

ISLAMIC SCHOOLS AND COMMERCIALISM: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Islamic schools in the United States assist parents in raising Muslim youth. They strive for growth and excellence, both in the areas of academia and religion, integrating the curriculum with Islamic ideology and philosophy. Teachers and the administration work hard in helping Muslim youth cultivate their Islamic identity and contribute to the salad bowel we call America. The curriculum used, the structure, and the schedule of most schools follow the public school model. Although Muslim schools usually are spared the issues of drugs, alcohol and teenage pregnancy, they share in the problems that the society and the market economy impose on education. This statement encompasses many varied and vast issues that have been expounded upon by hundreds of scholars, in thousands of books and articles. In this paper, I will attempt to bring together comments and studies on commercialism in our schools, its effects on efforts in creating meaningful experiences in the classroom, and the potential harmful affects on spiritual growth.

Commercialism, for most Islamic schools is an issue confined to advertisements seen on television or in a magazine. While mass media has its role in the commercialism problem, the pervasiveness of business advertisement in the curriculum and products used by schools is alarming. Nearly 80% of the educational packets and kits studied by the Consumers Union Education Services “contained biased or incomplete information, promoting a viewpoint that favors consumption of the sponsor’s product or service or a position that favors the company or its economic agenda” (Consumer Union Education Series [CUES], 1995, p.13). One shocking example, the Weekly Reader, owned by Kravis Roberts and Company (K-III), the nations second largest cigarette maker—echoed the tobacco industries viewpoint in an astonishing 68% of the stories in ran on smoking from 1989-1994. And when discussing the future of cigarettes, they overlooked the relationship between smoking and cancer and instead focused on the number of

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jobs that would be lost if the industry were to fail. (Kaplan,1996). This one example vividly illustrates how commercialism can be hidden, and implores us as educators to understand how and why commercialism exists in schools, why and how commercialism is contradictory to Islamic morals and values, and understand how we can avoid our students becoming victims in the onslaught of big business.

Critical Perspective: Commercialism, Islam and Philosophy

One area Islamic schools have failed in the past is providing the critical perspective in education. Positivism, the defining philosophy for the Tyler Rationale, (the basis of public school curriculums) does not allow for critical reflection on what is learned. This is called the technical framework, and its focus is outcome based, that is how much a student remembers from what was taught. What Islamic schools need to move towards is an Emancipatory framework for curriculum, where the questions and learning are reciprocal and cyclical between teacher and learner. Not only is the process of learning valued, but the journey it starts within the student to his own thinking, learning and doing is equally valued. Without this critical perspective, education prepares students to be vessels, ready to accept whatever is poured in.

Critique leads to change; where and if it moves us depends on our listening and our “grounding.” If we are to truly understand the society in which we live, we need to develop a critical perspective within our discussions of education. Michael Apple, a leading curriculum theorist notes:

...one of the fundamental conditions of emancipation is the ability to “see” the actual functioning of institutions in all their positive and negative complexity, to assist others (and to let them assist us) in “remembering” the possibilities of spontaneity, choice and more equal models of control (Grundy, 1987, p.124).

The idea of emancipation is important here. The zeitgeist, “the spirit of the times” is a compilation of the philosophies and ideologies that encompass the thought of an era.

Hiedegger's concept of "throw-ness" says that all of what is inherently part of the zeitgeist, including foundational epistemological and ontological concerns, affects our "grounding" whether we are aware of it or not. And it is not all good. Lets take for example Nihilism:

Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. Nihilism's impact on the culture and values of the 20th century has been pervasive, its apocalyptic tenor spawning a mood of gloom and a good deal of anxiety, anger, and terror. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. In the 20th century, nihilistic themes--epistemological failure, value destruction, and cosmic purposelessness--have preoccupied artists, social critics, and philosophers (Pratt, 2001).

Nihilism has had its effects on Islamic thought in the past century as well. Abdul Hakim Murad (2001), professor of religious studies at Cambridge University, comments on the current situation of Muslims and Islam:

The modern type of Tawba (turning to Allah)...born of insecurity, often makes Muslims narrow, intolerant, and exclusivist. Even more noticeably, it produces people whose faith is, despite its apparent intensity, liable to vanish as suddenly as it came. Deprived of real nourishment, the activist's soul can only grow hungry and emaciated, until at last it dies.

He does not end without advice:

How should we respond to this disorder? We must begin by remembering what Islam is for. As we noted earlier, our din (way of life) is not, ultimately, a manual of rules which, when meticulously followed, becomes a passport to paradise. Instead, it is a package of social, intellectual and spiritual technology whose purpose is to cleanse the human heart. In the Qur'an, the Lord says that on the Day of Judgment, nothing will be of any use to us, except a sound heart (*qalbun salim*). And in a famous hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammed), the Prophet, upon whom be blessings and peace, says that 'Verily in the body there is a piece of flesh. If it is sound, the body is all sound. If it is corrupt, the body is all corrupt. Verily, it is the heart.'

