

Identity and Islamic Educational Reform¹

Abdulkader Tayob

University of Cape Town

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Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this event, and to offer my comments to the paper prepared by Prof. Sachedina. The paper has captured the key challenges facing education in Muslim societies. On the one hand, the dominance of secularism in Western educational models leaves very little room for ethics and values. On the other hand, Muslim education is hampered and hamstrung by authoritarianism, sectarianism and a culture of imitation. After decades of attempting one solution or another, Muslim societies seem no better off than they were during colonial times. It behoves us to talk about this, and share our experiences in a critical and self-reflective exercise such as this one.

In my response, I would like to explore one particular issue raised by Prof. Sachedina in several places in his paper. He laments the crisis of dependency among Muslim educators, a deep and persistent tendency to value and emulate the West. This culture of imitation goes back a long way, at least to the 19th century when the West justified its colonialism with a self-righteous mission of civilizing the world. Many Muslims still believe that the best solutions, the most creative applications, and the best products come from the West. At root lies a crisis of identity and authenticity that debilitates the self to produce, to create, even to make mistakes. It is safer to rely on a superior, on one who is more intelligent and experienced, and hand over one's future and destiny to the Other.

In my response, I would like to critically examine the particular conception of identity that supports this culture of dependence and imitation. How is the self and the Other conceptualized, particularly in Islamic education? What is the relationship between the self and the Other? What is the underlying meaning of identity in some of the solutions offered to this challenge? My thesis is that both the problem and most of the solutions offered to deal with dependency and imitation call for critical reflection. The self and other are usually constructed as deeply divided, and are defined as utterly separated and alienated from each other. This conception of identity is rooted in incommensurable differences between humans on both individual and social levels. It is founded on an idea of the self that seeks to mark a unique place for him and herself in the world. In this view, human societies and individuals can only relate to each other on the basis of such differences – at best respect is expected two individuals coming together, but at worse one can only expect conflict and war. Such ideas of self and other presuppose a natural state of difference, incommunicability and alienation between people, individuals and societies.

I want to propose that Islamic reform of education take critical stock of this assumption, as it has occupied the fundamental ethos of schools, colleges and programmes. I offer a

suggestion to begin to consider identity and self that is not founded on difference and incommensurability, but on unity and non-identity. I propose to draw for an alternative insight to identity from one of the great mystics Jalal al-Din Rumi. His approach to self and other point to a very different construction and understanding of self and other. His is an identity rooted in unity and sameness. A vision that sees the other as a mirror of the self, and as a path to self-discovery.

Before I present Rumi's thoughts, allow me to remind you of some of the broad responses among Muslims to the reform and reconstruction of education in modern times. I can only provide a sketch, but a necessary one, to remember as we think about the options that have animated modern Muslim discourse. The first is a total rejection of modern forms and subjects of education. That approach is graphically and tragically illustrated in the Boko Haram of contemporary Nigeria. Their name is derived from a widespread sentiment among Muslims that modern education has no or little intrinsic value. In this view, Western education is categorically rejected as an intellectual attack (al-ghazw al-fikri) on Muslim peoples. In recent times, this argument is prevalent among groups as the Boko Haram, but this line of thinking and discourse is regularly heard beyond these circles. It is an argument that leads many Muslims, for example, limiting modern education for young girls and women in general. It is one with a deep hostility and rejection of any education that is not rooted in the origins of Islam.

There is a second approach that is a modification of this rejectionist position. And it begins with a neat division between what is called Islamic and what is called un-Islamic, secular, technological and worldly. This approach had first originated among early modern Muslims, particularly among the ulama and statesmen, who believed that a major technological gap had developed between Muslims and Europe. In this view, the West would be the source of updating and modernizing armies, better bureaucracies and other technological and professional fields. This now includes engineering, medicine, and the like. In this view, the social and human sciences could be separated from the technological sciences. The former would be exclusively drawn from the intellectual legacy of Islam, while the latter as techniques would be imported and developed from the advances made by the laboratories and factories outside (mainly in the West). This bifurcated model of education is probably most widespread in Muslim societies. It disingenuously separates technique from culture, creating binary relations between form and content, means and ends. The approach assumes that there is nothing that links technology and ethics, form and content. In our times, this approach provides a justification for turning to the West, and reinforces dependency whilst appearing to be independent.

