

Tertiary Education in Muslim Countries – The Commodification of Ideas and their Unintended Consequences

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Abstract

Islamic education, from a holistic point of view, is more than just the direct transmission of the pure Islamic science. It encompasses other branches of specialisation and ideally accompanies Muslims, through reflections of the Islamic worldview during their formal and informal education. This paper reflects how, in the contemporary tertiary education in the Islamic world, commodified concepts stemming from a non-Islamic worldview are being proliferated, and what the expectable results are for Muslim students.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Worldview, Commodification, Maqasid, Business Schools, Tertiary Education.

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Introduction

The contemporary education system in the Islamic world has its roots in colonialism. It has either been implanted after the traditional Islamic system of education had been eradicated; or been introduced as the saviour of societies in the Islamic world whose education systems had become stale due to neglect. In addition to the establishment of its institutions, curricula and teaching methodology there is also the issue of the language in which the education (culture) of the coloniser is delivered – a foreign language to the receiving populations, usually English or French. This problem is not new to research and analysis; however, there may have been disparities between the analysis of the problem and the attempt to find solutions; as well as between the problem solving strategy and its implementation. Mistakes have been made either in methodology or implementation; the trajectory of the school of Islamisation of human sciences may serve as a recent example of this phenomenon.

Education is a significant political topic in many societies and, also, between them. In democracies, the education system is frequently ‘over-hauled’ as each of the various parties of competing ideologies takes their turn in power, resulting in varying emphases in the curriculum over time (Denman, 2012; Hegazy, 2006), depending on the government, but increasingly, on the market (Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994; Hatcher, 2006;

Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard, 2016; Roberts, 1994).

Criticism directed at the education systems of the Western, industrialized countries and those following their pathways is increasingly being voiced (Gatto, 2000). Critiques usually mention that the system is a product of industrialization, merely aiming at producing a mass of obedient, non-critically thinking human resources to work in factories, some people who are qualified to do administrative jobs to run and manage the factories, and a chosen few to pursue an academic career (Chomsky, 2014). This ‘development’ of students in the school system to take their place in an industrialised workplace, meaning educational emphases are primarily social conformity, rather than creative (Robinson, 2011) but also vocational, right up to the highest levels of terminal degrees.

These structures have been internalised through the representatives of the system in a way that unwritten rules are being followed, and those characterized as “outsiders” in terms of socialization or descent may find difficulties to succeed within the system. There has been criticism of the schooling model from a wide range of groups and interests, who criticise it as stifling creativity, subjugating personality and inculcating servitude. Our interest is in how far this model, imported across the Muslim world, has served Muslims students.

This paper looks into some of the problems Muslim students may face with regard to an imported system of education, studying in a foreign language, and being consumers of commodified ideas without the expertise to deconstruct them, it particularly asks what the (un)intended consequences of these ideas may be.

Teaching in a foreign language and its implications

Language is one aspect which certainly counts as an educational factor in the absorption of ideas, the lacking ability to deconstruct, and continuity of dependence.

The Whorf- Sapir hypothesis, or rather the theory of linguistic relativity, as Whorf preferred, suggests that language influences thought (Chafe, 2013, 122). If this is so, it certainly matters which language is used to acquire basic and more advanced scientific concepts.

Education in tertiary, and sometimes secondary and even primary levels in the former colonies very often takes place in a foreign language – English in countries historically affiliated with British colonialism or influence; French in former French colonies, and so forth.

Teaching basic concepts in a foreign language, usually for claims of competitiveness, modernity, or functionality, has a number of effects on the learner; among them the danger of a growing disability to express these concepts in the mother tongue; the

learners may find themselves restrained or even incapacitated from developing ideas in their own language, while not mastering the foreign language well enough to be able to excel. In addition, the network of meanings that naturally exist while studying in the mother tongue is lost. The process may lead to a disability to refer to the own cultural legacy, as texts and sources the learner gets familiar with are expressions of a different culture; or the learners may start referring to their own culture and heritage through the filter of the (former) colonial language and its sources (Pennycook, 1998).