It is the heart to which commercialism is most detrimental. In the heart, the love for the Divine is nurtured; commercialism moves us to love the material, the ephemeral of this world. Allah warns us "The mutual rivalry for piling up (the good things of this world) diverts you (from the more serious things)" (Qur'an, 102:1). With Nihilism and its focus on the immediate and individual concerns, commercialism very comfortably spreads its message of consumption and

materialism. When there is no End, when values such as responsibility are questioned, and the ego celebrated, how can we not indulge. Kaplan (1996) comments in *Profits R Us: Notes on the Commercialization of American Schools*,

This nation faces a clear choice, according to the Center for the Study of Commercialism: taking the path of 'continued commercialism and wasteful consumption' or building a society 'more concerned about personal development and satisfaction of common needs (p. K11).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1994, p. 210), professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, comments on the state of educational institutions:

Very early in the development of modernism, however, educational institutions were for the most part, although not completely, captured by the forces of modernism and modern education became the most important means for furthering the value system of the modern world, for the spread of secularization and for the criticism of the religious world view. Through educational institutions, not only the sciences but also ideas concerning the amassing of wealth, furthering economic ends and creating greater social mobility within society were disseminated, this being especially true in America and only more recently in Europe.

Understanding this issue in an historical context, religious schools are facing two opposing forces. The first, as Nasr points out, is from within, that is the foundations of our education systems are based on a philosophy that contradict Islamic teachings and secondly the atmosphere created by Modernism that encourages values contrary to our own. The Qur'an tells us "Exult not, for Allah loveth not those who exult (in riches)" (28:76) and warns that greed will lead to a path of misery (92:8-10). Further we are encouraged to provide for the needy, to care for the orphan and to purify our wealth through giving. Commercialism with its emphasis on consumption and materialism is a direct attack on the values of Islam and thus we need to be wary of its presence in our schools. Emancipation thus is only possible through educating not only the mind through critical reflection, but the soul as well through Divine remembrance.

Abdul Hakim Murad (2001) reminds us:

As we are initiated into the distractions of the world, however, it [heart] is covered over with the 'rust' (*ran*) of which the Qur'an speaks. This rust is made up of two things: sin and distraction. When, through the process of self-discipline, these are banished, so that the worshipper is preserved from sin and is focusing entirely on the immediate presence and reality of God, the rust is dissolved, and the *ruh* once again is free. The heart is sound; and salvation, and closeness to God, are achieved.

It is imperative that we as Muslim educators concerned about the success of our students in this life and the next, begin on a journey of self awareness on which we take into account of not only what we have done, but what has been done to us, the distraction Murad speaks of. The Qur'an reminds us "Know ye (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying, (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children (57:20). And reminds us of materialism and the narcissism it can lead to: "Thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever" (104:3). To compound the problem further, Postman (1985), professor of Communications at Columbia University and author of "Amusing Ourselves to Death," comments on the willingness of society to accept a materialistic, self-indulgent lifestyle. He contrasts the view points of two well known novels, Orwell's "1984" and Huxley's "Brave New World":

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance...in short Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us...spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate...(forward and p.155-6).

Postman's critique calls us to question the nature of our existence and begs us to search further for understanding of the charges he has laid before us. Before we can move forward on the journey, we have to know how we have to come be, that is what has molded us. We started the

process by addressing the issue of narcissism. What else do we need to be wary of? What composes our intellectual grounding? What is the nature of our being in this world?

We as beings in the 21st century have to accept that we are products of a culture of narcissism, in which the:

will to power equates reason and justice with power, represses the body of feeling, denies the life of the spirit, reduces the Self to an ego which is socially adaptive but fragmented and self-alienated, and empties the Self and its world of all meaning and all value.

(Levin, 1989, p. 11)ⁱ

We are products of a culture in which “our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business...resulting [in] a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (Postman, 1985, p. 4). Lost in a measure where Man is the absolute, occupying the position of God, we have drifted without purpose, homeless and rootless in the loss of the traditional sense of Being (Levine, 1989). In a world where “information is not knowledge and knowledge is not understanding” (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994, p. 12) we rationalized the world, the Word and the domination of ego. Ahistorical in nature, this world of the current and currency leads us to blindness of my self, of the information we are absorbing and the incomplete education we are providing through not knowing. Our intellectual grounding is fertile soil for the seeds of commercialism, and our being is defenseless.

Commercialism and the Market Economy

Continuing on the journey we need to understand what we are looking for. Commercialism in schools is on the rise because “[a]s funds for classroom materials dwindle, schools are increasingly looking to corporate America to fill the void” (CUES, 1995, p. v). Commercialism with schools fall within the following categories:

- ◆ In School Ads

- ◆ Ads in Classroom Materials and Programs
- ◆ Corporate-sponsored Educational Materials and Programs
- ◆ Corporate-sponsored Contests and Incentive Programs.

