from him).“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 98-100). This statement shows his emphasis on individuals being deeply conscious of their actions and how they might harm others.

Fifth, what if some people decide to breach laws? Would their autonomy be recognized even though they might be punished? In an interesting passage in sermon 127 referring to the Prophet of Islam, Bin Abi Talib states that while the Prophet was punishing the people who preached laws in different ways, he was preserving all their social rights and considering them as civilians who have their civil rights: „Thus the Prophet held them to account over their sins and also abided by Allah's commands about them but did not disallow them their rights created by Islam nor did he remove their names from its followers.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 1, 478).

Finally, as for frankness of speech through autonomy, Bin Abi Talib tells people in sermon 216 to take heed of a truth said to him: „Do not evade me as the people of passion are (to be) evaded, do not meet me with flattery and do not think that I shall take it ill if a true thing is said to me because the person who feels disgusted when truth is said to him or a just matter is placed before him would find it more

difficult to act upon them.“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 182). This invites people and pupils to avoid flattering and to be frank. On the other hand, in the position of a scholar and teacher, he holds in sermon 3 that God has taken a promise of scholars not to be silent before the oppressor: “...if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed I would have cast the rope of caliphate on its own shoulders“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 1, 52). Having mentioned these points, Bin Abi Talib holds that frankness may not be appropriate in some cases. When the situation is not transparent so that you might not be able to show the truth of your position then frankness is not a virtue. Here he states: “During civil disturbance be like an adolescent camel who has neither a back strong enough for riding nor udders for milking“ (Al-Razi 2007, vol 2, 530).

4.2 Differences between Islamic and Western Social Education

In terms of differences between Western liberalism and Islam on the issue of individuality it should be stated that, whilst liberalism gives top priority to individuals' rights, Islam looks for a trade-off between individual rights and social traditions. As Haidt and Graham (2007) hold, liberal morality rests primarily on individual rights within the limits of refraining from inflicting harm on others' rights.

This brings us to the educational implications of the second principle, namely critically analysing social traditions. While 'Ali ibn Abi Talib puts the limit of social traditions for individual rights, this does not indicate that social traditions have absolute priority. On the contrary, social traditions should be the subject of scrutiny in their own terms. This can show the difference between the Islamic view and communitarianism supported by, for instance, MacIntyre (1981) and Sandel (1982), being the two famous representatives of communitarianism. In the communitarian approach, contrary to liberalism, the individual is not at the centre; rather, the society is given central importance. MacIntyre holds that the social position of individuals is the only context in terms of which one can talk about individual rights. In other words, individual rights can only be referred to positively in terms of social functions by which individuals relate to other individuals like a teacher, counsellor, and so on.

Finally, in terms of overcoming self-centeredness, social education has the following implications. In Islamic social education, people should be encouraged to overcome what we called ontological self-centeredness. In order to do this, pupils should learn to dismiss themselves as the pivotal point of the world and replace themselves by God. In consequence, they will learn to continue to do good things even if others do not appreciate them; as they will learn to stop revenging believing that God is the ultimate judge and that He will punish oppressors. This view is peculiar to Islamic social education.

In order to overcome cognitive self-centeredness teachers should provide pupils with communicating their reasons for their actions to their peers. The ability to hear from others and understand their reasons is what is needed to be cultivated here. In this implication, the Islamic view actually shares with cognitive-oriented approaches in social and moral education (Kohlberg 1969, among others). And, in order to overcome emotional self-centeredness, teachers should teach pupils how to care about others. They should be able to become happy by seeing the successes of others as well as becoming sad in relation to others' sadness. In this implication, the Islamic view shares with emotive and care approaches in social and moral education (Noddings1992) in seeing the cognitive dimension as necessary but not sufficient for social education.

5 Conclusion

We have attempted to introduce the Islamic approach to social education and argued that according to Bin Abi Talib, there are three basic elements which human beings possess: a divine inclination (*firrah*), dignity and freedom. Relying on this account of human sociality, three principles of Islamic social education have been extracted: protection and promotion of individuality; critically analysing tradition, and overcoming self-centeredness. These principles provide a foundation by which to engage with Western social education and show *Nahj al-Balaghah*'s relevance as a key text to facilitate this engagement. Social education, therefore, is a crucial discipline in both Islamic and Western education so that relationships are governed by enduring, fair and harmonious values. As Astin, Astin and Lindholm argue,

"Assisting more students to grow spiritually will help create a new generation of young adults who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations, and who are able to employ great equanimity in responding to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing technological society" (Astin, et al. 2010, 157).

A detailed examination of each of our principles in relation to specific educational trends requires further papers. However, an initial survey of *Nahj al-Balaghah* shows Bin Abi Talib's thoughts could help facilitate Islamic-Western dialogue on social education.

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