

# **PEDAGOGY IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION**



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The Madrasah Context

BY

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# Foreword

The book is about increasing our awareness of the spectrum of sensory experiences that shape Islamic pedagogy. We started this book from an Islamic premise of the inseparable nature of knowledge and the sacred. Islamic pedagogy is represented by the heartfelt interactions between the teacher and learner through orality, facilitating memorisation and the didactic approach towards sacred texts. The book has endeavoured to explore a spiritual approach and this provides the foundation for shaping our understanding of the universal concept of Islamic pedagogy. Al-Ghazali's mystical-theoretical approach towards learning is evident in this research in defining the madrasah as a spiritual rather than social construct.

We have used four broad claims concerning sensory orders, identity, embodiment and spirituality to structure our descriptions of Islamic pedagogy and embodiment. We propose the Islamic approach to the sensoria is different and privileges orality, kinaesthesia and embodiment. We describe the impact of this approach in four areas, each of which affects the others: the use of language to describe the sensorium, moral values embedded in teaching and learning, a madrasah model of embodiment, and ideas about knowledge and the sacred. We provide details of the four areas as a way to explore the madrasah concepts of Islamic pedagogy and how this is represented by embodied actions.

The book is shaped by the four broad claims that explain the stasis of Islamic pedagogy with reference not to dogmatic pronouncements but to local understandings of sensory orders, embodiment, identity and spirituality. In the final parts of the book, sensory insights are interwoven with theoretical insights. We show that Islamic pedagogy in the madrasah is considered a largely spiritual process through which knowledge extant in the potentia is in the heart of the learners and is slowly revealed in the form of embodied actions.

With this book, we hope to contribute to two distinct fields of study. By bringing to bear a variety of Islamic and educational studies research, relative to Islamic pedagogy, this book opens up some new avenues for research into Islamic education. The book will be of particular interest to scholars investigating Islamic education, Islamic pedagogy and embodied learning.



# Preface

The intention and aim of this book is to provide a greater understanding of Islamic pedagogy from a spiritual perspective, which requires empathy with the Islamic premise of the inseparable nature of knowledge and the sacred. This research supports a need to broaden our understanding of higher education traditions in pedagogy by looking beyond our modern university institutions. Raising our understanding of higher education madrasahs offers one such route. Inadequate understanding of Islamic pedagogy has the risk of not recognising genuine progress in the field of education. As higher education has become increasingly internationalised, with unprecedented cultural and religious diversity, there seems to be a call for a better understanding of educational thought other than 'our own' (Gunther, 2007; Van Crombrugge & Lafrarchi, 2010).

Throughout history we can observe, based on concordant evidence, insights of the frequent tensions between the temporal and spiritual. Even the word 'religion' is often used to denote whatever an individual or a group regards as being true, or that whereby conduct is regulated (Northbourne, edited by James & Fitzgerald, 2008). All religions indicate that in order for this tension to arise humanity move to a position that is quite distant from a primordial understanding of spirituality. Nasr (1987) explains the Islamic understanding of 'spirituality' as being informed by *ruhaniyyah* (Arabic) and *ma'nawiyyat* (Persian). First, *ruhaniyyah* is derived from the word *ruh* that means spirit. This is supported by the Qur'an that states 'The spirit is from the command of our Lord'. Second, *ma'nawiyyat* derives from the word *manna*, which translates to 'meaning', and denotes inwardness, 'spirit'. Nasr (1987) continues by defining spirituality as relating to a higher level of reality than both the material and the physical and directly related to divine reality or the sacred. Hence, these terms from an Islamic perspective refer to 'divine proximity' and are associated with revelation and what is accepted to be permanent, rather than transient and passing.