(CUES, 1995, p. 3)

The relationship between businesses and schools is quite complicated. You do have the truly altruistic business, willing to lend a helping hand, and they are a blessing. Islamic schools have businesses that support them without expecting advertisement. The school may publicly thank the business and it is sufficient. However, in most cases there is a specified "commercial" in return for their services. The most visible example of this type of commercialism is the advertisements painted on school buses as seen in Colorado Springs (Kaplan, 1996). A popular form of in ads in classroom materials and programs is Channel One. Eight million students in 12,000 classrooms are required to watch Channel One, the in-school "news" and advertising program that uses schools to market brand name products. Students watch two minutes of TV commercials pitching junk food products and video games as part of every twelve minute show. Channel One is owned by Primedia, Inc. a marketing company.

Perhaps the most used form of commercialism by Islamic schools is the corporate sponsored contests and incentive programs such as supermarket chains gifts in return for receipts/coupons/points. Molnar, a leading educational theorist, "ran the numbers and found that, for one Wisconsin school, receipts totaling \$500,000 earned two computers supposedly worth "more than \$3000" each, or 7/10 of one cent of credit for every dollar's worth of receipt" (Kaplan, 1996, p. K5). Most of these contests are just not worth the effort. Students are encouraged to turn in receipts and points; the student then in turn bugs their parent to shop at a specific chain or buy specified products, and the parent feels compelled in order to "help the school". Specifically with the Giant Food Chain, which is a more costly food chain, if the parent

were to shop at the more reasonably priced chain, and give the school the money they saved, it the end the school would be able to buy more.

Programs such as those sponsored by Pizza Hut or Campbell's "family of prepared foods" do promote literacy or give gifts, however they are also educating the child on what to eat. "These prepared foods are unhealthy, loaded with fat and sodium and are decidedly questionable nutritional value," comments Kaplan (1996). On top of that, these companies make the phony claim that the commodities the schools receive are free. In fact, they cost many thousands of soup labels and hundreds of thousands of dollars in receipts. They are exploiting unknowing children and teachers, presenting themselves as giving charity. Not only are they involved in getting children to become consumers of their products, they are distorting the reality of the transaction and the \$70 million net worth of offsetting gain from such campaigns, in the case of Campbell's. (Kaplan, 1996).

The most subtle and most often overlooked commercialism is found in curriculums provided by a profit-oriented company. The example provided earlier of the Weekly Reader and its parent company's interest in the cigarette industry is an appalling example of miseducation. Dupont, Dow, Anheuser-Busch, Kellogg's, Scholastic, Inc., Procter & Gamble and Mobil are just a few companies are guilty of misleading information in the curriculum packets they provide for schools (Kaplan, 1996). According to Kaplan (1996), these "are some thoughtfully conceived campaigns that offer useful instruction while at the same time discreetly promote an industry of company" (p. K6). Islamic schools need to evaluate the curriculum beyond the outwardly offensive and learn to uncover the hidden messages that undermine the Islamic teachings of frugality, charity and asceticism. This is a daunting task and the Consumers Union Education Services is one resource schools can turn to for information and guidance.

Why are businesses in our schools? Corporations are profit oriented and they invest in the future. The question before us is, "Are they investing in our youth's future or in their own?"
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Some are truly altruistic and want to help, but unfortunately this is not the case for most. Mike Searles former president of Kids R Us, put it bluntly: “If you own the child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying, ‘Hey, I want to own this kid younger and younger’” (Kaplan, 1996, p. K4). “Kid business has become big business,” Kurnit (2001) says. To make kid business even bigger, he preaches what he calls “surround marketing”: saturation advertising that captures kids at every possible moment. “You’ve got to reach kids throughout the day—in school, as they’re shopping at the mall, or at the movies,” says Carol Herman, a senior vice president at Grey Advertising. “You’ve got to become part of the fabric of their lives” (Consumer Reports, 1990). Business only understands the world only in dollar signs, and they know that the spending power of children is about \$15 billion per year and they influence another \$160 billion controlled by their parents. Teenagers spend \$57 billion of their own yearly and \$36 billion of their family’s More that 43 million children attend schools and the population is growing (CUES, 1995, p. 4). What better place to tap into this “resource” than in the concentrated and trusted environment of schools. This significant population of spenders is 57.1 million at the present and projected to top 60.4 million by 2005. Establishing brand loyalty is immensely important to corporations, and through the schools’ and teachers’ credibility, these corporations are hoping to profit off of short and long-term commitments to their products.

