

Contemporary Islamic Educational Discourse and the Philosophy of Empowerment

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Abstract

The central concern of this article is to examine the contemporary Islamic educational discourse from the perspective of the philosophy of empowerment. In line with this view, it proposes a new conceptual framework for empowerment in lieu of the traditional views, which consider empowerment in terms of infrastructural developments or shifting power from the powerful to the powerless. We suggest that empowerment should be viewed as a social process that helps people gain control over their lives by enabling them to act on issues important to them. Considered in this light, education that seeks to empower people must be a process that provides the fundamental freedom and resources to understand the world and grants the ability to change that world. Contemporary Islamic educational discourses are evaluated on this basis to determine to what extent Islamic educators are engaged with the idea of empowerment proposed in this article.

Introduction

A central concern of almost all social theories is how to *empower* people, although the term itself has been left either undefined or vaguely defined. Remarkably, since most of the existing political systems have failed to ac-

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tualize true human dignity, freedom, and social justice during the past decade, the concept of empowerment has emerged as a focus of social research. Most social theorists believe that people should be empowered. But there is one problem: How does one define the meaning and purpose of empowerment? Many use this term to denote different ideas. For example, most modern governments assume that it is possible to empower a particular group, especially marginalized people in society, by giving them economic support or implementing infrastructural change in their favor. Others think that this is possible when human beings enjoy the freedom to do what they want or to emancipate themselves from socio-religious bonds and obligations. These definitions admittedly contain some shades of the meaning, but they fail to address many other more fundamental dimensions of the term, as will be discussed below.

We view empowerment as a social process that helps people gain control over their lives by being allowed to act on issues they consider important. The first part of our article proposes the significance of a new understanding of empowerment in the educational context. In order to do this, we focus on explicating the different understandings of empowerment and its implication on education. This analysis also intends to show the underlying assumptions of the new concept of empowerment by highlighting the circumstances that demand the introduction of a different understanding of empowerment in the educational context. The second part analyzes the strength and weakness of contemporary Islamic educational discourses from the perspective of the philosophy of empowerment. It emphasizes the positive changes that should be introduced into the Islamic educational discourse in order to incorporate the various underlying dimensions of empowerment.

Empowerment and Education: Diverse Approaches to Empowerment

What is empowerment? How can it be recognized? How does a human being achieve it? Does it have a significant place in our life? What is its relevance in the educational context? These are the fundamental questions that come to mind while engaging in an educational discourse on empowerment. Several studies¹ on education have explicitly explained why empowerment must be made an educational issue. In addition, various documents and research works² have proven that most educational institutions have become instrumental for disempowerment by making students passive and obedient to the existing social system. Considering these facts, many efforts have been in the socio-

political field over the past decade to bring the concept of empowerment into the educational field. Prior to determining what the specific meaning of empowerment should be in the field of education, some of the generally discussed views on it need to be highlighted.³

One of the prominent approaches is to perceive empowerment as something related to development and progress. This view has led to the common trend of viewing empowerment a way to improve the welfare services and infrastructures via mediating social institutions.⁴ Considering economic development and progress as the major criteria for ensuring success and power, this approach suggests that empowerment is possible once people enjoy economic advancement and technological progress. Therefore, those who adhere to this perspective will be unable to perceive empowerment as anything more than channelizing more funds in order to introduce infrastructural changes in all kinds of social structures. The increasing number of schools, public health centers, roads, and highways or the establishment of new buildings and institutes would be valued as a significant indicator of empowerment.

When empowerment is visualized from the developmental-economic perspective, it will be more concerned with the quantitative changes that the allocation and distribution of resources and wealth will have. Nowadays, such international agencies as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank cultivate this perspective among the ruling classes of the underdeveloped world so that their recommended infrastructural projects can be introduced as “the” means of getting empowered. This perspective has made Third World countries dependent on others, especially the corporate world, for they believed that this mode of development would make them powerful very soon.

Another trend perceives empowerment as something that can be achieved through an individual’s ability, achievement, and skill. To be empowered, as per this approach, is to obtain a relative degree of ability to influence others.⁵ Those who are greatly influenced by this trend believe that empowerment is possible by improving one’s self-efficiency, confidence, management skills, leadership qualities, and so forth. In other words, empowerment is the creation of personal self-esteem, individual qualities, and necessarily helping people to go beyond the stigma.⁶ Therefore, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have quoted Eleanor Roosevelt, “We must do that which we think we cannot,”⁷ to emphasize their attempts to empower people. For Roosevelt, empowerment is actualized when a person or a society attains the ability to do things that are generally regarded as impossible.

