



# Exploring the relationship between Islamic religious learning and community

Islamic religious learning and community

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## Special reference to 'Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun and Mohammad Tahir Ben Achour

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Muslims' commitment to religious learning and its institutions speaks of a genuine interest in a lifestyle characterized by education and wisdom, spiritual and religious well-being, in addition to sustainable intellectual and socio-cultural conditions of their communities. At the core of these critical contributions however, lays the question of the interplay between religious learning and community building, and the means according to which religious learning is continually the driving force for development and prosperity. This study aims to examine a number of questions pertaining to the character of Islamic religious learning while exploring the problems impeding religious learning from the effective development of the community. Specifically, this research draws on the perspectives of two prominent Muslim scholars, 'Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun and Mohammad Tahir Ben Achour in an attempt to further understand the dilemmas impairing the position of Islamic religious learning in relation to the general context of Muslim communities. This inquiry opens new fields of critical inquiry on the role of religious learning today and brings to light some of the issues causing declining influence on the effective development of Muslim communities.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Examination of Islamic sources to develop conceptual framework on the issue of religious learning and community.

**Findings** – Ingraining the mind with varying degrees of information on a particular Islamic subject or mastery of a particular textbook without challenging students' minds with on-going problems and challenges, emerging ideas or trends, or growing emotions and behaviors; only causes memorized lessons to creep into stagnancy and inertia, thus shifting attention to the form and shape of learning as opposed to its essence and implications for community change and development. This calls for a systematic review of Islamic religious learning in such a way that it draws essentially from the primary sources of Islamic thinking while drawing learners closer to the folds of piety and moral discipline, embracing social change as a validating parameter for effective learning, while continually building active bridges with the surrounding community.

**Originality/value** – Research relied on original Islamic sources including works of Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Achour.

**Keywords** Ijtihad, Islamic studies, Muslim society, Religious learning, 'Umran

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



### Introduction

In Islam, the learning of religion is viewed as an act of worship and piety, and utter devotion to God; primarily as it provides Muslims with a deepened understanding of Divine revelation, and consequently of the rules and ethics of life. Much like any other

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human activity however, the intrinsically rewarding deed of religious learning is neither impeccable nor impervious to flaws; having been historically subject to change and transformation in terms of its respective vitality, periods of flourishing growth, consolidation or weakness. The historical development of religious learning and the impact of its respective institutions on Muslim life stand as a strong testament to its various periods of transformation. The significant task of identifying the measure of efficacy, and the inherent power of community building within Islamic religious learning however, remains a challenging question. As rightly pointed out by Muhammad 'Abdallah, the review and reappraisal of Islamic sciences remains controversial. This is for the reason that the delicate nature of such an undertaking is reflecting in numerous factors such as the criterion to be applied in determining what has become of Islamic sciences following periods of thriving vitality, and whether sufficient historical data exists to firmly establish an answer to the aforementioned question (Abdalla, 2003, p. 2). In spite of the difficulties surrounding the approach of Islamic religious learning, a significant number of Muslim reformers are generally in agreement with the claim that Islamic religious learning has lost its vitality and primacy as a dynamic leading agent in the shaping of Muslim communities, particularly with the closure of the gate of Ijtihad and the observed cases of blind adherence to Taqlid, occurring as early as the twelfth century. In effect, this stance has led them to argue that attempts at reforming the curricula and teaching methods of institutions of Islamic learning today has become an urgent necessity, as this will aid them in coming to terms with arising issues and contemporary challenges (Abusal, 1995, p. 26).

Held in 1995, the Organizing Committee of the Conference of Shari'a Sciences in Universities found that the large majority of Muslim reformers had arrived at the realization and keen awareness of the role of Islamic studies and its respective institutions in the reform of the Ummah. A common basis exists, which as they argue, is found in Ghazali's call for the revival of religious sciences as well as Ibn Taymiyyah's call for adherence to the methodology of the Sunnah. Contemporary movements of Muslim reform also reflect a conscious awareness of this vital role, and therefore regarded the reform of institutions of Islamic studies as a cardinal requisite and fundamental theme of current Islamic revival. Scholars and reformers such as Kheireddine al-Tunisi (d. 1890), Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), Muhammad Rachid Rida (d. 1935), 'Abdu al-'Aziz al-Tha'alibi (d. 1944), and Ibn Badis (d. 1940), Muhammad Tahir bin Achour (d. 1973), have all made significant contributions and inroads into this matter; having pointed out critical issues in their attempts to review and reform Islamic religious learning. Prior to exploring some of the landmarks of religious learning however, we will first discuss some of the essential characteristics in light of which it was nurtured and developed; eventually flourishing and effectively influencing the definitive shaping of Muslim communities. Such an understanding provides us with the necessary insight for a holistic understanding of the development of religious learning as well as the respective parameters concerned with evaluating its active connection to and substantial effects on Muslim life.

