

Education and Knowledge in the Perspective of Islam

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ARTICLE INFO

Volume: 4

ISSN: [2963-5489](https://doi.org/10.29635/2963-5489)

KEYWORD

Islamic education, knowledge ('ilm), epistemology, Tawhid, moral development, holistic learning.

ABSTRACT

Education in Islam is not merely a process of transferring knowledge or training intellect but a sacred duty that encompasses the moral, spiritual, and social development of humankind. The Qur'an's first revelation, "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Qur'an, 96:1) encapsulates the centrality of knowledge in human existence and its connection with divine guidance. This study aims to explore the philosophy of education and knowledge in Islam through the lenses of epistemology, purpose, and application. Employing a qualitative, library-based methodology, it draws from classical and contemporary sources including the Qur'an, Hadith, and the works of scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Khaldun, Syed Naquib al-Attas, and Fazlur Rahman.

The study reveals that in Islam, knowledge ('ilm) is inseparable from faith (iman) and practice ('amal). It is viewed as a divine trust that must lead to self-purification, social justice, and the realization of human perfection (insan kamil). Education (tarbiyah, ta'dib, ta'lim) functions as the process of nurturing the human soul, harmonizing reason and revelation, and preparing individuals to act as stewards (khalifah) on Earth. The findings argue that the decline of Muslim civilization correlates with the fragmentation of knowledge and the adoption of secular models of education detached from spirituality. Therefore, the reformation of Islamic education must aim to reestablish the unity of knowledge under the paradigm of Tawhid (Oneness of God), ensuring that scientific advancement remains grounded in ethical and spiritual responsibility.

1. Introduction

This The concept of education (*tarbiyah*) in Islam has always been more than a mere academic pursuit. It is an act of worship (*ibadah*), an ethical endeavor, and a means of fulfilling human purpose as prescribed by God. The first word revealed to the Prophet Muhammad — *Iqra'* (Read) — marked the beginning of a revolution in human thought, emphasizing that learning and reflection are sacred acts. Islam thus laid down an intellectual foundation that inspired centuries of scientific, philosophical, and moral advancement. During the Golden Age of Islam, the pursuit of knowledge was deeply embedded in society. The establishment of institutions such as *Bayt al-Hikmah* in Baghdad, Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, and Al-Azhar in Cairo demonstrated Islam's commitment to knowledge as a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*). Scholars from diverse disciplines—mathematicians like Al-Khwarizmi, physicians like Ibn Sina, philosophers like Al-Farabi, and theologians like Al-Ghazali—worked harmoniously under the unifying principle of *Tawhid*. For them, there was no

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dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the scientific. All knowledge ultimately led to the understanding of God's creation and thus to His worship.

However, the modern era brought with it a crisis of epistemology. The rise of secularism, materialism, and colonial education systems fragmented the Muslim worldview. Modern Muslim societies, in their quest to modernize, often adopted Western educational models that prioritize cognitive and technical skills over spiritual and moral development. This shift gradually eroded the integrative character of Islamic education. As a result, Muslim students increasingly view education merely as a pathway to employment or social status rather than a means to self-realization and service to humanity. This disconnection between *knowledge* and *values* has led to a paradox: while the Muslim world has made significant strides in literacy and technological access, it still faces ethical, political, and social disorientation. Corruption, social injustice, and intellectual stagnation persist, suggesting that education without *adab* (moral discipline) and spiritual grounding cannot achieve true progress.

The Qur'an frequently reminds humankind that knowledge is a trust and responsibility. "*Indeed, those who were given knowledge before it, when it is recited to them, fall upon their faces in prostration*" (Qur'an 17:107). This verse illustrates that true knowledge leads to humility and submission to the truth, not arrogance or rebellion. Islam perceives the scholar (*'alim*) not merely as an intellectual but as a moral exemplar whose character reflects divine wisdom. In this context, re-examining the philosophy of education and knowledge from an Islamic perspective becomes an urgent necessity. The goal is not to reject modernity but to reinterpret it through a Tawhidic lens that reconnects reason with revelation, science with ethics, and progress with purpose. Only through such reintegration can Muslim societies regain their lost balance and rebuild an education system that nurtures both intellect and soul.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge ('Ilm) as a Divine Light