A certain conviction may spread that the own language/culture is unable to produce ‘modern’ concepts, solutions, that it is not competitive in the modern world. Reliance on foreign expertise, foreign teachers, and sending young students to foreign universities – an unneglectable economic factor for the former colonial powers (Universities UK, 2017), mainly, is expected to persist. This is only as far as the language, the medium of education, is concerned. In addition, any language is also a vehicle for cultural concepts; concepts that may be taken over as part of an acculturation process. The usage of a foreign language in tertiary education may have some advantages; however, negative consequences are multi-layered and manifold.

Commodification of Ideas

Commodification has a number of possible definitions, with the original attributed

to Karl Marx (Marx, 1975). The term is used to describe the process whereby something which does not have an economic value is assigned a value – illustrating how market values can replace social values across society. This allows relationships between things or objects, which formerly had no economic connection to be commercialised.

Commodification, in this sense, means to take something special or unique, and treat it as if it is indistinguishable, interchangeable, every day. The education system worldwide, both in etic and emic views, is a victim of this kind of commodification. Globalisation, a phenomenon of exporting of Western models, duplicated across the world through colonisation or imitation, resulted in a monolithic format of schooling being adopted worldwide. This system, which emphasises the values, perspectives and goals of a Western society naturally reflect values of Christianity and secularism, capitalism, industrialism and, perhaps most significantly, of consumption/consumerism.

Commodification, then, is the re-packaging of things and concepts in order to make them more attractive, more convincing, and more palatable in the service of a capitalistic global economy.

The term commodification is also used to mean “the choice of certain ideas, their simplified symbolic representation (sometimes with a lack of consideration of their intellectual or societal background) and their translation into a standard and/or

merchandise” (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016, p.61). We will use the term in that sense here as well.

Recently, Adi Setia has remarked the conflation and co-optation of the theory of Maqasid (Setia, 2016). We use the term commodification in a comparable way, with the additional focus on how the conflated and cooptated concept (Setia) is being proliferated.

Traditional Islamic Schooling Model

Traditionally, Muslims were taught in mosques, beginning with the fundamentals of Islamic din (Qur’an, sirah, hadith, Arabic) as a backdrop to all vocational and cultural education which followed (maths, science, languages, poetry etc). Ibn Khaldun wrote “It should be known that instructing children in the Qur’an is a symbol of Islam. Muslims have, and practice, such instruction in all their cities, because it imbues hearts with a firm belief (in Islam) and its articles of faith, which are (derived) from the verses of the Qur’an and certain Prophetic traditions” (Ibn-Khaldun: 1958, #38). In this way, learning was located within a comprehensive Islamic learning, meaning students had a good resource of Islamic learning even with very little formal education. It also meant that students learned Islamic models and ethics as starting points for all evaluations.

This point is very important, because the development of the various education systems has reflected their emphases and

requirements. In the West, schools developed from Christianity to philosophy to economics and the other business disciplines. In the Islamic tradition, all learning developed from the Qur'an.

Similarly, the physical structure of teaching meant that students sat with teachers in circles in the mosque working together on various lessons (Al Khateeb, 2012) – the groupings being made up by level, rather than age. In this way, one could find a tutor far younger than some of the students in his/her group, as is natural.

In modern times, finding a traditional Muslim model of education may prove a futile endeavour. With decolonisation stagnant and under the influence of globalisation in the Muslim world, the education systems may still be used to 're-educate' Muslims to conform to (Western) values and (Western) norms; with legal systems similarly modified (Charrad, 2001), schooling has been a boon in encouraging conformity in Muslim countries all over the world.

Differences in Worldviews

It is vital at this point to discuss the differences in worldview, so as to understand the dimensions for importing ideas and systems for the educational sector.