According to this view, if a person from a lower economic class earns a remarkable position or a notable profession in the social hierarchy, this would be considered a significant landmark of empowerment. The major reason for this is that such a person has moved beyond the limitation set by society due to his/her personal efficiency, skills, and ability. Those who hold such a view express a tendency to introduce programs dealing with leadership training, management workshops, and similar activities in the educational curriculum. They believe that the emphasis in these undertakings will boost an individual or a community's achievement. This perspective, which can be identified as a "professional perspective," also assumes that a more competent work force is a more empowered and a more productive work force. Consequently, such issues as self-efficiency, work management, confidence, and power management have become the focus of discussion.⁸

Parallel to the preceding definitions, some social theorists try to explain empowerment in terms of transferring power from the powerful to the powerless. For them, society is fundamentally divided into two contradicting social classes: the oppressed and the oppressors; the powerless and the powerful; the ruling class and the normal citizens. Based on this postulation, they assume that power must be redistributed among the powerless or shared between two social groups in order to create a society in which equality and fraternity are realized. Those who view it from this perspective are concerned about "power balancing" or "redistributing power" in order to protect weaker parties.

Considered from the perspective of power shifting, power is regarded as something to be lent or transferred, as opposed to being created. Again, this view advocates that the powerless can become powerful either by depending on the kindness of the powerful or by grabbing power from them. The political efforts of most modern democratic countries to strengthen marginalized groups have taken their roots from this assumption. Therefore, the concept of sharing power is now regarded as a highly appreciated democratic value, and a large number of modern countries tend to say that they have eliminated marginalization by giving the oppressed a share in the governing process. Introducing a reservation or a quota system in the highly esteemed government services, allocating quotas in parliamentary constituencies and local legislative councils, affirmative action policies to support weaker groups, and similar measure are seen as practical ways to accomplish empowerment.

Given that most definitions have reduced the meaning of empowerment to a structural adjustment among different classes or social groups, some so-

ciologists, especially those influenced by critical theory,⁹ have tried to develop a new approach. Taking knowledge as power, critical theory assumes that understanding how one is oppressed enables one to take specific actions designed to change the actual oppressive forces. Critical theorists state that empowerment is a social process because it occurs in relation to others. An essential component is the “development of a critical awareness of one’s social condition and society in general: that is, the development of a critical cultural literacy, the ability to critically analyze one’s social and political world on multiple levels as a pre-requisite of social action.”¹⁰ The important aspect of the concept of empowerment as a social practice is that it views individual empowerment as being closely connected to the sociopolitical condition of the society or group to which an individual belongs. Thus empowerment is a shared struggle whereby the individuals improve their lives while simultaneously helping others to improve their lives. In other words, it demands both personal and institutional change.

Arguments for an Alternative Approach

The above discussion indicates that most definitions have many problems. The major issue is that these approaches (1) undermine the possibility of formulating a wider definition by reducing its meaning to something that can be achieved through infrastructural changes or a redistribution of power; (2) considering empowerment as something that comes through an external agency (e.g., funding and government aid) prevents people from taking personal responsibility for empowering themselves; and (3) understanding empowerment in terms of shifting power assumes that some people possess power and that the only way to make others powerful is to depend on the former’s kindness in the form of giving the latter a portion of their power. This idea of sharing power indirectly makes the powerless indebted and obliged to the powerful, for he/she has given or lent a portion of his/her power.

The major problem of most of the definitions discussed above is their inability to relate empowerment to a human being’s capacity to transform the world. Moreover, most theorists find it difficult to challenge various stereotypical assumptions that human society has held for decades. Therefore, a more emancipatory interpretation of empowerment is needed to face the issues related to the concrete existence of human society. The subsequent section attempts to describe empowerment from yet another perspective.

To have an emancipatory meaning, empowerment should be understood as something more than just helping people or funding projects. It should be

perceived as a social process that helps people gain control over their lives, explained as an effort to cultivate power in people so they can use that power in their lives and societies by acting on issues that are important to them. If they are able to do this, they will have an enormous opportunity to decide what is important and what is not. In such a circumstance, no one has to tell them what things are important, as they will be in a position to decide that for themselves, based on their conviction and understanding of social reality.

