

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CULTIVATING THE SOUL

**INCORPORATING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN DAY ISLAMIC
SCHOOLS INSPIRED BY THE WORKS OF CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the importance of spiritual development in the Islamic tradition and strategies to implement spiritual development in today's Islamic schools in the United States. It will discuss the relationship between spirituality and knowledge from a Quranic and Prophetic perspective, as well as understanding how to implement spiritual development looking at the works of early Islamic scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali. It will also analyze the current landscape of Islamic school curricula and programming to determine where there is an area for growth as well as the roadblocks to educating and raising spiritually grounded students in the Islamic school systems.

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researched helps me become a better teacher to them, as they continue to help me become a better person.

GLOSSARY

Adab

Islamic etiquette that guides conduct and interactions with others.

Aḥādīth

Plural of *ḥadīth*—reports or narrations of the sayings, actions, or approvals of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Akhlāq

Islamic character.

‘Aqīdah

Islamic creed that includes fundamental beliefs such as tawḥīd (oneness of God), prophethood, and the afterlife.

Amānah

A trust given by God.

Dalā’il

Literature about the virtues of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Dhikr

Remembrance of God that often includes supplication or repeated terms.

Fiqh

Islamic jurisprudence: the science of understanding Islamic law derived from sources such as the Qur’ān and ḥadīth

Ghaflah

Heedlessness or negligence in remembering Allah and fulfilling religious obligations.

Ḥadīth

A report or narration of the sayings, actions, or approvals of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Ḥadīth qudsī

A category of ḥadīth in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ conveys the words of Allah in meaning, but in his own words.

Ḥudūr

Presence or attentiveness, particularly in spiritual practices and devotion to Allah.

Iḥsān

Spiritual excellence.

Īmān

Faith in Islam, a belief system and internal belief.

Islām

Submission to Allah by following his commands, as taught in the Qur’ān and Sunnah. It consists of five pillars.

Khaṣā’iṣ

Literature related to the special attributes of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Murabbī

A mentor or teacher who provides moral and spiritual guidance.

Qiyām

Refers to *qiyām al-layl*, a night vigil spent in worship of Allah.

Ṣadaqah

Voluntary charity given for the sake of Allah, distinct from *zakāh*, which is obligatory.

Şīrah

The biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, detailing his life, character, and mission.

Sharī‘ah

Islamic law derived from the Qur’ān, Sunnah, and scholarly interpretations, that govern personal and communal conduct.

Shamā’il

Islamic literature that describes the physical appearance, character, and attributes of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Sulūk

The spiritual path of self-purification and moral refinement in Islam.

Sunnah

The teachings, practices, and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Ta’dīb

Refinement of character, often linked to moral education and upbringing.

Ta‘līm

The act of imparting knowledge.

Tarbiyah

Holistic upbringing and character development, including spiritual, intellectual, and moral training.

Taşawwuf

The tradition of Sufism, which focuses on purification of the heart and drawing closer to Allah.

Tazkiyat al-nafs

Purification of the soul, a core aspect of Islamic spirituality.

Tawhīd

The oneness of Allah, Islamic monotheism.

Tajwīd

The science of correct pronunciation and recitation of the Qur’ān.

Zakāh

Obligatory charity given by eligible Muslims.

Zuhd

Asceticism or detachment from worldly pleasures in pursuit of spiritual closeness to Allah.

ﷺ (Sallā allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam)

A blessing said after mentioning the Prophet Muhammad’s name, meaning “may Allah bless him and grant him peace.”