There is a third model built on the problems identified in the first two. And here we find models of integration proposed by various Muslim intellectuals since the 19th century. They have proposed that Muslims need a reconstruction of the human sciences as much as they need new technologies. Most of these models have been proposed by people who have been exposed to Western social and human sciences, and felt that new theologies or reconstructed theologies, hermeneutics and epistemologies are needed to face the challenge of the Other. In their view, technologies are not sufficient for the revival of Muslim societies – they must be supported by a revised and rejuvenated intellectual tradition. In various ways, they have done what is announced

in the Iqbal's book: The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam.

The three approaches to education presupposed a particular approach to identity and the self. In fact, identity making is a key function of these approaches. Some want to preserve identity at all cost, others want to accommodate the Self and the Other, and others still to reconstruct the self. Those who reject modern education entirely fear its threat to the self and his or her belief, the emasculation of being Muslim in any sense of the word. Those who divide education between Western and Islamic sciences divide the self neatly between the technological and perceptual – one deriving its strength from superior Western technologies and the other from the secure sources of revelation, belief and practice. Intellectuals within the third group have grappled and struggled how to put the two parts together. Iqbal was probably the leading intellectual who attempted to reconstruct the self (khudi) in his poetry. Drawing from Bergson and Nietzsche, he pined for a Muslim self to be whole, confident, creative and powerful. In the next generation, intellectuals identified a deeper malaise at the root of the Muslim self. Iranian intellectuals took the lead at identifying the problem of Westoxification (gharbzadegi). Abdallah Laroui followed with a land-mark study on the crisis facing Arab intellectuals – not knowing where they belong and where to turn to in their projects. They were all speaking of a general malaise striking at the root of the colonial self that Franz Fanon had identified in the 1950s. Like other colonized peoples, the Muslim self was colonized, and had to be freed.ⁱⁱ

In spite of their differences, I think that the three approaches agree on a deeper level about thinking about self and other. These radically different educational projects of Islamic reform agree on a conception of identity. They see the self as distinct from the other. The other was identified as utterly different, either a source of threat or value. For some, the self was threatened by an alien philosophy and humanity, which called for radical action in one form or another. For others, the self could benefit from the other. Generally, a politics of identity supported these projects. And that politics was founded and rooted on the self and other that were basically different from and incommensurable with each other. There was very little common ground between self and other: no common history, common values or common destiny. This is not surprising, given the history of colonialism and then the model of nation states. Competing interests were the underlying forces between individuals, groups and nations.

One may safely say that this conception of identity within Islamic educational projects was commensurable with general concepts of identity in the modern world. The latter turned around the individual ideally located within a nation and state, neatly defined even as it struggled to break free. The works of Charles Taylor, Sygmunt Bauman, and even Stuart Hall reveal this deep framework. In his exploration of the fundamental makeup of the self since the Enlightenment, Taylor's book presuppose the nation within which the self explores and constructs itself – sometimes against the other and sometimes with the other. The sociologist Bauman is more explicit on the project of identity of modernity within a nation, now deconstructed in postmodernism. Similarly, Hall's critical work on the construction of the self does not contradict its rootedness within the nation. He only argued that it was not permanent and primordial.

I would like to offer a very different approach to identity that is worthy of consideration for Islamic educational reform. My proposal comes from a discourse in the mystic's Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Fihi ma fihi* where he speaks about a breakdown in relations, first between God and an individual, and then between two individuals. Rumi turns his attention to the perception and response of the one who is hurt. In the relation between God and the individual, Rumi says that an individual hurt in her relation with God may feel reprimanded. Such reprimand, Rumi says, is a sign of love if a person "stung by it ...[sees] the truth in it." In this case, reprimand "is a sign that God loves [her] and cares for [her]." The greatest problem is not getting hurt, but being ignored. Rumi then turns to hurt and ill feeling between two individuals, and here we see the full implication for identity. Let me quote him in full:

If you find fault in your brother or sister, the fault you see in them is within yourself. The true Sufi is like a mirror where you see your own image, for "The believer is a mirror of their fellow believers." Get rid of those faults in yourself, because what bothers you in them bothers you in yourself.