By giving people the basic courage to design their life, this view of empowerment challenges assumptions and misconceptions about power, helping, achieving, and succeeding. It reminds us that power and success are not limited to a particular social class. It stresses that as a human being, everyone has the right to enjoy the freedom of choice and that one's freedom to do so is not at the mercy of some people whom we consider powerful. Therefore, empowerment advocates that every individual should be given the fundamental freedom of choice to determine his/her life. In other words, empowerment is closely associated with human liberty and freedom.

When empowerment is viewed in this light, such issues as power balancing or redistribution to protect weaker parties does not arise. Instead, every person must be considered an independent individual who has the strength and autonomy to do what she wishes. This idea cannot be conceived without an alternative understanding of power other than the common or existing one. As per common understanding, "power is related to one's ability to make others do what he wants, regardless of their wishes or interests."¹¹ Traditional social science stresses power as influence and control, often treating it as a commodity or structure divorced from human action.¹² For example, Thomas Hobbes defines power as the means (e.g., wealth and reputation) by which individuals can obtain what they desire.¹³ For Bertrand Russell, it is something that makes others obedient: "Some men's characters lead them always to command, others always to obey."¹⁴

Such definitions view power as a concept equal to those of domination and control and suggest that no power is possible without them. Furthermore, it views power as something that to be borrowed or captured from somebody who possesses it. Therefore, to conceptualize the emancipatory understanding of empowerment, one must reject the traditional view of power as something that one person holds at the expense of someone else, for this cuts most of us off from it.¹⁵

When the presence of power in every person's authentic self is recognized, the underlying assumption is that as an individual of a society, nobody is so weak as to be subjugated by others or victimized by the ambition of those

who consider themselves to be the powerful legitimate authorities of this world. It explicitly questions the existence of authoritative power and prompts each person to struggle to create and use his/her God-given freedom of choice wisely, that all human beings have the right to enjoy the freedom of choice, and that freedom cannot be blocked by the powerful.

But in order to use their freedom wisely, human beings have to acquire enough knowledge of how the world works and what social factors prevent them from becoming empowered. Therefore, understanding the sociopolitical situation of one's society is crucial. And thus education should equip students to know the socioeconomic conditions of their society. This is the relationship between education and empowerment.

Introducing this idea into the educational context necessitates perceiving education differently. When this dimension of empowerment is brought to the educational field, the purpose of education should be regarded as reinstating a human being's authentic nature by allowing her to have the freedom and receive the resources that she needs to understand the world and also to be allowed to change that world. Thus education must help people to maintain their dignity and freedom by enabling them to develop their potential for independent thought and inquiry, instead of indoctrinating them with domination and power. Those educational settings that internalize the concept of empowerment must view education as a cultural action designed to liberate people from all kinds of control, for such controls dehumanize them. Education can be a process of dehumanization if human freedom is not acknowledged, as well as inhuman if it does not teach one to think independently, gives only ready-made answers, or prepares people to perform certain functions instead of widening their horizons.¹⁶

In short, an educational setting that recognizes empowerment must be different from the functional interpretation of society and education, because the philosophy inspired by empowerment asserts that education's ultimate purpose cannot be reduced to performing certain economic or technical functions within one's society. Instead, education must widen the people's horizons to bring a change in accordance with social justice and human values.

Empowerment and Islamic Educational Discourse

The previous section explained how the philosophy of empowerment is significant in the educational context. Fortunately, some modern educational theorists have sought to insert this understanding of empowerment into the

contemporary educational context. Consequently, modern secular educational philosophies witnessed tremendous change after the Second World War. More significant than this, however, has been the attempt to relate educational process to the given society's sociopolitical reality. The emergence of a new approach, known as *critical pedagogy*, can be considered one of the most powerful attempts to highlight the dire need of empowerment within the context of teaching and learning.

Paulo Freire (d. 1997), who worked to develop literacy among the oppressed adult peasant population of Brazil during the 1970s, was the first one to set the agenda for critical pedagogy. As described in his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970, this educator held that all education is political and that the pedagogical means used to educate students renders them either objects ruled by their oppressors or subjects with the power to transform their own experience. He rejected the traditional "banking" method of instruction, which regards students as passive vessels waiting to receive the knowledge approved by the ruling class ideology and educators to maintain their control over the educational act, despite the cruel side effect of stripping the students of any opportunity for self-worth or creativity and replicating existing means of social control.¹⁷ He believed that students were not empty vessels to be filled with facts, sponges to be saturated with official information, or empty bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus.¹⁸ His method encourages students to understand the world in order to transform the existing social situation into a more just one, in other words, to empower themselves.