INTRODUCTION

The very first verse revealed from God to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was the command: *“Read! In the Name of Your Lord who created”*, forever establishing the knowledge as a key aspect of the religion of Islam.¹ It is well known that one of the hallmarks of Muslim civilizations has historically been the production of knowledge in various subjects such as jurisprudence, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. While these are all forms of knowledge, early Islamic scholarship did not just understand education and knowledge as an intellectual matter, they also considered it to be a spiritual one. Knowledge and spirituality were considered to be intertwined, both being tools to help the student fulfill their full potential and purpose. As laid out in the Qur’an, the ultimate purpose for the human being is to know God and seek to be closer to Him, and knowledge and spirituality are the keys to attaining this closeness. Without either of these, a person risks salvation and reward in this life and the next. Early Islamic scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Imam Ramli and Ibn Miskawahy understood the immense importance of cultivating the soul towards its ultimate purpose from a young age and they wrote extensively on this subject. Because these scholars considered true education to be a holistic endeavor, their methodologies for spiritual education and training were not limited to simply the imparting of information but also included factors such as cultivating the proper environment for the child, being aware of what they consume, and teaching them proper social etiquette.

¹ Quran 96:1. Translation consulted?

In contrast, the modern, mainstream American education system and educational philosophies do not take into account the cultivation of the soul, and the purpose of education is focused on worldly matters alone. This general attitude towards knowledge has impacted Islamic schools and their educational approach, namely in two specific ways. The first is in the removal of the sacred in topics of general studies and the second is by the focus on outward aspects of the religion such as only *fiqh* and Quran memorization without reflection on the spiritual importance of these topics. This thesis will discuss the importance and methodologies of spiritual development within traditional Islamic understandings of education, analyze the current state of Islamic studies curriculum for Islamic schools in the United States, and suggest strategies for Islamic schools to implement spiritual formation based on the works of early Islamic scholarship.

CHAPTER 1

TRADITIONAL VIEWS ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION

The Status of Education, Learning, and Teaching

A supplication that can likely be found on the walls of many Islamic schools is the verse “*Say, My Lord increase me in knowledge.*”¹ This supplication is found in the Qur’an as a directive from God to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and those who follow him to prioritize knowledge and to seek it from God, *Al-‘Alim* (The All-Knowing). In Surah Zumar, God elevates the status of the people of knowledge saying, “*Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know?*”² Through Quranic verses such as these, God forever establishes the importance of knowledge and education for the *ummah*. These verses on the virtue and importance of knowledge are corroborated through various *ahadith* of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, such as the statement, “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.”³ This obligation of seeking knowledge was not just one of duty but is one that is considered to have great reward attached to it. In famous hadith the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ mentioned the benefit of seeking knowledge saying, “Whoever takes a path to obtain knowledge, God will make the path to paradise easy for him.”⁴ Prophetic narrations and Qur’anic verses such as these are just a few of the texts that highlight the importance of knowledge and putting forth effort to learn it. It is said

¹ Quran 20:114.

² Quran 39:9.

³ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 224

⁴ Abul-Husain Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith 2699

that knowledge is referenced in the Qur'an more than eight hundred times⁵, and scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali use the abundance of its mention in the Qur'an and hadith as a proof for seeking knowledge being one of the highest acts of worship one can do.⁶

Not only is seeking knowledge something that is praised, but teaching and educating others is as well. God mentions in the Qur'an that part of the role of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is to educate others, as mentioned in Surah Jumu'ah: "He is the One Who raised for the illiterate 'people' a messenger from among themselves—reciting to them His revelations, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and wisdom, for indeed they had previously been clearly astray".⁷ The majority of people in Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ were illiterate in several ways. They were illiterate in the sense that they were unable to read, and they were religiously illiterate, being a people who worshipped idols and had no connection with a religious and spiritual tradition such as Christianity or Judaism. Therefore, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent by God to teach them and provide them with spiritual and moral guidance. The Prophet ﷺ not only exemplified this, but he ﷺ also praised those who educate others in several narrations. In one hadith, the Prophet ﷺ entered the mosque and saw two groups of people gathered, one group was reciting Qur'an and supplicating to God, both of which are highly praised acts of worship. The other group of people were studying and teaching one another, it can be assumed that it was likely subjects related to religious knowledge. When the Prophet

⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib al- Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), 1993), 78.

⁶ Ghazzālī and Nabih Amin Faris, *The Book of Knowledge* (New Delhi, India: Islamic Book Service, 2002), 3-12.