The Islamic worldview is, first and foremost, based on the concept of tawhid, the oneness of the Creator of the heavens and the earth, Allah s.w.t. Man has been created as the servant of Allah, his khalifah

or vicegerent on earth. The purpose of his existence is to serve his Creator, obey His commands and prohibitions. This is also the very basic concept, aim ("learning outcome", in pedagogical terms) in any Islamic education on any level. While acquiring basic Islamic knowledge is an obligation (fardu 'ayn), acquiring any other kind of useful (i.e., not harmful) knowledge is recommended, basically permissible or could even be given the rule of fard kifayah. The basic sources of the Islamic way of life, and therefore its educational system, are the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh). It is a commonplace that, while Islamic culture found active implementation, Muslims were at the peak of scientific expertise and development; a reality that finds its secret in the first verse of revelation; "Read! In the name of your Lord Who created, created the human being from a clot of blood ('alaq)." (Qur'an, 96:1-2)

Secular materialist worldview as manifest in Western societies, and imported to the rest of the world in the wake of colonialization and then globalisation, in its technology-minded version, basically states that a Creator may – or may not – exist, but the human being is free to make his own choices of good or bad, right or wrong, create his own systems, according to his own whims and desires, or a real or conjectural 'benefit' (maslahah). Benchmark of action is the material benefit, ethical guidelines of different proveniences may well exist, but are often sacrificed for this purpose. Secularism

is, so to speak, the keeper of the Holy Grail and undisputable (Habib, R, 1993).

Observation needs to be made while embarking on scientific expertise of any kind developed within the framework of a different, here the secular capitalist worldview; while the pure sciences, life sciences etc, are often considered to be neutral, they may still express a point of view on life that is in contradiction to the Islamic worldview, either in conceptualisation (theory), or in implementation (practice), or both (Boulanour, 2017). As far as human and social sciences, philosophy, psychology, pedagogics are concerned, the guiding principle should be to accept these concepts only after thorough scrutiny with regard to its compatibility with the Islamic worldview. This requires that the student (as well as teacher!) of these sciences is well equipped and versed in the Islamic culture. Particularly here lies the weak spot of Muslim students in tertiary education in the Muslim world (and beyond). As a result of the growing secularisation of the societies in the Islamic world, and the Westernisation (and secularisation) of the educational systems, Muslim students are practising their Islam on an individual basis (with regard to prayer and fasting), but are not well versed in the Islamic systems, history, and understanding of its sources.

Accordingly, what does it mean to take ideas from one worldview, here the secular materialist, and import them to the other, here the Islamic? If we consider that

ideas and concepts carry values and that, particularly from the Islamic point of view, any action needs to be aligned with the stipulations of Islamic law, be it that they take the rule of being obligatory (wajib), recommended (mandub), permissible (mubah), discouraged (makruh), or prohibited (haram). The field of mubah, the permissible, is quite wide. With regard to the natural sciences, for instance, whatever comes under the description of a given reality is value-free and may be adopted under this category; provided that its usage is embedded in an Islamic framework. In case an idea / a concept stems from a secular point of view, its adoption would run counter to a person's belief system and could entail disbelief; in case it is in contradiction to an Islamic legal rule, it would amount to acquiring a harum. Importantly, the difference in worldview entails a difference in methodology, merging the two worldviews on the basis of concepts and rules will lead to a hybridised methodology that subtly undermines Islamic concepts.

Business School Examples

Besides the inherent ideological issues with the adoption of a Western, and particularly English language, curriculum by Muslim speakers of other languages, Muslim students are at a fundamental disadvantage within the system when compared to their Western (or even more Westernised) contemporaries (Chase, 1980).