According to Freire, dialogue based upon love, faith, and hope in humanity and upon the power of reflection, action, and critical thinking would produce *conscientização*, a Portuguese word roughly translated as "consciousness-raising," among the oppressed and, ultimately, an enactment of agency that could transform their oppression.¹⁹ The goal of his critical pedagogy is "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices"²⁰ by making students responsible for the social world around them. In that sense, critical pedagogy is a philosophy that places more importance upon a society's sociopolitical reality due to its belief that education's primary aim is to empower the society rather than achieve the pragmatic economic needs of individuals.

As far as Islamic educational practice is concerned, this philosophy of empowerment has much in common with the Islamic idea of *khalīfah* and social justice, for this particular term underscores the human being's autonomy, freedom of choice, and equality. By this, Islam categorically establishes that

each individual has his own power and autonomy. Since God holds all human beings individually responsible for their own actions and has given them the freedom of choice, it is they who determine how they will act: "Then whosoever wills, let him believe; and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve."²¹ It is each person's responsibility to use all of the resources provided by God to make his/her actions more fruitful, with the understanding that the merit of these actions will be evaluated on the Day of Judgment.

To be specific, nobody has been given the right to assert his/her power or authority over anyone else. Human beings must not be forced to do something against their wishes, for they must enjoy the fundamental right of self-determination. Therefore, everybody has the right to decide their life by acting upon those issues that they deem important. This is just one step toward empowerment. Since God has given us the ability to discern right from wrong, letting people use that ability becomes the core principle of empowerment. The only thing left to be done is to instill within individuals the sense of their own value as human beings and the capacity to handle life's problems.

Unfortunately, Muslim attempts to bring the underlying assumptions of empowerment into the Islamic educational discourse have been rather rare. This is not due to their insignificance, but because Muslim scholars (as well as most Muslims) are not really interested in them. This explains the dearth of studies on the subject. However, some Muslim writers have expressed deep concern over such issues. For instance, Yedullah Kazmi notes that the obvious link between educationists of critical pedagogy and those interested in Islamic education is their common commitment to social justice and concomitant interest in empowering students to subject the world to critical examination to make it more just. He discusses the various philosophical concepts of Islamic education and the importance of empowerment in a Muslim context. His concepts, such as *murabbi*, *'abd*, and the "realm of truth" can be considered one of the first attempts to bring some elements empowerment into the Islamic philosophical discourse.²²

Nadeem Memon and Qaiser Ahmad have presented several research papers to understand the problem of Islamic education from the perspective of empowerment. They argue that the goals set by a critical pedagogue, such as nurturing students so that they can become self-reflective, negotiate a political voice to speak out against injustice, and lead both their own lives and those of their communities through moral principles, are consistent with an Islamic pedagogy. Therefore, according to them, "Muslim educators need to join together with those who are articulating both critiques and possibilities for the

reframing of educational practices, and add to the discourse by articulating what the Islamic tradition has to offer.”²³

One of their assertions is that contemporary Islamic educational institutes have failed to relate the theories and principles taught in the classroom with the world in which the students live. Instead of thinking about the content taught in school and curriculum integration, Muslim educators must rethink the purpose of education. They also assert that the extensive dependence on a standardized system of education (e.g., standardized curricula, testing, and administration) has become an obstacle for enhancing social justice because it unconsciously reproduces the dominant values.²⁴ Given these realities, the contemporary model of modern schooling is fundamentally anti-learning in nature and, being inherently ineffective and inefficient at any age, fails to nurture human potential for anything more than a job.²⁵

Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), a prominent scholar at the University of Chicago, tried to assert the importance of utilizing education to change the world. Even though his major concern was not to bring empowerment into Islamic education, he states that Muslims should take knowledge as a means to bring change to the social world. For him, “the Qur’an is an action-oriented book par excellence”²⁶ and “Islam teaches and orients man to change things in the world, in the outside world.”²⁷ Therefore he believes that Muslims are obliged to engage with the world in order to change it. Joining the idea of social change with knowledge, he asserts that “knowledge in Islam exist in order to enable us to act, to change the current events in the world.”²⁸

Yusuf Progler, a Muslim intellectual who teaches social science and education at Zayed University in Dubai, has also made certain attempts to bring concepts that seem to be very similar to the philosophy of empowerment into an Islamic educational context. According to him, the contemporary educational setup lacks any form of social or cultural awareness and exists in a world without context. Thus, most educational theorists often ignore the fact that theories have a correlation with the existing sociopolitical situation. As a result, those who try to introduce western theories into non-western contexts cannot see the problem of the cross-cultural setting, such as teaching western theories to non-western teachers.²⁹ In order to resolve this problem, he posits that Muslims should make a careful and extended study of it. Although he has not brought various dimensions of this philosophy as it has been discussed here, he has highlighted the fact that one cannot empower a particular society by relying on outside sources produced in an alien sociopolitical culture and tradition.