⁷ Quran 62:2.

ﷺ witnessed these gatherings, he said “Both of them are good. These people are reciting the Qur'an and supplicating to God, and if He wills He will give them, and if He wills He will withhold from them. And these people are learning and teaching. Verily I have been sent as a teacher.”⁸ Then he went and sat down with the second group. Other narrations exemplify how the Prophet ﷺ incentivized teaching through promises of God’s favor to those who take part in teaching and guiding others. An example of this is in a narration in which the Prophet ﷺ mentioned the status of engaging in educating others saying, “By God, that God guide someone through you is better for you than a herd of expensive red camels.”⁹

The Necessity of Knowledge for the Human Being

A key element in understanding the Islamic conception of knowledge is to know the Islamic conception of the human being. The Qur'an mentions that Adam, the first man, was created and he was animated by a soul that was given to him by God.¹⁰ This soul is something that God states that only He really has full understanding of, but we know that it is something that connects the human to the metaphysical realm.¹¹ One recognizes the physical and metaphysical state that the human being is in, it should be understood that acquiring knowledge is not seen as simply an intellectual pursuit that benefits the worldly experience of the individual, but something that should address all

⁸ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 229

⁹ Muhammad ibn Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, hadith 3009

¹⁰ Quran 15:29

¹¹ Quran 17:85

aspects of the human being. Since knowledge is so essential to the human experience in the Islamic framework, classical Islamic scholars put great effort into defining what is considered to be true knowledge. All knowledge is not considered to be equal, and not all knowledge is considered to be beneficial. In a supplication that the Prophet ﷺ was said to make often: “O God, I seek refuge in You from knowledge that does not benefit...”¹² What scholars considered to be beneficial and true knowledge in the Islamic sense is that which is connected to faith and true belief. The aim and purpose of the one seeking knowledge is the edification of a person in a holistic sense and to grow in their relationship with God.¹³ As a person increases in their knowledge, they should be inculcating a sense of goodness and justice within them, so that they may become a better servant of God and source of benefit for the world around them. As Imam Shafi’i was reported to have once said, “Knowledge is not merely what is memorized. Knowledge is what benefits.”¹⁴ Knowledge should be leading a person to fulfill the role given to them by God as mentioned in Surah Baqarah, “Remember when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am going to place a successive human authority on earth.’”¹⁵

Attas mentions that one of the fundamental differences between the Western conception of knowledge and the Islamic understanding lies in the ultimate purpose of knowledge. For the Western tradition, the pursuit of knowledge is based in a sort of utilitarianism, with the goal of a person’s education is for them

¹² Ahmad ibn Shuayb An-Nasa’i, *Sunan An-Nasa’i*, hadith 5470

¹³ Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 85.

¹⁴ Abu Amina Elias, "Shafi'i on Knowledge: It is Only Knowledge if it Benefits You," *Daily Hadith Online*, Abu Amina Elias, last modified March 4, 2018, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2018/03/04/only-knowledge-benefit/>.

¹⁵ Quran 2:30

to be a useful member of society and useful to the state, essentially only focusing on the experience of the human being in this world.¹⁶

In contrast, the Islamic tradition, a person is encouraged to seek knowledge as a means to get closer to God and to develop the self in various aspects, with the recognition that there is a metaphysical aspect of the human experience. Knowledge in the Islamic scholarly understanding is not just information, but is a means of elevation, when it is grounded in faith and connected to an ultimate purpose-connecting to God. As the 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Jama'ah al-Kinani stated, "Knowledge, as some scholars have defined, is the hidden prayer, the heart's worship, and the way a person's inner self gains closeness to God."¹⁷

The Holistic Approach of Islamic Education

The three main terminologies regarding education that scholars have deduced from the Qur'an and the Hadith corpus, are *ta'lim*, *tarbiyah*, and *ta'dib*. There are various opinions as to which, if any, of this terminology can fully account for Islamic education, and they each have similarities and differences. The first term, *ta'lim*, carries the meaning of imparting knowledge or teaching in the common sense of the word, and is derived from the Arabic word "*ilm*", which means knowledge.¹⁸ The term of teaching

¹⁶ Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 85.