### 1. Characteristics of religious learning in Islam

As with any other system of influence affecting the community building, the activity of religious learning in Islam is based on a number of integrated blocks including

metaphysical principles, worldview, outlook to life, philosophy, epistemology, methods, theories, objectives, institutions, human capital and community. The composition of Islamic religious learning however, is dependent on the totality of revelation; its guidelines, values, and objectives while the keys principles of learning are drawn from the interpretation of the *Quran* and *Sunnah*.

### 1.1 The framework of Tawhid

One of the essential characters of religious learning in Islam is the harmonious composition of its intellectual branches within the unity of the divine (*tawhid*). The Muslim societal record exhibits a rather extraordinary degree of intellectual excellence and dynamism, leading to effective community building and meaningful interaction with the other. Throughout the process however, the centrality of the worldview was continually maintained, in addition to the social implications of Tawhid. It was the driving force of belief in one God that stood behind much of the intellectual contributions in Muslim societies, as it constantly provided learners with the vision of learning while nourishing the commitment of the human spirit to intellectual wisdom. Moreover, as Faruqi indicates, at times, an entire culture, a whole civilization, and a complete history was compressed into one sentence; as certainly is the case with the *kalimah* (pronouncement) or *al-shahadah* of Islam (Faruqi, 1992, pp. 9-10). For Faruqi, all the diversity, wealth, history, culture, learning, and wisdom inherent within the civilization of Islam stems and derives from this shortest of statements *'la ilaha illa Allah* (there is no god but God) and in this manner, Tawhid is therefore the universal view of reality, of truth, of the world, of space and time, and of history and destiny (Faruqi, 1992, pp. 9-10).

The significance of Tawhid – as founded upon revelation and in harmony with sound reasoning and the needs of human nature (*fitrah*) – in developing scientific and intellectual knowledge and creating learning methodologies of inquiry may easily be discerned through each element of the educational and learning experience. Learning is generally viewed as a religious commitment, an act of charity, and as one of the most effective means to divine satisfaction. As pointed out by Sardar, the epistemology of Islam emphasises the totality of experience and reality and promotes not one singular approach but rather diverse ways for the study of nature. The Islamic concept of knowledge incorporates nearly all forms and types of knowledge ranging from pure observation to the loftiest metaphysics, and thus, Islamic knowledge may be acquired from revelation as well as reason, from observation as well as intuition, and from tradition as well as theoretical speculation (Sardar, 1979, p. 19).

The significance of Tawhid however, is not merely limited to shaping the epistemological and theological components of a structured religious education but also creates a living experience within people by means of guidance, motivation, and protection from destructive philosophies and ideologies, as is the case with learning that in effect protects Muslim communities from the effects of liberalism, nihilism or other secular forms of learning. This is better illustrated in al-Attas's statement that Islam totally rejects any application of the concepts secular, or secularization, or secularism to itself, for the reason that they are incompatible and alien to it in every respect; and only belong and are natural to the diametrically opposed intellectual-religious history of Western-Christian religious experience and consciousness (Al-Attas, 1993, p. 25).

### 1.2 Practicality of knowledge

One essential attribute of Islamic religious learning is the practicality of its content and its profound interaction with the dynamic conditions of the community. Essentially, religious learning seeks to fulfil the diverse needs of a multifaceted community according to an authentic, original yet moderate course of balanced thought, action and lifestyle. The essence of practicality within Islamic religious learning gives compelling proof of its presence within the revelation. On numerous occasions, the *Qur'an* admonishes those who bear knowledge without action, as is the case with the *Qur'an* establishing a similitude, describing those who carry much knowledge without understanding as akin to a donkey burdened with huge tomes without understanding them (*Qur'an*, 62: 5). This reflects the necessity for useful knowledge in both religious and worldly life to grant its bearer the ability to translate knowledge into positive action (Sayis, 2002, 1: p. 747). It is within such a context that one understands why the religion of Islam elevates the status of praiseworthy knowledge that causes its bearer to act upon it. Failing to do so, would according to Ibn Taymiyyah mean relinquishing the intellect (Ibn Taymiyyah, 4: p. 332).

Unlike philosophical modes of inquiry, Islamic religious learning allows knowledge to increase individual and group interaction with social reality while contributing to the human endeavor without detaching understanding from change. Early and contemporary Muslim scholars are both aware of the need for religious learning to remain practical and serve the true needs of the community. In his critic of dialectical theology, 'AbdulMajid al-Najjar rejects its newly heavy abstract course. Najjar argues that the taxonomy of Islamic sciences does not speak much of purely abstract sets of general human knowledge, but rather reflects serious interest in the actualization of religion in fields of intellectual persuasion and practice (Najjar, 1992, p. 70). For him the very division of knowledge into that of the praiseworthy and blameworthy explains the ultimate objective set for Islamic studies; namely the service of the religious truth (Najjar, pp. 70-73). Najjar argues that throughout their development, religious Muslim writings have constantly reflected a social reality as opposed to a limited preoccupation to purely logical reasoning (Najjar, p. 75). The taxonomy of the emergent Muslim scholastic theology embraced human knowledge alongside a range of disciplines, in consideration of a particularly new emerging context, that provided it with harmony with other intellectual disciplines in the process of reinforcing the religious truth (Najjar, p. 73).