Suhailah Hussien³⁰ has also undertaken an in-depth study of the crises in Islamic education to develop an Islamic critical pedagogy, one that views the Islamization of education project as a response. She discusses the possibility of reconstructing western critical pedagogy from an Islamic perspective and therefore critically analyzes the Islamic philosophy of education by redefining its core concepts. But her goal is not to create an Islamic educational philosophy to incorporate the philosophy of empowerment; rather, it is to Islamize western critical pedagogy by taking into account the application of a critical pedagogical method of teaching in the context of Malaysia.

Apart from these studies, no other significant studies stress the concept of empowerment in an Islamic educational context. Most of the Muslim writers have not even made a significant effort to emphasize the need to join with those who articulate critiques on the contemporary educational system. As a consequence of this neglect, Muslim scholars have yet to contribute positively to the process of reconstructing Islamic education by articulating an educational project in which Islam is restored to its rightful place: the center of societal thought and action.

One cannot argue, however, that the lack of Muslim efforts to relate education with empowerment is due to their narrow understanding of Islam as a “set of rituals and customs,” because the modern Islamic religious landscape has undergone tremendous change since the emergence of Islamic revivalism. Revivalist scholars such as Abul A‘la Mawdudi (d. 1979), Sayyid Qutb (executed in 1966), Ali Shari‘ati (d. 1977) and Hasan al-Banna (assassinated in 1949) made marvelous efforts to create awareness among Muslims of the significance of social involvement and social change. They believed that Muslims could successfully respond to western civilization’s encroachment only through a reformed Islamic system that recognized Islam’s socio-political dimension.

The revivalist scholars’ major idea was that “Islam is a way of life that does not separate spirituality from the worldly life.” According to them, Islam has the ability to be translated into any particular context so that it can be decoded in a modern context. Their views have convinced Muslims of the significance of social action in the ongoing quest to bring their societies into line with Islamic principles. The common perception of Islam as a merely ritualistic religion has been replaced with one that gives Islam a central role in the nation building process. However, despite some Muslim scholars’ vision of Islam as a sociopolitical reality and force, no fruitful effort has been made to relate education with empowerment and emancipation.

When such later Muslim educational thinkers as Isma‘il al-Faruqi (murdered in 1986) and Syed Muhammad al Naquib al-Attas tried to develop an appealing Islamic educational philosophy known as the Islamization of Knowledge (IOK) project, it was clear that they recognized Islam’s socio-political significance and took a firm stand against the secularization process. This effort to solve the crisis of religion in modernity can be viewed as one of the most credible contemporary Muslim intellectual responses to modernity. All of the scholars who supported it explicitly stated that the confusion among Muslims was the result of the dual system of education, one secular and modern, and the other religious and traditional.³¹ Therefore, the project’s adherents asserted that the necessity for “the emergence of a third group [of people who] are acquainted with their own traditions but are willing to acquire any wisdom that modern civilization can offer.”³²

Those who introduced the IOK project defined the Islamization of knowledge as giving equal importance to religious and worldly knowledge in order to overcome the dichotomy between religious knowledge and the modern sciences. In that sense, this process can be seen as an integration that harkens back to earlier scholars who tried to keep a moderate approach between traditionalism and modernism. But where the social aspect of religion is concerned, the idea of Islamization as integration theoretically rejects the perception of religion as apolitical. Thus the IOK project can be considered a synthesis of moderate modernism (viz., the attempt to reconcile modern knowledge with Islamic teachings without violating the boundaries of faith) and Islamic revivalism (viz., the effort to reinstate the sociopolitical dimension of Islam).

But in a practical sense, although Islamization is concerned with the problem of secular education and the importance of integrating traditional and modern knowledge, the majority of Muslim educational establishments show no serious interest in relating the educational process to contemporary sociopolitical reality. In other words, those who seek to devise and then implement a reformed educational system have not realized the importance and relation of empowerment and emancipation to the educational context. It must be stated that the IOK project could inspire Muslims worldwide and maybe even some of their leaders. In fact, some of the latter have expressed their commitment to the project by supporting institutes. The establishment of international Islamic universities in Malaysia and Pakistan can be considered a clear indication of such positive support. The project has at least convinced Muslim intellectuals of the dangers of secularism and the challenges of dualism.