¹⁷ Badr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Shoaib Shah, *Etiquette Of The Learner*, ed. Mariam Madge Conlan (Turath Publishing, 2015), 27, Kindle.

¹⁸ Amjad M. Hussain, Abdassamad Clarke, and Abia Afsar Siddiqui, *A Social History of Education in the Muslim World : from the Prophetic Era to Ottoman Times* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2013), xvi.

with the root word ‘ilm is used in verse 151 of Surah Al-Baqarah describing the role of the Prophet ﷺ: “Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know.”¹⁹ *Ta’lim* can be understood as aligning with the common understanding of education or schooling, which is the training of the intellect and learning of new information.

The second term *tarbiyah*, which is one that is used often today in discussion on Islamic education, means ‘fostering growth.’ It comes from the word ‘*raba*’ which is used in the Qur’an to connote increase or growth. *Tarbiyah* is related to nurturing and developing a person. *Tarbiyah*, as defined by scholars such as 13th century scholar Al-Qurtubi²⁰ and 11th century scholar Raghīb al-Asfahani, is the development of something from stage to stage until it reaches a state of perfection or completion. An Arabic word often used for teachers is the term “*Murabbiy*”, which connotes someone who develops and grows a person across various stages of life. In *Curriculum Renewal for Islamic Education*, Farah Ahmed writes, “*Tarbiyah* is the nurturing fitrah (which can be loosely translated to mean natural state or spirit) towards Allah Ta’ala (God most High), it involves bringing up a child to his or her full potential as a human being and as a Muslim.”²¹ *Tarbiyah* differs from *ta’lim* in that *ta’lim* is focused on the intellectual

¹⁹ Quran 2:151

²⁰ Ramli and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 11.

²¹ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 206.

development through learning information, while tarbiyah includes other aspects of development such as spiritually and socially.

The third term, *Ta'dib*, stems from the word “*adab*”, which can be understood as manners and etiquette. The term *ta'dib* then means “the imparting of manners” or teaching etiquette. There are several ahadith connecting education and teaching manners, such as one where the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said “My Lord educated me (*adabanni*) and taught and then made my education most excellent.”²² In classical texts, many scholars would refer to education with the word *ta'dib*, emphasizing the importance of manners and behaviors, especially in regard to children. Imam Al-Ramli, a 16th century scholar, used this term in his poem on raising and educating children saying: “Know that the education (*ta'dib*) of children from the initial stages is a great affair.”²³ *Adab* in the Islamic tradition is not just manners in the way that social etiquette and proper manners is commonly understood. *Ta'dib* is a sort of moral education, as *adab* is often defined as “giving something its correct due” or “placing something in its proper place.”²⁴ A person who possesses *adab* can recognize the sacred nature of things and act accordingly. Attas describes the purpose of teaching *adab* as, “*adab* means to discipline the mind and soul; it is acquisition of the good qualities and attributes of mind and soul’ it is to perform the correct as against the erroneous action, of right as against wrong...”²⁵ The ability to do

²² Hussain, Clarke, and Siddiqui, *A Social*, xvii.

²³ Ramli and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 8.

²⁴ Ramli and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 8.

²⁵ Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 149-150.

this, to honor things the way they should be is a reflection of the internal state and character of a person, known as *akhlaq*. Akhlaq is considered to be a major part of a person's religious expression and practice, as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ mentioned in a hadith: "I was only sent to perfect Akhlaq."²⁶ Akhlaq is often translated as good character, but more accurately should be understood as the internal qualities that a person has, their disposition and tendencies. The Prophet ﷺ was sent to perfect the character of people, aligning their natural dispositions and tendencies to goodness and morality.²⁷ The reason why the term adab is used instead of akhlaq to describe character building in education is because akhlaq is an internal state that is difficult to measure on its own, but a person's internal character can be seen in their outward actions. Adab is measurable and observed, when a person treats a thing the way it should be treated, it can be assumed that this is internally driven by their character.