Of particular interest, Najjar draws on Ibn Khaldun's remarks regarding the significant changes taking place on the field of logic where the objectives of rhetoric, logical fallacy and black magic were dismissed altogether due to their violation of or rather irreconcilability with the fundamental principles of Islam (Najjar, p. 74). This example is better illustrated in the Prolegomena, in which Ibn Khaldun draws attention to the question of actual versus practical knowledge, therefore highlighting the clear line of distinction between knowledge of the letter and that of the context, or that of the letter and that of the spirit, essentially referring to the problem of synergetic synchrony between knowledge and its recipients, or simply between knowledge and its practice. Ibn Khaldun believes that knowledge should be transformed from a state of abstraction into reality, or as he puts it: "Knowledge acquired through embodiment is a necessity and is more reliable than that which is acquired early on" (Ibn Khaldun, 2005a, Vol. 3, p. 27). To better explain his point, Ibn Khaldun draws attention to the objective of

Islamic law and legislation which is found through seeking the acquisition of sound habits and skills for human beings, leading one to obtain the necessary knowledge of the self and belief; thereby yielding human happiness in life. Ibn Khaldun asserts that formal knowledge (*ma'rifah suriyyah*) should be transformed into what he terms actual or factual knowledge (*ma'rifah haliyah*) which is dependent on regulative action and behavior supported by the acquisition of skills (*malakat*) (Ibn Khaldun, 2005a, Vol. 3, p. 27).

To further substantiate his point concerning the practicality of religious learning, Ibn Khaldun asserts that many people for example understand that a show of compassion to orphans or the needy is religiously commendable, and are able to draw on evidences of the Sharī'a in this regard. However, upon seeing orphans or needy, they simply ignore them, or fail to wipe over their heads for mercy, compassion and charity. This explains the example of people who have acquired the status of knowledge regarding showing mercy to orphans and poor, but have failed to acquire the status of condition and character embodiment" (Ibn Khaldun, 2005a, p. 27). Far prior to Ibn Khaldun, Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (d.1111A.D) agreed with this notion, pointing out that humans possessed knowledge of certain values such as patience, piety and reliance upon God, and that their knowledge of these truths should not be different from their manifestation and practice. For Ghazālī, when the human heart ascends to the level of such characteristics, and when the soul is touched by their impacts until the entire being resonates with the same, they will have then shifted from a state of practicing knowledge to a working condition of knowledge.

### 1.3 Beneficiality of knowledge

Beneficiality allows for the useful reconciliation of learning pedagogy with societal development, while conclusively paving the way for a meaningful identification of the problem and the construction of its solutions. The beneficial nature of knowledge in Islam is found to be intimately associated with religious values such piety (Tha'alibi, 2002, p. 275) and also bears legal values of lawfulness, prohibition, recommendation, reprehensibility, and general permissibility. To illustrate this idea, one finds Sa'di's interpretation of the *Qur'anic* verse; "His mother was a saintly woman" (*Qur'an*, 5: p. 75) rather useful and relevant. Sa'di argues that the state of sainthood means beneficial knowledge yielding certainty. His contention is that Mary the Virgin was not on a spiritual level similar to that of the Prophets, but was in a state of sainthood (Sa'di, 2000, p. 239). Sa'di however, extends the scope of beneficial knowledge further to include learning worldly business as part and parcel of beneficial knowledge (Sa'di, 2000, p. 961).

Along similar parallels, Ibn 'Ajibah draws on some interesting points when he argues that beneficial knowledge is much like the rain which vitalizes the earth, and causes springs, wells and rivers to flow. Rain is kept in bays and containers for public use while purifying the earth. Beneficial knowledge revives the spirits following their deaths which are brought about through ignorance and doubts while re-awakening the souls after death caused by forgetfulness (Ibn 'Ajibah, 2002, p. 331). It is from this vantage point that learners in Islam are continually exhorted to benefit others and to guide them to whatever is good and beneficial as defined and acknowledged by the norms and values of revelation.

The scale of beneficiality of learning is epistemologically integrated with the fundamentals of the Maqasid, according to which Islam sets a number of higher objectives such as religion, life, intellect, wealth, property, dignity, justice, freedom and environment.



Public interest (*al-maslaha al-'ammah*) and obstruction of means (*sadd al-dhara'i'*) are both critical tools for the proper designation of beneficial outcomes of religious learning. The productive level of religious learning observes the general guidelines of revelation, and constantly seeks to fulfill, maintain and promote a comprehensive state of well-being, whereby people would live in belief and peace while being protected from all forms of vice, corruption or mischief potentially interrupting their fundamental mission in life.