In Islamic epistemology, *'ilm* occupies a sacred position. The Qur'an mentions the word and its derivatives over 750 times, underscoring its centrality. Knowledge is viewed as *nur* (light) bestowed by God upon the human intellect. Al-Ghazali in *Ihya Ulum al-Din* stated, "Knowledge is light, and the light of God does not enter a heart that is darkened by sin." Thus, acquiring knowledge requires spiritual purification, sincerity, and humility. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "*Whoever follows a path seeking knowledge, Allah will make his path to Paradise easy.*" (Muslim). This hadith affirms that learning is not confined to worldly success but is intrinsically linked to salvation. Moreover, Islam's concept of knowledge encompasses both *revealed knowledge* (*naqli*) and *acquired knowledge* (*'aqli*). The two are not contradictory but complementary; revelation provides divine guidance while reason interprets and applies it within the context of human experience.

2.2 Educational Aims in Islamic Thought

According to Al-Attas (1999), the ultimate purpose of Islamic education is the inculcation of *adab*, which represents the proper recognition of the order of things—of God as Creator, of humans as His servants, and of knowledge as a trust. Education, therefore, is not about producing skilled workers but *good persons* who understand their responsibilities to God and society.

Ibn Khaldun, in *al-Muqaddimah*, identified education as essential for civilization (*'umran*). He argued that human progress depends on the transmission of knowledge and moral training. Similarly, Al-Farabi viewed education as a process of guiding the soul toward virtue and happiness, achieved by harmonizing intellect and moral character.

2.3 Contemporary Discourse

Modern Muslim thinkers such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have revisited these classical views in the context of modernity. They highlight the crisis of dualism in Muslim education — a separation between religious and secular sciences — which distorts the unity of knowledge. The *Islamization of Knowledge* movement

emerged as a response, aiming to reintegrate modern sciences into a Tawhidic epistemology. While critics argue that the Islamization project often lacks practical implementation, its philosophical contribution remains significant: it calls for the moral contextualization of knowledge. In the age of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and globalization, education must not only produce competent individuals but also morally conscious citizens who apply knowledge responsibly.

3. Methodology

This paper employs qualitative library research with an interpretative analytical approach. The study does not rely on empirical surveys but on textual exploration and conceptual analysis of Islamic sources and scholarly works.

Primary Sources:

- The Qur'an and Hadith (with major tafsir works such as *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* and *Tafsir al-Razi*).
- Classical writings: Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, and Al-Farabi's *Tahsil al-Sa'adah*.

Secondary Sources:

- Modern works of scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (*The Concept of Education in Islam*), Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (*Islamization of Knowledge*), and Fazlur Rahman (*Islam and Modernity*).

Analytical Steps:

1. **Concept Identification:** Extracting Qur'anic and prophetic concepts of education and knowledge.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** Contrasting classical and modern interpretations to identify epistemological continuity.
3. **Thematic Synthesis:** Constructing a comprehensive framework linking knowledge, ethics, and education within Islamic worldview.

The study emphasizes hermeneutic interpretation, allowing a holistic understanding of education as both a philosophical and spiritual process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Sacred Foundation of Knowledge

In Islam, knowledge is inherently sacred because it originates from God. The Qur'an states: "*He taught man what he knew not*" (96:5). This verse indicates that all learning is a gift from the Creator, and thus, acquiring knowledge is a means of fulfilling one's covenant with Him. Unlike secular epistemologies that perceive knowledge as a product of human curiosity or social construction, Islam situates knowledge within divine ontology. Al-Ghazali explains that ignorance is a veil that separates humans from divine truth, while knowledge removes that veil. Hence, seeking knowledge is both a cognitive and spiritual endeavor. The spiritual aspect distinguishes Islamic epistemology from positivist models, where knowledge is often divorced from ethics and spirituality.