This book proposes that the two powers, spiritual and temporal, did not originally exist as separate functions. On the contrary, they were two indivisible aspects linked indissolubly in the unity of a synthesis that was at once superior and anterior to their distinction (Nasr, 1989). In its original sense, religion applies only to something which is, above all, not a construction of the human mind. It is viewed as having a divine origin that is exemplified by its supernatural, revealed or mysterious nature. Here 'religion' has a purpose to provide a link between the spiritual and temporal. Islam in this book is always used hereafter as a representation of the original sense of religion. A traditional understanding of religion accepts an unbroken chain of tradition to an authentic

‘prophecy’ that are paths that lead to the same place. ‘Prophecy’ is therefore by definition something greater than anything purely human, including reason. This understanding informs this book and in particular the role of spirituality, and sacred, in shaping the notion of Islamic pedagogy. It is not our intention here to trace everything back to its origins, and most of our references for the purpose of this book are drawn from epochs close to Islam. We propose that the Islamic tradition, represented by the unity of the spiritual and temporal, struggles with the spirit of analysis that governs the development of ‘profane science’. Islam is one of the religious traditions that can be adopted by those who wish to remain in conformity with an intrinsically orthodox religion.

The word ‘tradition’ also suffers from the same kind of vague usage as religion. It is often used to indicate ‘custom’ or ‘style’. Northbourne (edited by James & Fitzgerald, 2008) defined the foundations of ‘tradition’ as lying at the very root of our being. Such a perspective informs this book and provides an insight into what has emerge, for some, as a ‘traditionalist’ school of comparative religious thought. The ‘traditionalist’ school was pioneered by Rene Guenon (1886–1951), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Martin Lings (1909–2005) and which continues to be amplified by scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr. A ‘traditionalist’ school accepts both absolute ‘truth’ and infinite ‘presence’ (Lings, 2005). Absolute ‘truth’ is defined as the perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis*) that represents the transcendent source of all the intrinsically orthodox religions of humanity. St Augustine described this as that ‘uncreated wisdom, the same now, as before, and the same to be for evermore’ (Powell, 2001). As infinite ‘presence’ is recognised as the perennial religion (*religio perennis*) that lives within all the intrinsically orthodox religions. The ‘traditionalist’ school of thought presents a viewpoint on the notion of ‘tradition’ that influences this book and underpins the use of the word ‘tradition’. The ‘traditionalist’ school also provides a profound understanding of the spiritual and the temporal in the chains of tradition from prophecy. Such an understanding has helped in philosophically shaping this book in following the intrinsically orthodox religion of Islam.

The book acknowledges the continued influence of philosophy (*hikmah*) and theology (*kalam*) in Islam and identifies some commonality and distinctions between the Islamic philosophical and theological schools of thought. Blackburn (1996) defined philosophy as a way of understanding the world in a universal, comprehensive and conceptual way. The main characteristics of philosophy are its approaches to the process of enquiring, researching, analysing, evaluating, judging and conceptualising truth and reality. Rosenthal is illustrative of a scholar who believes there is no distinction between ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’. From the perspective of the intrinsically orthodox religions of the world, ‘wisdom’ is seen to be something better than ‘knowledge’ and represents a higher level of knowledge in the domain of both philosophical and theological opinion (Rosenthal, 2007). In contrast, Islamic theology (*kalam*) is engaged more with the understanding of the will of God and supporting the fortification of faith (*al-iman*). The main theological purpose is not to deal with the intellect and issues of intuition and seeking ultimate knowledge. Rather the intellect is the domain

of philosophy (*hikmah*) and this is where Muslims can find a methodology of knowledge in Islam. Such an understanding represents the dominant school of Sunni theology, the Ash'arite school, where truth is acknowledged as God's will, and the intellect is identified practically with reason but subservient to the will of God.

In summary, this book is influenced by the philosophical perspectives of Rene Guenon, Martin Lings and Seyyed Hossein Nasr who represent the traditionalist school, the theological perspective of Al-Ghazali and his approach to the Ash'arite School, and the Shafi school of jurisprudence. Gunther (2007) and Winter (2008) elucidate Al-Ghazali's perspective, within the Ash'arite School, as the 'Al-Ghazali mystical—theological approach'. The influence of the Shafi school of jurisprudence on this book is seen through the acceptance of both philosophy and theology as instrumental to the study of Islamic education. By identifying the adopted perspective towards philosophy, theology and jurisprudence, it is our intention that this allows the book to continue unabated. This provides an insight into what defines the 'spirit' in which we write this book and also the 'spirit' in which this study should be read if one wishes to understand its meaning.