The foundation of Islamic educational philosophy can be found in the combination of these three methodologies. Throughout Islamic history, Islamic educational institutions have been shaped by an attempt to teach students through imparting information, cultivating them holistically, and instilling in them morals and good character. In the book, *A Social History of Education in the Muslim World: From the Prophetic Era to Ottoman Times*, Hussain et al. mentions:

"Primarily, the success of education during the foundational period was based upon the formation of a believer, who would be able to attain ta'lim, ta'dib, and tarbiyah,

²⁶ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, hadith 8952

²⁷ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 78-80.

i.e. he or she learnt the knowledge available to them and their actions conformed to spiritual, ethical, and moral directives laid down in the Quran and Sunnah.”²⁸

The ultimate goal of all Islamic educational institutions today should be for the students to develop and excel in all aspects of life, intellectually, spiritually, morally, socially, and culturally with the end goal of attaining the pleasure of God and success in this life and the next life. Islamic schools have the golden opportunity of continuing this legacy of cultivating students and guiding them to reach these goals. If they can succeed at this, it will be for the benefit of all parties involved as Imam Ghazali states regarding the education of children, “If it is habituated to and instructed in goodness then this will be its practice when it grows up, and it will attain to felicity in this world and the next; its parents too, and all its teachers and preceptors will share in its reward.”²⁹

²⁸ Hussain, Clarke, and Siddiqui, *A Social History of Education in the Muslim World*, 171.

²⁹ Ramli and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 16.

CHAPTER 2

TRADITIONAL VIEWS ON SPIRITUAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Defining Spirituality in Islam

Spirituality within the Islamic tradition has historically had many different terms such as *Ihsan* (spiritual excellence), *Tazkiyyah* (purification), *Tasawwuf* (Sufism), and *Suluk* (Traveling on the Path to God.) All these terms are attempts to define the inward aspects of Islamic practice. While spirituality for some might be a contested topic in terms of approach, it is a core aspect of the Islamic tradition that has grounding in several hadith and Qur'anic verses. One foundational hadith that highlights this dimension of the religion is *Hadith Jibril*:

...a narration in which the Angel Jibril came to the Prophet ﷺ and asked him about several aspects of the religion, including how to define *Islam*, *Iman*, and *Ihsan*. The Prophet ﷺ replied that Islam is to practice the 5 pillars (testification of the faith, praying, fasting in Ramadan, obligatory charity, and making Hajj if one is able). Iman is to believe in the 6 articles of faith (the existence of One God, His Angels, the Holy Books, His Messengers, The Day of Judgment, and Divine Decree). When Angel Jibril asks him about Ihsan, he replies “Ihsan is to worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, He surely sees you.”¹

Worship here is not limited to formal acts of worship such as the ritual prayer, but it is understood to be a lifestyle in which the person is constantly aware of God's presence and acts accordingly. Worship is the ultimate purpose of the human being, as mentioned in the Qur'an “I did not create the *jinn* and mankind except to worship Me.”² Centering this understanding of purpose and using it as a guiding principle in one's life

¹ Abu Zakariyyah An-Nawawi, *Al-Arba'een*, hadith 2.

² Qur'an 51:56

can be understood to be the essence of Islamic spirituality. It includes the inner state of the human being and the doing of good deeds in their outward action. While spirituality is difficult to define and measure, this thesis will focus on 5 aspects of spirituality that are manifestations and key elements of Islamic spirituality: Doing of righteous deeds, purification of the self, maintaining presence with God, detachment from material wealth and gains, and possessing good adab.