4.2 The Integration of 'Aql (Reason) and Wahy (Revelation)

Islamic intellectual tradition never rejected reason; instead, it celebrated it as a divine gift. The Qur'an invites humans to think, reflect, and reason more than 200 times. However, reason is not autonomous—it operates within the boundaries of revelation. Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina developed sophisticated philosophical systems that combined Aristotelian logic with Qur'anic ethics, while Al-Ghazali rebalanced this rationalism by emphasizing the heart's role in perceiving truth.

The synthesis of reason and revelation became the hallmark of classical Islamic civilization. It allowed Muslims to lead in science, mathematics, and philosophy while preserving spiritual depth. The decline of this synthesis, particularly after the 13th century, corresponded with the intellectual stagnation of the Muslim world.

4.3 Education as Character Formation (Tarbiyah, Ta'dib, Ta'lim)

Islamic education involves three interrelated concepts:

- **Tarbiyah:** nurturing and developing human potential through guidance and discipline.
- **Ta'dib:** instilling adab — moral, ethical, and spiritual refinement.
- **Ta'lim:** transmitting knowledge systematically.

A complete education must encompass all three. The Prophet Muhammad exemplified this integration, being simultaneously a teacher, moral reformer, and community leader. His pedagogical method combined compassion (*rahmah*), dialogue, and example (*uswah hasanah*). His companions, inspired by his approach, became the first generation of scholar-leaders who balanced faith and intellect.

4.4 Crisis of Modern Muslim Education

Modern Muslim societies face a disconnection between knowledge and faith. Colonial influences introduced dual education systems: one secular and Western-oriented, another traditional and religious. The result is a fragmented human personality—technically skilled but spiritually hollow, or pious but intellectually limited. This dualism manifests in universities where sciences are taught devoid of ethical context, and in religious schools where worldly knowledge is neglected. Such imbalance produces neither holistic scholars nor capable professionals who can embody Islamic ethics in practice. Fazlur Rahman warns that unless Islamic education integrates modern disciplines within a Qur'anic moral framework, Muslims risk irrelevance in shaping the future of knowledge.

4.5 The Role of Teachers and Scholars

In Islam, the teacher (*mu'allim*) occupies an exalted position. The Prophet said, “*The best among you are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it.*” Teachers are heirs of prophets (*'ulama warathat al-anbiya*). Their authority, however, is not based merely on academic credentials but on moral integrity and sincerity (*ikhlas*). They must teach not only facts but wisdom (*hikmah*), helping students internalize ethical values.

Classical Islamic pedagogy emphasized spiritual companionship (*suhbah*)—a teacher-student relationship rooted in mutual respect and humility. This approach contrasts sharply with modern impersonal systems focused solely on assessment and competition.

4.6 Reviving Holistic Education: The Tawhidic Paradigm

The future of Islamic education depends on restoring the unity of knowledge under the principle of *Tawhid*. This paradigm affirms that all truths, scientific or spiritual, ultimately derive from the same divine source. Therefore, knowledge must serve moral ends. For example, technological innovation should aim to alleviate suffering and protect the environment, not exploit or destroy it.

Educational reforms should:

1. Reconnect curricula to Qur'anic worldview.
2. Encourage interdisciplinary study integrating ethics, science, and spirituality.
3. Develop assessment systems valuing moral behavior alongside academic performance.
4. Foster critical thinking guided by *iman* (faith) and *taqwa* (consciousness of God).

This synthesis can produce a generation of *ulul albab*—those “who think deeply and remember God” (Qur'an 3:191).

5. Conclusion

Education and knowledge in Islam represent an indivisible unity of intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. The Islamic worldview considers knowledge a sacred trust that must elevate human dignity and promote justice. True education nurtures not only the intellect but also the heart, producing individuals who embody wisdom, compassion, and responsibility. The crisis of Muslim education today stems from the fragmentation of knowledge and the dominance of materialist paradigms. To overcome this, Muslim educators must revive the *Tawhidic* approach that integrates revelation and reason, science and spirituality, theory and practice. The aim is to cultivate holistic individuals who can navigate modern challenges while upholding divine principles. Thus, the reformation of education in the Muslim world is not simply a curricular issue but a moral and philosophical one. It demands a return to the Qur'anic vision of knowledge as light — a light that illuminates not only the mind but also the soul.

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