The most important changes that occurred after the IOK project are globalization and the ensuing spread of a market economy and a free market. The market's interest in knowledge and education has reduced education to something that serves the global powers' economic needs. By imposing a particular type of knowledge and educational curricula through the "reformation program" introduced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), knowledge has been exploited as a means to control undeveloped and underdeveloped countries. Consequently, global finance capital has become a powerful authority that can determine each nation's policies. In such a situation, even independent nations cannot design any economic and political policies that go against global finance capital or those countries that channelize and utilize global financial agencies to preserve their own interests. These current realities have made education nothing more than a tool to serve the interests of corporate giants. In this situation, not only educational and political institutions, but even dreams are controlled by global finance capital. As a result, human beings are not allowed to color their dreams or to design their lives in accordance with their desires.

Since neither neocolonialism nor imperialism allow people to even have an imagination of their own, the sociocultural implications are very clear: (1) they thwart all the possibilities and potentials of a human being as a *khalifah*, thereby denying his/her basic human rights and freedom of choice; (2) disempower people from actively participating in the world; and (3) question the very idea of equality and social justice by denying millions of people (now called "marginalized") even the opportunity of life. Moreover, by making all educational institutes a business venture, they undermine the value of education by reducing it to something that guarantees economic positions in the society's power structure. Since global finance capital's neocolonial agenda obstructs justice and equality, making students aware of the contemporary world's sociopolitical realities should become an educational issue.

For Muslims, this means that the Islamic educational discourse should address the issue of a market economy and global finance capital as it addressed the problem of secularism and dualism. In other words, efforts to desecularize the ummah have to be developed in concrete terms by exposing the interests of corporate giants and global finance as regards education. Those who stand for Islamic education are obliged to take a firm stand against the sociopolitical imperialism that is driven by the market economy and multinational corporations. In that sense, Islamic educators should become proactive and make their students aware of the dangerous nature of the existing and ongoing neocolonial educational policies that these external

powers have introduced into their midst. Unfortunately, no Muslim scholar has engaged in a serious effort to reveal the fact that the hegemony of global financial capital makes Islamic education something impossible to attain. Therefore, hardly any of them have bothered to discuss the issues of globalization and market economy in detail with reference to their negative impact upon education. Even fewer have dared to ask Muslim nations to avoid projects supported by such global finance agencies as the IMF and the World Bank.

Although most Muslim scholars have written a great deal on secularism's dangerous impact on Islamic education, not enough has been done to suggest that Islamic education should be different from the existing business-oriented educational projects. With regards to education, the success of the IOK lies in its determined effort to make people aware of the downsides of secularism and the dualistic educational system. Throughout the discussion, secularism has been perceived as a philosophy that rejects the role of the sacred in the public domain. In addition, its impact has been projected in relation to its role in spreading anti-religious feeling among educated young people. Although these aspects should be discussed, Muslims need to realize that secularism, in principle, can be found in ideologies and philosophies. One cannot get rid of its dangerous consequences just by eliminating a dualistic system of education or establishing integrated curricula. Instead, a deliberate attempt must be made to point out the sociopolitical conditions and ideologies that shape the secular way of life. The issue of capitalism and the market economy should be addressed from this perspective.

Unfortunately, those who argue for Islamic education do not acknowledge empowerment as an important educational issue, perhaps because Islamic educators have failed to perceive education from a sociological perspective. Consequently, the idea of what Islamic education is has been significantly narrowed down and is usually perceived as something dealing only with abstract terms of spirituality, as opposed to concrete human issues. This accounts for the widespread tendency in Muslim society to strongly resist any attempt to relate the educational process to contemporary sociopolitical realities. Moreover, as most Muslim educators are more concerned with terminologies, definitions, and the practices of mainstream education, they have tried to develop a suitable Islamic terminology without critically reflecting on their consistency with an Islamic pedagogy. They are more concerned with how to translate a given Qur'anic word or phrase so that it will correspond to modern educational terminologies rather than making concrete and substantial suggestions regarding Islamic education. Hence the sociopolitical dimensions,

which are fundamental to the very concept of any type of education, are not adequately discussed.