Conclusion:

Michael Apple states in “Understanding Curriculum,” “education is ultimately a moral activity and as such it cannot be understood without recourse to, and thus must be held accountable to, ethical principles and obligations of justice and responsibility to other persons” (Pinar, 1995). What are our ethical responsibilities to our students? Is it to provide computers or is it to provide propaganda-free schools? In allowing commercialism in schools, we are allowing forces with economic concerns to dictate curriculum issues. Schools as the dispensers of
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education compromise their powerful position by allowing these advertisements to gain maximum exposure in the student's daily environment. Molnar (2000) states that advertising is a twenty-four hour a day, seven-day a week, three hundred and sixty-five day a year curriculum of our culture and that Americans young and old are being relentlessly mis-educated and, as a consequence, our society is correspondingly less democratic. Less democratic schools result in students not deciding how they want to "be" in the world. And "regardless of one's personal position on materialism and consumption, schools should be preparing students to make their own choices, and not influencing them to follow the path advocated by marketers" (CUES, 1995, p. 33).

This requires a critical perspective within the curriculum and in the teaching-learning relationship that only an Emancipatory framework of curriculum can provide. As a short term solution, schools can provide classes that critically analyzes intellectual, social and economic issues of our society. However, one needs to be wary of the postmodern dilemma of never-ending questions that result in confusion and despair. With Islam as the guide, critical questioning is necessary for the survival of the Muslim American identity.

The solution however does not solely rest on the intellectualization of problems. As Apple states, the solution has "to account for the significance of the spiritual dimension in human affairs" (Pinar, 1995). Thomas Moore (1999, p. xi) comments on the spiritual state of "modern man" in the introduction of his bestseller, *Care of the Soul*:

The great malady of the twentieth century implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is "loss of soul". When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one, but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it. We have today few specialists of the soul to advise us when we succumb to mood and emotional pain, or when as a nation we find ourselves confronting a host of threatening evils.

In his book, Moore addresses the concerns of the soul from a non-religious perspective, using Greek mythology to inform his critique. Although our sources are different, as well as our ontological and epistemological foundations, his understanding of the suffering of the soul speaks to all who experience it:

The emotional complaints of our time, complaints we therapists hear everyday in our practice, include:

- Emptiness
- Meaninglessness
- Vague depression
- Disillusionment about marriage, family and relationship
- A loss of values
- Yearning for personal fulfillment
- A hunger for spirituality

All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves. We yearn excessively for entertainment, power, intimacy, sexual fulfillment and material things and we think we can find these things if we discover the right relationship or job, the right church or therapy. But without soul, whatever we find will be unsatisfying, for what we truly long for is the soul in each of these areas. Lacking that soulfulness we attempt to gather these alluring satisfactions to us in great masses thinking apparently that quantity will make up for lack of quality (p. ??)

A school's responsibility is to not only inform about the forces of materialism, Nihilism, narcissism and all the other "isms" contradictory to Islamic values and way of being. It also has the responsibility of providing spiritual awareness and educating to the soul. The science of purifying the heart must be an integral aspect of the curriculum to remove the rust of materialism, Nihilism, narcissism, etc. This science is described by a Muslim scholar of this science, Muhammed Amin Kurdi, as:

...a knowledge through which one knows the states of the human soul, praiseworthy or blameworthy, how to purify it from the blameworthy and ennable it by acquiring the praiseworthy, and to journey and to proceed to Allah Most High, fleeing onto Him. Its fruits are the heart's development, knowledge of God through direct experience and ecstasy, salvation in the next world, triumph through gaining Allah's pleasure, the attainment of eternal happiness, and illuminating and purifying the heart so that noble matters disclose themselves, extraordinary states are revealed, and one perceives what the insight of others is blind to.

(Keller, 1994, p. 861)

As with the other sciences of Islam, such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafseer* (exegesis), *tassawuf*, which Murad (2000) refers to as Islamic psychology but traditionally known as Sufism, has been a respected part of Muslim intellectual and political life throughout our history. Orientalist and Wahabi doctrine have recently tried to disassociate it from Islam, however the participation in Sufism by great Muslim scholars such as Nawawi, Ghazzali, al-Hakim al-Nisaburi, Ibn Furak, al-Qushayri, al-Bayhaqi, Al-Sawi, al-Dardir, al-Laqqani, Abd al-Wahhab al-Baghdaadi, Abdallah Ansari, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn Rajab, al-Suyuti, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, al-Ayni, Ibn Khaldun, al-Subki, Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, Baydawi, al-Sawi, Abu'l-Su'ud, al-Baghawi, and Ibn Kathir is testimony to it as a central and indispensable Islamic science. Our rich heritage has the answers for us; in turning to the “middle way” defined by sophisticated classical consensus we can fulfill our responsibility of providing education that is intellectually as well as spiritually meaningful; education that is on the path to the Divine.

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