#### 1.4 Institutions of learning

Religious learning in Islam enjoyed constant support of varied government and private institutions. The community (*jama'ah*) on the other hand provided a rather effective source of motivation for the establishment and maintenance of Muslim learning institutions. The institution of the Masjid for instance is considered the birth place of Islamic religious learning, and is also considered to be the geometric centre from which the process of learning begins, and from which other institutions such as the *madrassa* library (*khizannah*) and *waqf*-based management system all stem. Institutions of learning do not simply embody the physical manifestations of religious or intellectual disciplines, but rather serve as their reflections and embody the very functions which cause them to live and subsist. This may apply clearly to the case of Zakat (obligatory charity) which serves the community in a direct format. Similarly scholarly consensus (*ijma'*) shows how the legal opinions of Muslim scholars effectively evolved into an authoritatively epistemological framework for Islamic knowledge or the reform of human conditions.

Religious learning also involves varied scholarly groups of authority in a wide range of intellectual specialities. This is understood through the many functions of scholars exhibited in the titles of intellectual assignments such as *salaf*, *jumhur*, *muhaddiqun*, *muhaddithun*, *usuliyun*, *mufasssirun*, *mujtahidun*, etc. They provided specialized communities looking after the systematic organization of socio-religious spheres which were effectively developed and utilized for the welfare of the community at large. Those groups not only played the role of authentic links of knowledge in chains of preservatory transmission but also maintained active learning processes nourished through daily interaction with the community and their consistent engagement in public and political life.

#### 1.5 Community building

The teaching of Islam is set to affect both the individual and communal life, and as such religious learning has sought to develop and sustain healthy Muslim community. The *Qur'an* makes use of the term *'umran* and its derivative to highlight this point. The inclusive nature of religious learning in Islam may be shown through the engagement of scholars, policy makers, and the public in the process of learning through which new forms of community life are continually forged and refined. Many examples support the communal direction of religious learning, including perhaps the problem of poverty which is found to be a serious problem menacing the well-being of family. In his treatise, al-Qabisi (d. 1013AD), addresses a number of critical social issues related to learning in addition to his discussion of parenting and parental responsibility in regards to providing opportunities for learning. Support of learning opportunities for unfortunate children means the need to facilitate and organize learning for them as per the religious and social responsibility of individuals and

institutions (Qabissi, 1986, pp. 92-95). Similarly Burhan al-Din al-Zarnuji (d. 1223) devoted a full chapter to addressing the question of sustenance, namely 'which things bring, and which prevent earning a livelihood, and which things increase or diminish the years of one's life' (Zarnuji, 1947, pp. 70-74).

Nevertheless, the elements of community and reform are found to be two key religious principles underlying such an association. While the community requires constant empowerment of individuals and groups which dictates serious cooperation and mutual support, reform requires authority set through diverse forms and shapes. The significance of institutions and authority supply important information regarding the evaluation of the societal value of Islamic religious learning and measuring the performance of religious learning in society. Along this parallel however, a number of questions pertaining to Muslims' institutions may be directed to the enterprise of Islamic sciences, their methods of learning, and liaison and delivery to the community. As such, the effectiveness of knowledge speaks of varying degrees of success in the development of institutions, and also of positive changes made to improve the living conditions of the community. The strength of learning on the other hand, is manifested through the strength of institutions such as the Masjid, madrasah (college), *maktabah* (library), *majlis* (learning circle), *zawiyah*, *bayt al-mal* (Muslim treasury), *waqf* or *habs* (endowments).

## 2. Impact of Islamic religious learning on community

Review of the effectual contribution of religious learning and its impact on the community represents a key activity in the development of Islamic religious learning with regards to community building. Through the history of Islamic learning, Muslim scholars show awareness of this issue. A prime example perhaps, is the case of al-Ghazali who made a number of significant contributions to improve the quality of Islamic religious learning. First, his attempt to purify Islamic thought from the influences of Greek philosophy as found in his Magnus opus *al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence) and his introduction of logic to the field of Islamic legal theory, as found in *al-Mustasfa*. Second, his attempt to purify Tasawwuf from the damaging infiltrations of foreign philosophy and Eastern religions as undertaken in his two major works *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din* (Revival of Religious Sciences), *al-Munqidh min al-ŌalÉl* (The Rescuer), or "Ayyuha al-Walad" on learning ethics.

The evaluation of Ghazali's intellectual reform initiatives however, are far beyond the scope of this research. What requires attention however, are the spiritual dimensions of Islamic religious learning prior to the infiltrations of rampant material trends that came to affect the image of Muslim learning institutions alongside the pervasive effects of foreign directions, interpretations, and at times even the manipulation of religious learning. This concern is better elucidated in questioning the degree to which contemporary Muslim religious learning responds to Muslims' problems, concerns, and needs. Historically speaking, a number of Islamic sciences have developed congruently as a spontaneous reaction to questions raised by other faith groups (external problems) as found in the case of dialectic theology (*ilm al-kalam*).

The *Munqidh* (The Rescuer) of Ghazali better illustrates the point. In its introduction, Ghazali outlines the purpose of his work in the form of answers to queries posed to him throughout different contexts of learning, summed up as:

- unveiling "the aim and secrets of the sciences and the dangerous and intricate depths of the different doctrines and views";

- describing the nature and scope of his work as “disengaging the truth from amid the welter of the sects”;
- surpassing servile conformism to the stage of independent investigation;
- acknowledging the advantage of Muslim theology;
- identifying the value of the methods of learning;
- exposing methods utilized by the philosophers; and
- acknowledging values of Tasawwuf and its methods (Ghazali, 1980, p. 2).