Due to the lack of attention to those sociopolitical factors that control the educational process, efforts to infuse Islamic values into educational activities have ended up being limited to structural adjustments that only seek to replace some western educational terminologies with Arabic words. For example, Muslim scholars have vested more time in determining how the concept of a good human being differs from the western idea of a good citizen. Further, some have stated that Islamic education should try to create a good human being instead of a good citizen. Throughout this discussion, the concept of *khalīfah* has been utilized to denote “the good human” or the “morally upright human.” But how does the distinction between a good citizen and a good human being mark a significant difference in the Islamic educational practice? The concern should be whether the concrete issues highlighted here are reflected in the terminologies used.

Most of the Islamic reformers who analyzed the educational scenario of colonial and postcolonial Muslim world have opined that the major problem with the traditional Islamic educational institute was its inability to train students to get engaged in the world. This reason for this is because most traditional *madāris* ignored the role of Muslims in this world and thus the traditional institutes completely disregarded worldly knowledge. But even after the successful implementation of an integrated curricula in various countries, such problems continue to exist. Obviously, Muslim efforts in the field of education have improved the people’s material conditions by providing them with enough opportunities to study modern knowledge and sciences. Efforts to integrate modern knowledge with traditional Islamic studies have made it easier for students to access knowledge, especially in highly regarded professional jobs.

In this sense Islamic educational activities, including the IOK project, have helped Muslims in their private salvation. But the Muslims’ major responsibility is to attain social salvation, a concept defined as improving the people’s lives by creating a social situation in which everybody would be treated equally. Hundreds of Qur’anic verses encourage Muslims to work actively to rid the world of poverty, inequality, oppression, injustice, and so forth. Nobody can find a private heaven by neglecting the issues of those people who live around him. So Muslims should live in the world in such a way that they recognize the people. In this context, Islamic education must create an atmosphere that prompts students to be involved in the human world. This is the vital requirement of empowerment.

Conclusion

Since empowerment is defined as a social process that helps people gain control over their lives by being allowed to act upon issues that are important to them, education inspired by the philosophy of empowerment should make students architects of their destiny, should enable them to know their society's socioeconomic condition. Since the Qur'an highlights human autonomy and emancipation, a Qur'an-inspired educational philosophy should also perceive education from an emancipatory perspective. Naturally this demands several things: (1) exposing various types of agencies and methods that make educational institutes mere replicas of the cultural values held by the dominant group and/or the elite/ruling class; (2) undertaking a systematic effort to emancipate students from being controlled by the elite's dominant values, showing them how important it is to be allowed to act upon issues that are important to them; and (3) perceiving knowledge and education as change agents.

Therefore, Islamic education should create an environment that encourages and guides students to understand this world in order to transform it. To be specific, it should empower students by equipping them to do something better in this world. It might be useful to quote Ibn Sina here: "Education ... should be undertaken for the spiritual development of man, and with the aim of deepening his understanding of the world around him ... and to use this understanding as a gateway to spiritual love and apprehension of God."³³

Even though revivalist thought has been widely accepted in contemporary Muslim societies and has played a major role in removing the narrow perception of religion by making a connection between spirituality and the world, those who vouch for Islamic education have not paid much attention to the philosophy of empowerment. So in terms of empowering the ummah by removing its members' traditional passivity and making them designers of their own life, Islamic educators still have a great deal of work to do. Moreover, to transform Muslims into dynamic actors who actively address such concrete human social issues as economic exploitation, social inequality, and neocolonialism, the Islamic educational discourse still has to be modified by incorporating some of the major philosophical discourse of contemporary education.

And finally, one must remember that two fundamental questions are very important in determining the significance of empowerment in the Islamic educational context: (1) how Islam perceives the human being. For example, empowerment would not be a significant issue if Islam considered the human being as no more than a weak living creature, and (2) if Islam believed in in-

dividual salvation or collective salvation. In other words, how does Islam relate the individual to his/her society? Therefore, in order to visualize the issues of empowerment the Islamic educational curricula must elaborate both the Islamic perspective on the human being as a social being as well as the Muslims' social role. Once this is accomplished, students would be able to conceptualize the Islamic perspective of empowerment by realizing that there is something they can do both for themselves and for others. Since the current practices in Islamic education do not make certain issues important, Muslims are obliged to emphasize them by promoting those Islamic values that have been overlooked for centuries.