An elephant was led to a well to drink. Seeing itself in the water, it shied away. It thought it was shying away from another elephant. It did not realize it was shying away from its own self.

All evil qualities—oppression, hatred, envy, greed, mercilessness, pride—when they are within yourself, they bring no pain. When you see them in another, then you shy away and feel the pain. We feel no disgust at our own scab and abscess. We will dip our infected hand into our food and lick our fingers without turning in the least bit squeamish. But if we see a tiny abscess or half a scratch on another's hand, we shy away from that person's food and have no stomach for it whatsoever. Evil qualities are just like scabs and abscesses; when they are within us they cause no pain, but when we see them even to a small degree in another, then we feel pain and disgust.

Just as you shy away from your brother or sister, so you should excuse them for shying away from you. The pain you feel comes from those faults, and they see the same faults. The seeker of truth is a mirror for their neighbors. But those who cannot feel the sting of truth are not mirrors to anyone but themselves.

Rumi's discourse is a commentary of the statement "The believer is a mirror of their fellow believers." It offers much food for thought and reflection on what we call identity today. It is an idea of self that is deeply connected with the Other. The self was not founded on separation and difference. In fact, his concluding statement "those who cannot feel the sting of truth are not mirrors to anyone but themselves" is a deeply powerful comment on identity projects that do not appreciate the other as self. Such people who only see themselves do not "feel the sting of truth!" For Rumi,

the road to the self passes through the other, and vice versa. It is a conception of self that is rooted in the Other as oneself. And this is the “sting” of truth that must inevitably be felt by an identity encounter.

Rumi’s discourses in *Fihi ma fihi* are replete with the challenge of unity and plurality. He wants readers and listeners to fully appreciate both unity and multiplicity in the world. He reflects on the multiplicity of objects, events and histories. He does not want to reject such phenomena, but urges his readers and listeners to pay attention to the unity underlying all multiplicities. His comment on the self and the other reflects this sentiment in relation to self and others. The self is endlessly replicated in variety, but the self that recognizes itself in the other begins the discovery of unity. When the self sees the other as self, then it begins to see the self in all others. Rumi does not want to reject multiplicity, but he says that the truth cannot ignore unity within it.

I do not think that this is an idiosyncratic insight of Rumi. It should not be rejected or set aside as the inspiration of a great poet and mystic. The balance between unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference lies at the heart of Islam as a religion. We might think of the very origins of Islam as first preached by the Prophet Muhammad when he reminded his listeners about the fact that his message was no different from the truth brought by all the prophets and righteous people that came before. At the same time, Islam in Medina and beyond also came to be defined as unique, the absolute truth, setting itself apart from the others. This balance between sameness and difference lies at the heart of Islam as religion, as a call from the unseen! Rumi’s reflection on the self might be seen as a deep resonance of reality. In his view, the ultimate and absolute Self was also the other. Unity and universality was the fundamental essence of Islam, not difference and distinction.

In my view, the dominant projects of education in modern societies have emphasized difference rather than unity. Identity rooted in difference has dominated Muslim thinking across the board. Those who reject modern education see no value in the Other at all – it is as if they have denied the basic humanity of the Other. Some are even willing to kill the other – defined always in the most liberal way. The list of Others keep on expanding – it begins with the kuffar, goes on to Shi’ites, but also then includes intimate allies who differ on minute issues. Those who support bifurcation also police the boundaries between self and Other on a continual basis. The irony and even tragedy, of course, lies in the fact that the unity of humanity would have been forgotten. And those who propose integration grapple with the underlying unity of the human condition, set against the particular self. They emphasize the value of the Other as a source of value – but not the other as Self in the radical way proposed by Rumi. I would like to propose this kind of unity be embraced without fear and hesitation.