These points appear to have represented what were then the concerns of religious learning, drafted with measures of amendment so as to accommodate the “then” conditions of learning and its institutions. What one learns from Ghazali’s discussion is that the standard of learning may at any time be evaluated according to two interrelated parameters, namely, the means according to which learning serves the objectives of the human being and the ways according to which it prepares the necessary pre-requisites required for the growth and building of civilization, or what may be termed as the pre-conditions of ‘*umran* leading to change in individuals, and therefore the community in reaching said objectives.

In addition to the aforementioned, one may propose three directions of evaluation of Islamic religious learning in relation to development of the community. The first pertains to the methods used for different religious disciplines and sciences and their proximity from the sources of Islamic revelation. The second however, relates to the ways according to which Muslim sciences accordingly approach the social reality (*‘umran bashari*) and the physical sphere (*‘umran tabi’i*). The latter points towards the position of human agents who produce knowledge for different needs and purposes of life. Interestingly, the history of Islamic religious learning alludes to these three methods of evaluation as found in Ghazali’s work entitled *Ihya ‘Ulum al-Din* (Revival of Religious Sciences) which places great emphasis on the individual subject to knowing (human). In much the same manner, a number of rather similar earlier works in the field of Islamic legal theory also dealt with the issues of methods as found in the works of *Risalah* by Shafi’i (d. 820 A.D.), the master architect of Islamic legal theory and *al-Muwafaqat* by Abu Ishaq Shatibi (d. 1388 A.D.). The method of evaluation is also discussed in the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun and those who shared his interest in the study of the conditions of civilization inclusive of its various educational, economic, and political institutions.

A re-evaluation of the effects of Islamic religious sciences on the shaping of Muslim community however, is also regarded as a fundamental branch of the Islamic epistemology; clearly reflected in numerous reports and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. The chapter of knowledge (*kitab al-‘ilm*) in Bukhari and Muslims for instance provides us with many constituents of this epistemology. Besides this, the on-going evaluation of Islamic religious learning also helped Muslims’ scholars to introduce new branches of sciences, as was the case with mysticism, Islamic legal theory, Islamic theology, *Qur’anic* exegesis, and so on. Also to be found are other existing modes of regular evaluation associated with the growth and development of a number of branches of Islamic sciences and learning. In the following section, we shall discuss the perspectives of two notable Muslim scholars concerning some problems and issues that would eventually impede the



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progress of learning and development, impair its dynamic relationship with the community, and isolate it from the zone of effectual reform.

### 2.1 *'Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 AD)*

Ibn Khaldun argues that the development of Islamic religious learning and its stalling were causally determined through human association (*'umran*). Prosperity of learning is proportionate to the extension of the *'umran*, or declined as a result of stagnation. Ibn Khaldun identifies the causes behind the impeding of various sectors of Muslim society with reference to the status of civilization in both the Muslim East and West which were beset with a destructive plague which “devastated nations, and caused populations to vanish; swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out”. This plague, he argues, “overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, lessened their power and curtailed their influence, while weakening their authority” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967b, p. 30). For Ibn Khaldun, their situation effectively approached the point of desolation, annihilation and near-certain dissolution (Ibn Khaldun, 1967b, p. 30). According to Ibn Khaldun, civilization weakened concurrently with the weakening of mankind; thus cities and buildings were laid to waste and, roads and way-signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty and fell to disrepair, and dynasties and tribes grew feeble. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to [the East's more affluent] civilization (Ibn Khaldun, 1967b, p. 30).

In his attempt to review the position of Islamic religious learning in the context of civilization, Ibn Khaldun underscores the significance of skills and pedagogy as effective learning methods. He views the instruction of knowledge as a craft, as the mastery of skills in knowledge and science are the result of a habit enabling their holder to comprehend the basic principles of the particular intellectual discipline, to acquaint him with its problems, and to develop its details deriving from its principles (Ibn Khaldun, 2005b, p. 340). Ibn Khaldun's examination of the conditions of religious learning led him to delve deeper and further in the underlying causes behind the inefficiency of certain teaching methodology. One such example is found in methods of instruction lacking techniques for acquiring skills and talents instrumental to the development of *'umran*. Some of those techniques include self-expression and discussion of specific problems.

For Ibn Khaldun the surest method of acquiring the scientific/intellectual habit [*malakah*] is by means of expressing oneself clearly [*fatq al-lisan*] in discussion and dispute of scientific and intellectual problems. This, he argues, is what clarifies their import and makes them understandable (Ibn Khaldun, 2005b, 340-341). Ibn Khaldun further notes that although students devote much of their time attending sessions of religious learning, significant attention of theirs is devoted to memorization as opposed to comprehension. Ibn Khaldun observes that the learners are often found silent [*sukutan*]; that is they do not talk and do not discuss matters more than necessary, and are concerned with memorizing. As a result, they do not obtain much of a habit in the practice of science and scientific instruction. For Ibn Khaldun, some of those learners fall under the impression that they have obtained (the habit), but when they engage in a discussion or disputation, or carry out some teaching, their scientific habit is found to be defective. The only reason for their deficiency is their respective lack of instruction,

alongside the break in the tradition of scientific instruction which materializes in them (Ibn Khaldun, 2005b, p. 341).