At the heart of this research is a desire to search for greater understanding of pedagogy beyond our modern university institutions. The madrasah is Islam's institution of higher learning focused on the religious sciences and their ancillary subjects (Makdisi, 1981). Madrasahs of higher learning predate Western universities by several centuries (Kinany, 1957; Makdisi, 1981) and some continue to operate and provide an insight into traditional teaching methods. For example, Al-Qarawiyyin University in Morocco (established in 859), University of Al-Azhar in Egypt (established in 970–972), Nizamiyya Academy in Baghdad (established in 1091) and the more recent International Islamic University of Malaysia (established in 1983) provide an insight into institutions that have followed a madrasah perspective towards Islamic education (Bunt & Bernasek, 2008). The tenth and eleventh centuries represented an important period for teaching Islamic knowledge with madrasahs becoming an important place of study. The madrasah continues to be an important institutional type that is created for the purpose of education and typically it has distinctive differences in the context of architecture, organisation, instruction, learning, curriculum and funding sources (Kadi, 2006; Makdisi, 1981).

This research has endeavoured to explore the sensoria of the madrasah<sup>1</sup> from a what was explained earlier as a mystical—theoretical approach (Al-Ghazali translated by Faris, 1962; Gunther, 2007), and this provides the foundation for shaping our understanding of the madrasah concept of Islamic pedagogy. We sensed how Islamic pedagogy was being mainly researched and presented from a social rather than a spiritual construct. Al-Ghazali's mystical—theoretical approach towards learning is evident in this research in defining the madrasah as a spiritual rather

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<sup>1</sup>Madrasah is defined as an Islamic school or dar al-ulum - house of knowledge).

than social construct and is epitomised by the embodiment of learning (Gunther, 2007). We can see the origins and importance of the Islamic education perspective, presented in this book, in particular verses of the Qurʾān. As stated in *sūrah Al-Alaq*, verses 1–5:

Allah says:

Proclaim (Read)! (Iqraʾ) in the name of God thy Lord and Cherisher, who created man, out of a clot. Proclaim! And Lord is most Bountiful, He who taught (ʿAllama) the use of the Pen (Qalam), and taught (ʿAllama) man what he did not know. (Source: Qurʾān 96:1–5)

Muslims know *Iqraʾ*<sup>2</sup> as the first verse revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad during his meditation in the Jabal Al-Nūr (the mountain of light). The narration explains how Angel Gabriel came and asked him to read the above verses. Prophet Muhammad responded by saying that he could not read. The angel repeated it to him three times but Prophet Muhammad repeated the same response. Following this, the angel recited the above verse, which was then repeated by Prophet Muhammad. Indirectly, this narrative of the interaction between Angel Gabriel and Prophet Muhammad shows the Islamic importance placed upon the teaching and learning process. At the beginning of prophecy, which started the emergence of the Qurʾān, we can observe how the Angel was the teacher and Prophet Muhammad was the learner and a mutual understanding was achieved by means of spiritual practice.

Our understanding of *Iqraʾ* defines the focus on our book from an Islamic premise of the inseparable nature of knowledge and the sacred. The madrasah concept of Islamic pedagogy is defined as the strategies employed by the teacher to spiritually form the human person (Hardaker & Sabki, 2015; Sabki & Hardaker, 2013). This is supported by Al-Ghazali’s mystical–theoretical approach towards learning in his conception of the linkage between the heart and the human being (Al-Ghazali translated by Faris, 1962; Gunther, 2007). Islamic pedagogy is represented by the heartfelt interactions between the teacher and learner through orality, facilitating memorisation and the didactic approach towards sacred texts (Hardaker & Sabki, 2015; Sabki & Hardaker, 2013). For our research into Islamic institutions, this was seen to shape the interactions between the teacher and learner through orality, facilitating memorisation and