Endnotes

1. See Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985); Peter McLaren, "On Ideology and Education: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Education," *Social Text* 19-20 (fall 1988): 153-85; Seth Kreisberg, *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment, and Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).
2. For details, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, tr. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2003); Michael Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: John Wiley, 1979); Christopher J. Hurn, *The Limits and Possibilities of Schooling: An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993).
3. Jennifer Gore has developed three constructs, namely, empowerment as constructed by discourses of professionalism, empowerment as constructed by discourses of liberal humanism, and empowerment as constructed by discourses of critical educational theory, to help identify various discourses on empowerment. She has used these constructs to differentiate among various approaches. Some of the concepts have been utilized in this article. For details, see Jennifer M. Gore, "Agency, Structure, and Rhetoric of Teacher Empowerment," *American Educational Research Association* (San Francisco: The Educational Resources Information Centre, 1989), 27.
4. Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, 1977), 17.
5. L. H. Staples, "Powerful Ideas about Empowerment," *Administration in Social Work* 14, no. 2 (1990): 29-42.
6. Jenny Pearce, "From 'Empowerment' to 'Transforming Power': Can a Power Analysis Improve Development Policy, Practice, and Impact?" *Dutch Co-Financing Agencies Meeting on Power* (Dutch Co-Financing Agencies: 2006);

- J. F. McKenna, "Smart Scarecrows: The Wizardry of Empowerment," *Industry Week* 239, no. 14 (1990): 8-19; D. Tyack and L. Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
7. For example, Wingspan Youth Development Services has made this statement its motto. See Maire A. Dugan, "One View of Empowerment," July 2003. <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/empowerment>.
 8. Seth Kreisberg, *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment, and Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).
 9. In contrast to traditional theory, which concentrates on understanding and explaining society, critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. It emphasizes the role of socio-historical factors in maintaining particular social conditions and prompts people to liberate themselves from them. Taking knowledge as power, it assumes that understanding how one is oppressed enables one to take action to change the oppressive forces. For details, see James Bohman, "Critical Theory," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005. www.stanford.edu (accessed April 16, 2011). Also see Robert M. Seiler, "Human Communication in the Critical Theory Tradition." www.communicationcache.com (accessed April 16, 2011).
 10. Kreisberg, *Transforming Power*, 19.
 11. Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press), 1946.
 12. Hilary M. Lips, *Women, Men, and Power* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfeld, 1991).
 13. Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore* (tr.) (London: J. Bohn, 1984), 150.
 14. Bertrand Russell, *Power* (London: Routledge, 2004), 48.
 15. Nanatte Page and Cheryl E. Czuba, "Empowerment: What Is it?" *Journal of Extension* 37, no. 5 (October 1999).
 16. Alija Ali Izetbegovic, *Islam between East and West* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1984), 36.
 17. Freire, *Pedagogy*, 72.
 18. Ira Shor, "Education Is Politics: Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy," in *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, ed. Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard (London: Routledge, 1993).
 19. Ibid.
 20. McLaren, "On Ideology and Education," 153-85.
 21. Qur'an 18:29.
 22. Among his numerous articles are the following: Yedullah Kazmi, "Faith and Knowledge in Islam: An Essay in Philosophy of Religion," *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 4 (1999): 503-34; "The Notion of *Murabbi* in Islam: An Islamic Critique of Trends in Contemporary Education," *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999), 209-233; "Historical Consciousness and the Notion of the Authentic Self in the Qur'an," *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000), 375-98; "Islamic Education: Traditional Education or Education of Tradition," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003), 259-88; "Re-

- claiming the Tradition: An Essay on the Condition of the Possibility of Islamic Knowledge,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15, no. 2 (spring 1997), 97-108.
23. Nadeem Memon and Qaiser Ahmad, “The Pedagogical Divide: Toward an Islamic Pedagogy,” 2008, 9. www.razigroup.com (accessed October 19, 2011).
 24. *Ibid.*, 3.
 25. *Ibid.*, 4.
 26. Fazlur Rahman, “Islamization of Knowledge: A Response,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3-11, 11.
 27. *Ibid.*, 5.
 28. *Ibid.*, 11.
 29. Yusuf Proglar, Islam Online, www.islamonline.net (accessed April 17, 2011).
 30. Suhailah Hussien, “Towards the Islamization of Critical Pedagogy: A Malaysian Case Study” (The University of Sheffield, July 2006).
 31. Taha Jabir al-‘Alwani, *The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today* (Herndon, A: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995); Sayyid Ali Ashraf, *New Horizons in Muslim Education* (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Academy, 1985); Muhamed Aslam Haneef, *A Critical Survey of Islamization of Knowledge* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2005).
 32. S. S. Husain and S. A. Ashraf, *Crisis in Muslim Education* (Jeddah: King Abdul Aziz University, 1979) , 15
 33. Quoted in Memon and Ahmad, *The Pedagogical Divide*, 12.