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An assessment of teaching and learning methodology in Islamic studies

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Abstract

During the last century, there have been critiques targeted at methodology related to teaching and learning of Islamic studies, in particular towards the failure to effectively respond to the challenges brought by contemporary needs in this modern world. As a religion embraced by one fifth of the world's population, there is a real need for Islamic studies to re-vamp its methodology and approach in order to ensure its continuous relevance and as a response to the demands exerted by the globalization and presented by the modernity. Since the late 1970s, Islamic scholars have seriously discussed this failure and have suggested a multitude of action plans to address the weakness. This paper discusses various stands taken by Islamic scholars in this issue and suggests ways to improve the method of teaching and learning of Islamic studies.

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1. Introduction

Ideally, Islamic studies should be able to respond the challenges brought by the modernity at the level of theory and application. Therefore, teaching and learning Islamic studies should be developed as the relevant subject to cope the contemporary needs of the modern world in light of the principles as stated in al-Quran and al-Sunnah. Indeed, Islam should become part of global modernity and should be brought into line with the age. Proud with the glory of the past Islamic civilization but stagnancy with innovating new ideas at the practical level do not help Islam to be seen as the relevant subject in this modern world. Islamic studies have to retain all principles of Islam and to inspire all human beings on the ways to live in this modern world in coexistence and peace. Unfortunately, the current situation of the Muslim Ummah indicates the failure of Islamic studies to address these challenges comprehensively that leads Muslims linked to backwardness and stagnation.

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Scholars relate the failure of Islamic studies to the inability of Islamic education to nurture the critical thinking among students (Rosnani, 2005; Ramadan, 2004) that led Islamic education freeze and dormant; and failure to cope challenges of the contemporary world. Actually, to develop an appropriate method of teaching and learning the Islamic studies to solve the above failure has been voiced since the early in the past decade by some Muslim scholars such as Abduh (1905M) and al-Afghani (1897M). Since late 70s Muslim scholars have seriously discussed this failure and in 1977 a conference was held in Mecca to identify main problems and to give solutions. Although some resolutions of this conference have been implemented such as the formation of the International Islamic University of Malaysia; the situation of Muslim *Ummah* remains. This article is intended to discuss ways to enhance the method of teaching and learning Islamic studies.

2. Challenges in Islamic education

Basically, Islamic education was introduced to the pagans produced an overreaching civilization and culture. It pushed the Muslim society to the front challenging the political and economic superpowers of the day. It produced the scholars and scientists who contributed to the human society and to the welfare of the people. Specially, in the medieval period, the Islamic education was supreme and was the source of advanced discoveries in diverse field such as geometry, astronomy, geography, medicine, optics, and physics, plus comprehensive contributions in theosophy, philosophy, and encyclopedic compilations. According to Hilgendorf, (2003), there were at least 60 major centres of learning spanned the Islamic Empire from Baghdad and Isfahan in the East to Cordoba in the West that courted the wisest and most influential leaders of human knowledge.

The Spain in the medieval period was an Islamic cultural city with a number of educational institutions. The Cordoba University was at the peak of education. The Europe borrowed this educational heritage, its principles, methodologies and contents from these Muslim institutions. Al-Attas (1977) noted:

Muslim works on science, philosophy and other fields were translated into Latin, particularly from Spain and enriched the curriculum of the West. The Muslims passed to the experimental method of science. The system of Arabic notation and decimals was introduced to the West. their translated works, particularly those of men such as Avicenna in medicine, were used as texts in classes of higher education far into the middle of the 17th century. They stimulated European thought, reacquainted it with the Greek and other classical cultures and thus helped bring about the Renaissance. They preserved Greco Persian thought when Europe was intolerant of pagan cultures. European students in Muslim universities carried back new methods of teaching. They contributed knowledge of hospitals, sanitation and food to Europe.

However, Islamic education lost its appeal in this contemporary world. It could not produce people to face the challenges of the modern society. Rosnani Hashim (2005) discussed these challenges and inability of Islamic education, teaching methods and curriculum to produce scholars and students to face modern challenges. She described the Islamic education as 'lost its heart and mind' and was accused as producing militants and terrorism especially after 9/11.

Besides, she pointed out poverty, illiteracy, and educational accesses are some other challenges in the underdeveloped Muslim world. Furthermore, the economically developed and rich Muslim countries face social illness associated with modernization: hedonism, crime, drug addiction, deviant sexual lifestyles (e.g., homosexuality, lesbianism, adultery, and premarital sex), and the associated diseases (e.g., STD, HIV, and AIDS). Even abandoned newborns who were born out of wedlock have found their way into the social fabric of Muslim society. Islamic education became weak and failed to meet these challenges. It became paralysed in terms of answering the questions of modern man. Many reasons can be discussed for this situation. Reading the Quran without bringing the problems of today, sticking in classical methodologies to study the classical texts and the failure to agitate in Islamic thought are important among them. Rosnani Hashim (2005) urged for a rethinking of Islamic education considering the following fundamental questions: Has contemporary Islamic Education been able to produce students who can think critically or generate original and creative ideas? Has it been able to produce students who possess good hearts and live by Islamic values? Have Muslim youth been successfully educated and prepared to face the challenges of their time? What improvements are necessary in the teaching and curriculum of Islamic education for the twenty-first century?.

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