To give an example of a typically

secular connotation and its – non-existent – Islamic counterpart in textbooks of tertiary education; students are exposed to the concept of the economic ‘invisible hand’ as credited to Adam Smith in his very famous text *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776). The explanation reflects a Western capitalist or Industrialist viewpoint in its formulation that ‘the baker does not bake bread out of benevolence’. The idea is being used – in neoliberal circles, and has probably also seen a commodification and decontextualised usage since Adam Smith formulated it – so as to suggest that individual self-interested actions lead to social benefits, and that, therefore, the state is not in charge of social welfare – as the deregulated market regulates it on its own account. Muslim students are not exposed to the mechanisms of an Islamic economy; or even the Islamic perspective, as once formulated by Imam al-Shatibi in his *Muwafaqat*, that a baker bakes to produce bread for his neighbours to buy as an act of worship, meaning they are fed and he is paid (Al-Shatibi, 2003, 2/300). There are many examples of this across disciplines, and certainly the anecdotal result is a compartmentalising of ideas in the Muslim students’ minds. They are Muslim at home, but university, work and especially business, does not have anything to do with Islam – different rules apply, different norms abound. The link between the Islamic belief, education and professional life is being lost.

Conflicts can be further reinforced,

when Islamic concepts such as *Maqasid al-Shari’ah*, are commodified to make Islamic teaching palatable or ‘relevant’, or to package these complex concepts to ‘meet the needs’ of established human theories such as scarcity (eg, Rice, 1999), but also many others.

Students are also disadvantaged with understanding some concepts. For example, the concept of interest (Qur’an 2:279) is taught as standard in the Western business school (and from the seventh grade in school mathematics). An enquiry into how money can increase in values is naturally answered by interest, inflation and the like, however for a Muslim student *riba* is haram (eg, Qur’an 3:130, 4:161, 2:275-276, 278-279), so this answer may be difficult to get to, and to learn, and, therefore, to teach. Getting it right actually requires a compartmentalised of belief. In answer to the question of why interest is taught at all, academics may cite globalisation/the global economy. However, with interest being taught primarily or fundamentally, rather than supplementarily, the concept of, in this case, interest, is either compartmentalised in a student’s mind or it supersedes their ‘Islamic self’. It loosens the hold on the rope of Allah (Hussain & Bouzenita, 2011).

Examples from psychology

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016) is a pervasive model in many specialisations, so many students

in the Islamic world will be exposed to it; albeit its intrinsic contradiction to Islamic concepts. To summarise the most important parts of criticism, the model is not empirically proven and is based on randomly chosen US-American experiences of the 1950ies, making it ethnocentric. The model does not give room for any spiritual aspect as a motivation to action in human life, while the possibility of “self-actualisation” demands a fulfilment of the basic human needs – quite in contradiction to the reality of human existence. (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016) Teaching this model and its likes as default – without an Islamically founded evaluation – deprives the students of any link to their belief system.

Maqasid al-Shari’ah, the Higher Objectives of Islamic Law, and their commodification

The theory of maqasid al-shari’ah, the higher objectives of Islamic law, has been developed in an Islamic framework and by Islamic scholars deeply rooted in the Islamic sciences. Although these five values are often (particularly in contemporary textbooks) being presented as the only possible solution, different scholars have named different values or diversified them more.

Imam al-Ghazali has defined the maqasid as either acquiring benefits (masalih) or warding off harm (madharrah), be it in this world (dunya) or the afterlife (akhirah). The

preservation of these values takes place on different stages of strength (which have come to be called necessities (dharuriyat), needs (hajjiyat), and embellishments (tahsiniyyat). He also underlines the difference between the masalih as defined by the Lawgiver, Allah s.w.t, and benefits as intended by the human being. Ghazali imposed a number of conditions to be applied to unrestricted or masalih murslah, i.e. benefits not defined through a specific text which are generally not part and parcel of the commodified version. (Al-Ghazali, 1904)

What we need to keep in mind here is that these scholars lived and found themselves under the intellectual and cultural impact of an Islamic system, i.e. the holistic implementation of the Islamic way of life. Therefore, their value system and ideas can be considered as originally Islamic. Within an implemented Islamic way of life, the interpretation of whatever is beneficial or harmful will follow an Islamic conceptualization. Within a capitalist, profit-maximising system, however, the interpretation will tend to be materialistic, profit-orientated sometimes even without bad intentions. In addition, the contemporary methodology resorted to is to deny the importance of textual evidence and declare the objectives as open-ended; in this way, any appraised concept, from modernity to progress to science to human rights can be claimed to be part and parcel of the objectives of the shari’ah (Setia, 2016).