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<sup>2</sup>The word *Iqraʾ* does not refer only to the literal meanings: read, recite, rehearse or proclaim aloud. It also refers to understanding. The words themselves, *Iqraʾ*, *ʿallama* and *Qalam*, in this verse imply reading, writing, books, study, research, reflecting the comprehensive meaning of these words that gives them a universal direction and does not refer only to a particular person (The Presidency of Islamic Researchers, n.d., pp. 1980–1981).

the didactic approach towards the sacred. Islamic pedagogy is dependent on both teacher and student embodiment of the sacred texts and supporting material. From our observations, embodiment has a physical and spiritual dimension where prophecy is retained and is inherent to existence and daily practice. In doing so, it urges us to engage with the physical realm of the seen but also the unseen, as it were, within our heart and soul. Although the transmission of knowledge has long been central to Islamic culture, the institutions and madrasahs through which this transmission takes place have changed over time. This evolution and changes will be discussed throughout the book.

This book is based on research into higher education institutions and such institutions symbolises a diverse global diaspora of loose connections. The Islamic educational institution has sustained the historical significance that has taken Islam to many parts of the world. For example, Tarim is known for its role in taking Islam to Southeast Asia and China, which represented the Yemeni trade routes. We suggest that the key to Islamic pedagogy is about enabling the embodiment of knowledge and this is seen to create an individualistic and personalised learning experience.

In this book, we are dealing with a belief in both knowledge and the sacred and this demands sensory categorisation that facilitates Islamic pedagogy and embodiment. These categories began to emerge through the researcher's culturally specific engagements as part of the research process. For this book, in part, we follow a sensory narrative style in expressing our descriptions. We observed early in our own research that the five-sense sensorium is not universal across all cultures and did not meet the needs of our book. We have used four broad claims concerning sensory orders, identity, embodiment and spirituality to structure our descriptions of Islamic pedagogy and embodiment. This leads to our propositions that the mainstream Western model of five senses is a folk model (Geurts, 2002), and the madrasah model is different and privileges orality, kinaesthesia and embodiment as central to the approach. The impact of this model (or approach) can be seen in four areas, each of which affects the others: the use of language to describe the sensorium, moral values embedded in teaching and learning, a madrasah model of embodiment, and ideas about knowledge and the sacred. The book is shaped by the four broad claims and is influenced, in parts, by a sensory narrative approach. The sensory narrative style is interwoven with theoretical insights.

For the first part of the book, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 that follow, we look back to key moments in madrasah history and their formation, diversity of Islamic institutions, and the notion of the scholastic community. In doing so, the intention is to identify the rise of the Islamic education institutions and the diversity within their formation. Despite the partial disappearance of the spiritual in many Islamic education institutions, we will argue that the spiritual construct is still deeply implicated in the reification of Islamic pedagogy and in the process of embodiment. In the second part of the book, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 that follow, we will draw on unravelling knowledge and the sacred that considers the philosophy of Islam and knowledge, spiritual understanding of Islamic education and knowledge and the sacred as an educational compass. The third part of the

book, Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 that follow, explores the implications of Islamic pedagogy and embodied learning, the universal nature of Islamic pedagogy and reflections for the future.

The book is intended to provide a unique insight into how the seen and unseen are active in the formation of the characterising features of the pedagogical approach and its affiliation to the embodiment of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, the selection of case examples within this book aims to encompass situations that reveal the inextricable paradox of the diversity in the formations of Islamic education institutions.

# Acknowledgements

We offer our acknowledgement and sincere heartfelt gratitude to Allah, Lord of the worlds. Our reflections on our early Islamic studies learning experiences as a child were instrumental in shaping this book. We both acknowledge the research was about following prophetic teaching and connecting with our sensual perception of Islamic education. The intention was clear and the aspiration was for a genuine contribution to Islamic pedagogy that lifted the veils of philosophy to what this actually meant for teaching methods and techniques. We owe a special debt of gratitude to everybody that has let us bring our thoughts to this research and especially those who showed their concern with the concepts of Islamic education and with the integrity of these concepts of Islamic faith, life, education and civilisation within the Islamic context. We are also indebted to everybody that has let us share with them their everyday routines of madrasah life. We are especially grateful to all the teachers that have given their sincere views and thoughts and many whose conversations and comments were invaluable.