This learning deficiency not only affects periods of learning undertaken by students but also results in symptoms affecting students after their graduation where they would have a far less chance of mending the quality of their learning and instruction. Pondering on some of these factors, Ibn Khaldun concludes that the value of learning time is proportionate to the method and quality of instruction. This implies that short learning periods alongside the application of proper methodology would provide an ideal model for a successful transmission of knowledge and skills to the community.

Throughout his discourse, Ibn Khaldun also highlights the weight and significance of institutions of *'umran* in the interpretation of the ratio of scientific and intellectual cultivation. Quite often, Ibn Khaldun refers to a shortage of *'umran* as a primary cause in slowing down or even disrupting learning and its contributions to the community. Ibn Khaldun, 1967b, p. 341 states:

Scientific instruction is very much in demand and greatly cultivated in the East, because of the continuity of an abundant civilization and the continuity of the tradition (of scientific instruction) there. It is true that the old cities, such as Baghdad, Basrah, and Kufah, which were the (original) mines of scholarship, are in ruins. However, God replaced them with even greater cities. Science was transplanted from the (early centers) to the non-Arab Iraq of Khurasan to Transoxania in the East, and to Cairo and adjacent regions in the West. Those cities never ceased to have an abundant and continuous civilization, and the tradition of scientific instruction has always persisted in them.

An ideal working model of religious learning for Ibn Khaldun is that which prepares students to acquire what he terms the intellect [*al-'aql al-mazid*]. The latter possesses two aspects of excellence; the first consisting of a solid theoretical foundation by means of which students are able to express themselves and demonstrate their skills in discussion or disputation regarding intellectual issues. The second is practical, according to which students would solve problems using their learned skills. This type of thinking, according to Ibn Khaldun, yields greater opportunities for development in the more complex human association known as *hadarah* (civilization). In this respect, Ibn Khaldun denies the popular belief held by students in the Maghrib, following their journey to the East who were impressed with the assumption that the intellect of Eastern Muslims was generally more perfect. For Ibn Khaldun, sound habits whether in instruction, crafts, or in other customary activities contribute in development of insight granted to the intellect and enlighten thinking. This, he justifies in view of the soul [*nafs*] acquiring increased numbers of habits which grows under the influence of the perceptions it receives and the habits accruing to it. Thus (the people of the East) were marked with cleverness as their souls were influenced by scientific and intellectual activity (Ibn Khaldun, 2005a, p. 342).

*2.2 Muhammad Tahir ben Achour (d. 1972)*

In his work entitled "Alaysa al-Subh bi Qarib" (Is Not the Morning Nigh?) Ben Achour diagnoses the conditions of contemporary religious learning, giving special attention to its causes of retardation and the required perspective of reform. He identifies two primary reasons to explain the stagnation of learning in Muslim societies; one being general which may be explained in view of other interrelated factors. The other is brought about by changes in social life leading to the transformation of thoughts,

objectives, and intellectual norms. For Ben Achour, this change affected the methods of teaching, the set degrees of sciences, and also the quality of instructors (Ben Achour, 2006, p. 100). Ben Achour made note of the fact that Muslim instructors of Islamic religious learning are often less attentive to the flux of rapid change affecting Muslims societies. What he perceives to be worse is that whosoever realises the conditions for change and consequently calls for reform will be thought of as having evil intentions (Ben Achour, p. 100). The central premise maintained by advocates arguing for current teaching methods while remaining inconsiderate of changes in time and conditions are that such highly pedagogical methods of religious instruction have produced prominent scholars in the past. Moreover, that the progress of religious learning, is dependent upon the integrity of both the instructor and the learner and is often reflected in the amount of time devoted to learning, and also in the simplicity of life-style protecting one from all forms of distracting indulgences.

Ben Achour also raises some critical issues related to the instructor of religious studies, teaching material, and educational policies (Ben Achour, p. 101). One of the problems affecting religious learning in his view is the relative lack of control and inspection for which he proposes wise educators to develop appropriate guidelines allowing instructors and learners to reach their learning goals in shorter periods of time. For him, studying the conditions of learning is in fact a study of the future of society (Ben Achour, p. 101). Besides this, Ben Achour notes that famous learning institutions such as the Zaytuna in Tunis was subject to serious efforts made to reform the quality of its religious learning. For instance Amir A. Shawish in 1842 and Amir M. Sadiq in 1870 have, respectively, introduced it to a number of educational reforms. Their reforms failed however for the reason that they were often discontinuous, superficial, incoherent, partial, and were more inclined to dealing with superficial issues such as attendance or observation-based assessment of religious instructors.