What would education, particularly Muslim education, look like with this conception from a perspective of unity *and* difference? I would like to conclude this essay by pointing to a number of propositions that would emerge from a conception of identity rooted in unity and commensurability:

1. If one however begins with Rumi’s insight that the other and the self are windows to each other, then a more radical and bolder approach to identity in reform might be pursued. Following Rumi, the radical critique of the West should not be the beginning

of radical difference. The pain and reprimand should be used to begin the path to self-discovery, and self-healing. Building on the various models from Abduh to al-Attas, the difficult lines separating the self and other may be overcome by seeing the self in the Other.

2. In even more practical terms, the vision of unity and universal as suggested by Rumi would mean the major political, social and ethical challenges facing the world would be included in a reformed programme of education. For example, Muslims are often proud to say that they do not have the same challenges of secularism, religion, individualism, ethical malaise, etc. as the West. And they proceed to develop research programmes and institutions that are uniquely suited for Muslims, as if they face unique problems and challenges. If one were to take Rumi seriously, these problems of religion or secularism or ethics that one sees so clearly in the West, in the Other, would call for serious examination in the self. As the other is a mirror, the only way of understanding the scab in the other is to recognize it in oneself. And the only way to reform might begin with what one identifies as the problem so prominently in the Other. The problem of the instrumentalization of religion, for example, is not only a problem in Europe's colonial past and present so cogently argued by Asad, Mamdani and others. It calls immediately for how religion is instrumentalized in the self. A appraisal of religion, its meaning, value and instrumentalization would have to become part of an educational programme. Likewise, as I have shown, would identity, authenticity, philosophy of science, history, etc. The self and other are mirrors to each other. Let one's perception of the other be an invitation to a serious exploration of the self.

3. Values and not identity would be the starting project of education. Such a project would have to re-open the questions raised first in theology (kalam) in reaction to the challenge of rationalism in the history of Islamic thought. What is the goodness and what is its opposite? Are these values fully determined by revelation? What values should be promoted in our contemporary world marked by science, capitalism, diversity, mediatization and globalization? What values should be promoted in educational institutions in relation to the other as the enemy, the neighbour, the stranger and as the environment? I think that the answer to these questions should be the beginning of educational reform. They will prepare the ground for identity rooted in unity and commensurability?

4. There is one fundamental resource available for such a reformation project that I illustrated in my response. In this presentation, I have turned to Rumi for a critical insight into identity by looking at his exploration of self and other. Identity and authenticity are critical issues in modern societies, endlessly debated in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences. I have identified it as a problem in modern educational reform programmes and discourses of Muslims in the last 100 years. But then I have turned to Rumi for a critical perspective on identity. I do not believe that Rumi provides all the answers for current challenges (sometimes I admit that I do), but his works provides a radically new perspective from modernist and postmodernist readings of identity. And that is what I think the intellectual history of Islam presents for an educational reform in general. I have become aware over the years that the intellectual history of Islam grappled with some fundamental issues on knowledge, ethics, self and society. I see these debates as resources for critical reflection in Islamic

educational reform. There are no neat and complete solutions in this intellectual history. It consists of contradictions and radical alternatives, but in general presents extensive material and a resource of human experience. It presents a record of thinking about human experience that deserves to be appreciated. I hope that my example of thinking about Rumi is a good indication of the potential that exists out there.

5. Taking the insight of Rumi even further, it is also time that Islamic education reform locates itself more clearly in comparative perspective. What we are talking about today and tomorrow is going on in India, Brazil, China, Japan and even in the West. Educational reform is not a project uniquely shared by Muslims in different places in the world. It is the concern of those who are worried about the future of humanity and about life on earth, and there are excellent partners and Others other there. The colonial and post-colonial condition of our world provides a rich tapestry of self and other in which pain and reprimand should be seen as opportunities for critical self-reflection. I think partnerships and cross-cultural reflections might be the beginning of this comparison.

In conclusion, then, I have identified the malaise of identity in Prof. Sachedina's paper and in the general reformist educational projects. I have argued that such projects share a conception of identity founded on separation, difference and incommensurability. There are signs of reformist projects breaking the hold of such conceptions, but Rumi takes us one step further. The discourses of Rumi help us to radically locate ourselves outside this maelstrom of identity making. By thinking about identity as self and other looking at each other, we can imagine a different way of thinking about Self. Such a perception has important and radical implications for educational reform.