Righteous deeds: The Qur'an establishes the necessity of doing righteous deeds to attain the reward and pleasure of God. God says in Surah Kahf, "Indeed those who believe and do good will have the Gardens of Paradise as an accommodation."³ The Islamic assessment of the righteousness of an action is 2 things: 1. Is that action in accordance with the *Shari'ah* 2. What are the intentions of the actor when performing the deed, as recorded in the famous hadith, "Actions are judged by their intentions."⁴ The best action that one can engage in is that which follows the *Sunnah*, the example of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as he is the exemplar for humankind. God mentions in the Qur'an, "Indeed in the Messenger of God you have an excellent example for whoever has hope in God and the Last Day and remembers God often."⁵ The *Shari'ah* and the *Sunnah* are not just expected to be followed in ritual acts of worship, but in all actions such as social interactions, eating, and sleeping. Regular actions can become spiritual deeds when they align with Islamic guidelines and are done with the purpose of seeking the pleasure of God. In a *hadith qudsi*, the Prophet ﷺ narrated that, "God says 'My servant does not

³ Qur'an 18:107

⁴ Abu Zakariyyah An-Nawawi, *Al-Arba'een*, hadith 1.

⁵ Quran 33:21

draw closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the religious duties I have imposed on him, and My servant continues to draw nearer to Me extra good actions until I love him...”⁶ Imam Al-Ghazali writes in his book *Ayyuhal Walad* (O Beloved Son) that the entire purpose of seeking knowledge is to do righteous actions:

...drawing an analogy to a person who pours glasses of wine and expects to feel the effects of the alcohol without drinking. “Though thou pour two thousand measures of wine, Unless thou drink, no oblivion is thine! Even if you studied for a hundred years and collected a thousand books, you would not be eligible for the mercy of God the Exalted except through action [As God says] ‘Man does not receive other than that for which he strives; So let him who hopes for the meeting with his Lord act ridgetously...’⁷

The more that a person engages in good deeds, the more they are fulfilling their purpose of worship and are growing spiritually.

Purification of the Self: The inward aspect of spiritual excellence relates to the states of the heart and the self and is often referred to as Tazkiyatul nafs (purification of the self.) God establishes the importance of self-purification in the Qur’an saying, “Successful is the one who purifies the soul, and doomed is the one who corrupts it”⁸ The focus of this aspect of spirituality is to purify the heart of spiritual diseases and to adorn it with Divine and Prophetic qualities. Purification of the heart requires the individual to be aware of the state of their heart and to safeguard it from diseases such as arrogance, stinginess, jealousy, anger, and envy. The importance of the heart is seen in a hadith of the Prophet ﷺ which states, “Verily, in the body is a piece of flesh, which, if sound, the

⁶ Ezzedin Ibrahim, Forty Hadith Qudsi, hadith 25

⁷ Ghazzālī and Tobias Mayer, *Letter to a Disciple = Ayyuhā'l-walad* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2005), 8.

⁸ Quran 91:9-10

whole body is sound, and if corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart.”⁹ Without purification of the self, one’s actions may seem good on the outside, but the person may have incorrect intentions in what they do. Self-purification also allows a person to safeguard the good deeds that they do. The Prophet ﷺ warned people that being unaware of some diseases of the heart may remove the good deeds that a person does, such as the example he gave for envy in which he said, “Beware of envy, for it devours good deeds just as fire devours wood or grass.”¹⁰

Presence with God: Another key aspect of spirituality is *Hudur*, having presence and awareness. This presence is generally related to being present with the Creator and having awareness of Him and of the self. When asked by a man about Tazkiyatul Nafs, the Prophet ﷺ was reported to have said that it is to have the awareness that God is with him wherever he is.¹¹ Having this constant awareness should cause a person to make correct moral choices and to consider what is most pleasing to God at any moment. *Hudur* can be measured in how much one remembers and mentions God, and how much someone considers God in their day-to-day activities. The lack of this presence and awareness of God is equivalent to a lack of spirituality, because if a person is not making decisions based on the understanding that God is aware of their actions, then likely they are operating in a state of heedlessness or acting based on their own desires.¹² This presence and awareness with God should be based in a healthy balance of fear and love

⁹ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 3984

¹⁰ Abu Dawud Sulayman ibn Al-Ash’ath, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, hadith 4903

¹¹ Abu al-Qasim Sulayman ibn Ahmad At-Tabarani, *al-Mu’jam al-Ṣaghīr lil-Ṭabarānī*, hadith 555