Ben Achour identifies a number of problems affecting religious learning in contemporary societies including the poor uniformity of learning. The general conditions of learning for example reveal that they are in effect built upon excessive freedom resulting in disorder and poor standardization. Students learn what they wish to learn, instructors teach the materials or issues they themselves choose while authors coin their terminology in the manner they wish. As such, these circumstances make it rather difficult to set a uniform approach to learning characterized by quality and systematic order (Ben Achour, p. 105). Standardization however, may be achieved through compulsory education, schedules of times of instruction, appropriately set venues, and proper enrolment and distribution of students throughout different academic disciplines (Ben Achour, p. 105).

Another serious problem affecting the progress of religious learning in the view of Ben Achour concerns the grievous oversight of learning ethics. Ben Achour argues that the syllabus of early religious learning represented part and parcel of adherence to an ethical code as outlined in the *Qur'an*, the model of Prophet Muhammad, and the legal ethics; which he finds unfortunately overlooked in present day. In this regard, he argues that some Muslim scholars today are under the faulty assumption that sciences are only limited to scientific laws similar to those of Arabic language and jurisprudence, and as a result tend to increasingly focus on generating sub-branches of sciences. Ben Achour states: "It is disappointing to see many instructors with good

physical appearance, nice dressing, and great status, who are yet like great monuments without virtues, ethics, or manhood” (Ben Achour, p. 108).

Ben Achour raises some other concerns affecting the effective delivery of Islamic religious learning such as the lack of freedom of criticism. For him, criticism is vitally needed to nurture the spark of creativity. Through developing what he terms the power of wisdom, the sciences and their respective methodologies may then develop further. Aside from learning capacity, Ben Achour considers a variety of learning methods in accordance with the level and capacity of learners (Ben Achour, p. 111). He emphasizes the appropriateness of style of delivery, something especially needed when instructors grant minimal opportunity to learners for expressing themselves, voicing criticism, or suggesting ideas. The lack of practice in the process of learning remains a significantly critical issue. In the case of the Arabic language for instance, one finds a lot of related material, yet many people still cannot communicate eloquently in Arabic simply because their weak learning delivers rigid terms which they fail to understand (Ben Achour, p. 112). Other issues involve the diverse background of students, as reflected through varied and often disordered diversities and thinking styles, as well as disorganized voluntarism in learning, and the weaker linguistic capacities of learners (Ben Achour, 117).

### 3. Critical issues in Islamic religious learning:

In current times, Islamic religious learning faces the challenge of two categories of intertwined problems, some internal while the others are external, pertaining to the relationship of Muslims with the external world. As far as the internal problems are concerned, Najjar draws on the works of Muslim theology showing a tendency for literalism and supplementary commentaries. Apparently, a degree of stagnancy in learning affected both the style and content of Muslim theology. It should be noted however that Najjar marked this decline with the advent of the Fourteenth Century, which differed significantly from Ghazali's assertion that such a decline was initiated in the Twelfth (Najjar, p. 74). The external problems however, are perhaps better illustrated in Malek Bennabi's statement regarding the impact of newly emerging trends of colonization and their institutions on the Muslim world. Secularism also brought about a serious impact on the way in which Muslims perceived and engaged religious learning. It deeply penetrated the process of learning in the Muslim world; effectively affecting the Islamic worldview and undermining the credibility of Islamic sciences as far as the methodology of learning, research, and their respective worldview are concerned.

To further expose the problems affecting the effectual role of Islamic religious learning, particularly in relation to the positive development of the community, the following section would discuss the position of the mediums of learning, methods, scholarly community and practices of *ijtihad* with respect to Islamic religious instruction.

#### *(a) Mediums of delivery*

By mediums here, one refers to the scholars, learners, textbook materials, institutions, and the public. Religious learning essentially looks forward to the ways and means of improving the quality and quantity of those mediums as they will result in positive reforms leading to the prevention of conflict in the educational enterprise while creating opportunities for change. The Muslim public generally finds it extremely

difficult to digest much of the materials used in circles of religious learning; obviously they are not bound to know them. These works were produced initially for learners who wholeheartedly devote themselves to religious learning and sought to use them for legal verdicts. The reality however is that quite a large number of those juristic questions do not come about while some others never occur in the real world. Muslim scholars should instead train their students on issues and questions they need to learn and understand; and further command and exhort them to do good and forbid them from wrongdoing. In doing so, they would adopt the shortest and most convenient ways that may be unidentified through experience and examination (Rida, 1990, 5: p. 139).

*(b) Method*

Muslims' frustration and at times civilizational weakness or hegemonic decline led them to embrace methods alien to their Islamic epistemology. Even worse however, is the confusion affecting the field of Islamic religious learning where no clear distinction is being made between the various parts of knowledge. Ideological thought such as secularism is viewed as a genuine scientific and objective framework of thought. Students are often required to learn and memorize data from historical eras largely unimportant and irrelevant to their actual life and future. This, perhaps helps explain the currently common legal language of obligation in the discussion of reform or social contribution which is brought about through either ignorance or a definitive inability to bridge between reality and history, or simply reconcile the secular present and religious absent.