Resorting to a – commodified – model

of maqasid al-shari'ah seems, superficially, like a reminder to what the Islamic legal rule is intended to be for, seeming like a defense to the rule; however, it may serve as a cover to introduce capitalist values and thought, trying to “close the gap” between reality and law; not by changing an un-Islamic reality, but rather by changing the law in the end. Characteristic of attempts to close the ranks between the systems is to refer to the ultimate *maslahah* – in faulty reference to Ibn Qayyim – “wherever there is the *maslahah*, this is Islam”; with no differentiation between the different systems in term of origins, rules, values and intentions. Interestingly, even non-Muslims have discovered the theory of maqasid al-shari'ah as a means to “harmonise” the Islamic and secular (legal) systems (Bohlander, 2014).

To give an example on how the – commodified – theory serves as a closing of ranks between the outer appearance of an Islamic legal rule and the content of capitalist values, we may resort to the interpretation of benefits and harms in the contemporary *ijtihad* on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (Bouzenita, 2012).

It is not astonishing that the theory is very often resorted to in the field of Islamic finance and banking, as the commodified model, i.e. the maqasid as decontextualized from their original worldview and textual evidences, offers a vehicle to merge decontextualized Islamic legal rules with a secular capitalist setting.

As Setia (2016) has observed, it is often the Muslim specialists of the Islamic sciences who deepen the cooptation of concepts despite their in-depth Islamic knowledge, under ignorance of the reality of the Western concepts and their rootedness in the secular worldview. Positively laden terms such as modernism, development, science, and progress are used as exchange maqasid, sometimes like the classically mentioned five maqasid, and turned into open-ended objectives. The very fact that these, just like the ‘*maslahah*’ and ‘*madharrah*’, are then interpreted within a secular materialistic framework is completely neglected. Setia (2016) forwards examples from the pervasive Islamic finance sector and the Halal Industry to illuminate how “original epistemological and axioteleological parameters of what really counts as *maslahah* are disregarded so that it can be identified with core Western values such as progress, science and development.” (p.127). Setia's (2016) critique also encompasses how the hierarchical order of maqasid, is often undermined, although substantial for the realization of maqasid within the theory, where *deen* is the most, *mal* the least important; he also remarks how the levels of strength within one maqasid, the *daruriyat*, *hajjiyat*, *tahsiniyyat*, are being misconsidered.

What can be observed in contemporary academic writing is a tendency to link an already commodified model or theory to the commodified version of maqasid. To give an example; Zakaria and Abdul Malek in their

2014 paper briefly refer to Maqasid as “purpose, objective, principle, intent, goal and end. Meanwhile, Maqsid of Syariah is the objectives or purposes behind Islamic laws”(p.43). This- and otherwordly dimensions of maqasid al-shari’ah are not mentioned.

Albeit the obviously good intentions of the authors to enhance zakah distribution (the initial problem of which has not been clarified), the authors have contributed in conflating (Setia) the concept, merging it with the non-Islamic conceptualization of human needs (Maslow) and thereby commodifying it.

Instead of presenting the Islamic economic system in its own right, shari’ah remains but an ethical cloak to ‘embellish’ capitalism through its maqasid. Setia uses the term “reverse engineering” for this process (Setia, 2016).