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ⁱⁱ In an article in *al-Manar* in 1906, Muhammad Abduh addressed the issue of reform that reveals the dilemma of identity from a reformed perspective. There are two lines of argument discernable in Abduh's article. In the first argument, Abduh proposed that the reform of the Azhar should be founded on the principle "that science has not yet reached its perfect state," and that "ethics, laws, religions, beliefs, science and all that is in the universe exist for the benefit of humankind and for its happiness." In this way, Azhar would be open to new ideas on the basis of their value (benefit) and on the idea that human knowledge was continually developing (it had not reached an apogee in the past). From the perspective of identity, this approach to reform was universal in outlook. It emphasized the common humanity of mankind.

In the second line of argument in Abduh, revealed in this same very short essay we find

a different approach to identity:

In studying the cause of social illnesses in the Orient, it can be found that among the causes are the beliefs and opinions introduced into Islam by different groups like the Sufis and others. These beliefs and opinions took root in the souls of Oriental people and have wrought harmful results. The reformation will extract these beliefs from the nation. It will replace them with authentic Islamic beliefs - those that call for resolution, work, perseverance, and determination in life.

In this example, Abduh proposes a radical purification that rejects the Other. Some encounters had corrupted Muslim societies, and their influences needed to be removed. In identity terms, the Self had to be saved from the Other. The open and pragmatic approach of the first line of argument was contradicted by this restricted approach that wanted to eliminate the Other from the self. Reform was caught between self and the other in Abduh's project.

Muhammad Naguib al-Attas's concept of Islamization also illustrates the kind of quandary present in Abduh. In his view, Islamization should address the scourge of secularism in the sciences studied by Muslims and restored the individual to the centre of attention. Closer attention to some of his writings reveals that he did not completely reject secularization. In fact, he recognized a deep affinity between the philosophy of Islam and secularization. Islam, he said, has its own form desecralization as far as

... banishing the animistic and magical superstitions and beliefs and false gods from nature where indeed they do not belong. Islam did not completely deprive nature of spiritual significance... (37-8)

Islam, he continued, brought about "proper disenchantment of nature, and the proper desecralization of politics, and the proper deconsecration of values, and ... without bringing about secularization" (38). Islamization for al-Attas was defined in relation to secularization: "Islamization is the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition, and then from secular control over his reason and language." (39). Islamization, then, was a both a rejection of Western secularization, but enjoyed a deep affinity with it. Islam, according to Al-Attas, had a unique approach to secularization. This uniqueness rested on the place of the individual. Islam, he said, knew no search for identity as it was already given:

The individuals within the generations that comprise it, whether male or female, have already established their identity and recognized their ultimate destiny; the former through recognition and confirmation of the Covenant, and the latter through affirmation and realization of that Covenant by means of sincere submission to God's will and obedience to His law such as enacted as Islam. (89)

This direct perception of the self, not mediated by history or society and certainly not by the Other, was willing and capable of creating new interpretations for society. Al-Attas, like Abduh before, was holding on to both the Self and Other as he navigated a new course. His definition of Islamization could not dispense with the Other- even as he

created the outlines of a self separated and set apart from the other.

In the twentieth century, other scholars produced proposals for a reformed Islamic education. They struggled with similar tensions between Self and Other. They took one step in the direction of universality and unity, and retreated as quickly with another step to distinction and difference. One can talk about Iqbal's exploration of faith as a dynamic movement in tension with his commitment to the Muslim national ummah; to the ethical framework of Ismail al-Faruqi between Kant and Ibn Taymiyyah.

They took one step in the direction of unity and universality, then quickly stepped back to differentiation in the next move to a unique Muslim identity. And generally, it is the second step to distinction and difference that has been appreciated by Muslims in the modern world. Unity, universality and commonality are repeatedly ignored and forgotten as the self is put up in distinction against the other. I think that these models contain some very good insights, but they also reveal, in one way or another, torturous constructions of the self in conflict with the other. The self and other are always separated. It is as if the self and other live in completely separate worlds, sharing no values, aspirations and dreams.