*(c) Scholarly community*

The scholarly community is a critical component in the infrastructure of Islamic religious learning. Historically speaking, knowledge has been shown to develop with the individual and to move communally to serve people and reinforce Muslims' socio-cultural and religious immunity. Serving the community within this context was not seen as an act of spontaneity; but rather, as a conscious collective project of education requiring all possible skills of learning, instruction, management, and support. This notion finds especially strong support in the certification system (*ijazah*). The latter first began as a means of permission for transmission of Prophetic traditions and evolved later into a certification for issuing of legal fatwas (*ijaza li al-ifta'*) effectually followed into its growth into a certification of teaching (*ijaza li al-tadris*) (Makdisi, 1981, p. 270). The *ijazah* served as a systematic tool for granting access to knowledge and its transmission to the community. In other words, it was through *ijazah* that the Muslim community was assured a solid mode of knowledge transmission, resulting in the sharing of wisdom while reinforcing the paramount duty of scholars towards the community. On the other hand, it shows the mutual relationship and cooperation among scholars and students, and further proves scholars' serious interest in preserving the quality of shared Islamic knowledge.

In many ways, the *ijaza* system helped strengthen the authority of Muslim scholarship; often perceived as key to continuity and change. In the meanwhile, Muslim scholars appear to have carried out two parallel responsibilities; the first relating to the process of generating and developing knowledge while the second pertains to protecting the community despite the many political upheavals affecting its status, role and contribution. The autonomy of the scholarly community was one of the



major factors leading to the formation of a sustainable vision of religious learning in Islam. The impression one collects about scholars is their individualistic character, especially when measured against their delivery of free learning or endorsement of religious authority through *fatwa* and *ijazah*. The reality however, is that their contributions were made in a rather collectively communal manner, as shown in the names of the chain of scholars recorded in the certificate and the great trust Muslim scholars and institutions enjoyed throughout society.

(d) *The practice of ijthihad*

A number of contemporary Muslim thinkers consider the paradigm of *taqlid* which stands at the opposite end of *ijthihad* as a major cause for the stagnation of Islamic learning since the fall of Baghdad in 1258 and the Ottoman Empire in 1923 (Sardar, 1979, p. 56). Some however, rather prefer to use the expression of the “closing of the gate of Ijthihad”. The question of *taqlid* in this context has thoroughly been discussed, but remains understudied in relation to factors such as spirituality, the conditions of *'umran*, Muslim collective consciousness, epistemology and politics. *Taqlid* implies both blind and unquestionable following and obedience. In spite of the rejection of *Taqlid* mostly made by early philosophers, it nonetheless became the dominant paradigm used in Muslim speculative theology. Scholars such as Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd for instance strove to synthesize revelation and reason and were deeply convinced that both expressed the same truth. Ibn Hazm, Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah further rejected *taqlid*. As noted earlier, Ghazali's argument almost oversteps the observed limits, especially when he argues that he who has not doubted shall never acquire certitude. The victory of the Asha'rite philosophy over the Mu'tazilites however, in effect allowed *taqlid* to acquire widespread acceptance (Sardar, 1979, pp. 56-57).

As much as the practice of *ijthihad* is concerned, we should concern ourselves with an understanding of the foundations which make it possible in the probable context carrying both ignorance and *taqlid*. The ignorance we realize today cannot be identified with past centuries. What we need to discover is rather how to formulate our questions in a manner that supports the practice of *ijthihad* among learners. The shift from ignorance and *taqlid* to opposite conditions requires a working knowledge and practice of *ijthihad*. In this case we would need to seriously address real questions pertaining to central issues such as the following: What brought about ignorance in the Muslim world? What did Muslims do to overcome ignorance? What was the size of Muslims' contributions to *ijthihad*. Similarly we would need to address the diagnosis, strategies and confrontation of problems of Islamic religious institutions, and see how their inter-institutional engagement effectively solves common challenges.

#### 4. Conclusion

Islamic religious learning is often evaluated according to the degree of familiarity and mastery of details of Islamic traditional knowledge. The ultimate objective of delivery of knowledge is to generate higher degrees of acquaintance with the details of Islamic subjects; the more data committed to memory, the greater the success achieved in learning therein. Moreover, while it is true that understanding the key concepts and themes of various courses of Islamic learning is vitally necessary to grasp the essence of Islamic disciplines and to advance progressively to higher levels of intellectual

mastery, one cannot ignore the detrimental effects of isolating religious learning from the very context of change and transformation which continually breed new insights, ideas and perspectives. Ingraining the mind with varying degrees of information on a particular Islamic subject or mastery of a particular textbook without challenging students' minds with on-going problems and challenges, emerging ideas or trends, or growing emotions and behaviours; only causes memorized lessons to creep into stagnancy and inertia, thus shifting attention to the form and shape of learning as opposed to its essence and implications for community change and development. This calls for a systematic review of Islamic religious learning in such a way that its draws essentially from the primary sources of Islamic thinking while drawing learners closer to the folds of piety and moral discipline, embracing social change as a validating parameter for effective learning, while continually building active bridges with the surrounding community.

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