Conclusion: The (un)intended consequences, effect on students’ mindset

Muslim students are, either in or outside of the Islamic world, exposed to a seemingly overwhelming, successful modernism they are not able to digest, let alone evaluate as against Islam as a way of life. They are therefore alienated from their innate culture and – intentionally or not – hybridised in a self-perpetuating circle. Their relationship to their own Islamic culture will at best be emotional, not intellectual; they may look at Islamic culture as remnant of a glorious past, but not to be realised in today’s age;

a creator of problems and ambiguities rather than the solution to it.

Tragically, they will most likely not even be able to excel, their success will be in the shallow reproduction of ideas, not in their development, as long as the hybridised framework has not been left behind. The intellectual dynamism necessary for success demands that the fish moves in its own water, not in a fish bowl limiting its movement under lack of oxygen.

Confusion will exist as students privilege Western ‘evidence’ over Islamic knowledge – thinking of the Western knowledge as right. They have a compartmentalised mentality, where they live as Muslims at home and with family and co-nationalists, but operate in business and profession in another ethical and legal framework entirely. In the past, they used their grounding in Islam to filter outside knowledge and take the good from it, now they filter Islamic knowledge through Western culture, because they are learning it, in English, including its ethical approach and secularised civil law.

As Ghazali put it, people imagine inconsistency in the deen because of their own impotence: “He is indeed like a blind man who entered a house and there stumbled over some of the vessels of the house and said, ‘what are these vessels doing in the path; why are they not put in their place?’ They answered him, ‘Those vessels are in their place, but you did not find the way because of your blindness. How strange it

is of you not to blame your stumbling on your blindness, but rather to blame it upon the negligence of someone else.’ This is the relationship between religious and intellectual sciences”. (Ghazali, 2010, p.48).

Through the Western lens, Muslim students may think nothing really innovative came from Islamic sciences, but they are taught lots of things that did, but have been ‘hybridised’ into a gross, unnatural form and then these ideas are ‘sold back’ to them as examples of the awesome, superior, progressive, modern west (fuelled by capitalism).

Also there is the sending of the ‘best and brightest’ to the west to study. And the home country bias towards those students as if they are better quality graduates, even if they clearly are not.

Then they do research on themselves as ‘other’ (self-orientalisation), using the frameworks and methodologies they learned from their Western textbooks, their Western educations, their Western trained teachers.

French colonialism has produced the ultimate example for brainwashing younger generations, the future indigenous co-optated (to use Setia’s term) elites of the colonies, with the cultural force of the textbook. “Nos ancêtres les Gaullois étaient blonds” , the famous phrase lurching into the mindsets of primary school students wherever French colonialism had taken hold, and creating the ultimate sense of an inferiority complex amongst the perpetually colonized. As time passed on, the means of colonizing

people’s mindsets have become more subtle, and more pervasive, and maybe more difficult to recognize and deconstruct. Roles have been changed; where it used to be the scholars who deconstructed non-Islamic concepts as what they are, it is now very often Muslim scholars and those presenting themselves as such who introduce non-Islamic concepts in a pseudo- Islamic garb. As the Algerian intellectual Malik Bennabi sharply realized in the middle of the 20th century, colonialisation, to be successful, needs the colonisable mind-set, “la colonisabilité”. (Bennabi, 2005) The North African polymath Ibn Khaldun, in his *Muqaddimah*, aptly formulated the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror. The conquered, he says, will always follow the conqueror in habits and attitude (Ibn Khaldun, 1958). It is unlikely that Ibn Khaldun could possibly have imagined the far reaching consequences of colonisation, particularly in the education system. However, his observation is completely transferrable to our example.

Commodified secular capitalist concepts in textbooks and, to a lesser extent, in academic papers, are absorbed by future generations. From our observation, students in tertiary education (let alone beyond) very often do not have the ability to distinguish between an original concept and a commodified one, nor have they been equipped with the intellectual abilities of deconstructing a concept that defies Islamic culture.

¹ *Our ancestors, the Gauls, were blond.*

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