¹² Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 80.

of God, that drives one to do good actions. As Seyyed Nasr states, “The spiritual life is based...upon the reverential fear of God and obedience to His will, love of God, ... and knowledge which is the ultimate goal of creation.”¹³

Detachment from materialism: Detachment from material wealth is another part of Islamic spirituality, and something that is discussed thoroughly in the Qur’an and hadith. In Arabic the term for detachment of the worldly life is *Zuhd*. This life that we are experiencing is temporary, whereas the next life is eternal. As God mentions in the Qur’an, “This worldly life is no more than play and amusement. But the Hereafter is indeed the real life, if only they knew.”¹⁴ The experience of the soul in the eternal world is based on who we were in this life, so detachment is encouraged in order that people can be charitable and prepare for what is to come. The purpose is to shift the focus from this life to the next life, and push people to have higher aspirations. The Prophet ﷺ mentioned in a hadith, “Be in this world as if you are a stranger or a traveler,”¹⁵ emphasizing the reality of death and that this life will come to an end. Detachment in the Islamic tradition is not renouncement of everything in the world like we see in some other spiritual traditions. A person can have wealth and be spiritually okay but making money should not be their main priority. The Prophet ﷺ warned about the impact that being attached to worldly things can have saying, “Two hungry wolves, roaming freely among a flock of sheep, are less destructive to them than the greed of a man for wealth

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (London: Routledge, 2008), 25-26.

¹⁴ Quran 29:64

¹⁵ Muhammad ibn Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, hadith 6416

and high status are to his religion.”¹⁶ The main concern that a person should have is about their eternal reality. With detachment comes qualities such as being charitable and forgiving because the person starts to realize that there is no point in holding onto things.

The final manifestation of spirituality to be discussed here is *adab* and *akhlaq*. When an individual has spiritual awareness, this should drive them to try to have proper etiquette and good character in their interactions with the world. As previously mentioned, *adab* is realizing the sacred nature of things and treating them accordingly. Showing *adab* towards God is to prioritize what He asks from people, worshipping Him, and making sacred what He makes sacred. Showing good etiquette towards others is also a manifestation of spirituality, if the individual is aware that God is watching and present, they will act with others in the best manner possible. Also, when a person is constantly striving to purify their heart of spiritual diseases, they will try to be aware of their feelings towards others and treat them in the best way, staying away from feelings such as jealousy and conceit towards others.

The ultimate goal of spirituality in the Islamic framework is for one to attain the Love of God, become a *Wali* (friend) of God, and attain closeness with Him in the capacity that a human being can. For the purpose of this paper, spirituality will be defined as remembrance of God and presence with Him that is the guiding principle of the believer. This is expressed in doing actions that are beloved by God, striving to take on purity of the heart, and a focus on the otherworldly which leads to good character and manners with others.

¹⁶ Imam Nawawi, *Riyadh As-Salihin*, hadith 484

Knowledge and Spirituality

In Surah Zumar, God establishes a direct connection between knowledge and spirituality saying:

“What about someone who worships devoutly during the night, bowing down, standing in prayer, ever mindful of the life to come, hoping for his Lord’s mercy? Say, ‘How can those who know be equal to those who do not know?’ Only those who have understanding will take heed.”¹⁷

A person is considered to be amongst “the people of knowledge” by not only just possessing information, but also by putting that knowledge into action and using it to seek nearness to God. The nature between knowledge and spirituality is twofold, in that knowledge is required to grow spiritually and that a person’s knowledge is measured to the degree in which they are spiritually sound. Knowledge is considered a prerequisite of spirituality, since spiritual acts are that which aligns with what God has ordained in the Shari’ah, one must have knowledge and understanding of what God has revealed and guidelines in Islam. As Imam Al-Ghazali states in his *Book of Knowledge*:

The greatest achievement in the opinion of man is eternal happiness and the most excellent is the way which leads to it. This happiness will never be attained except through knowledge and works, and works are impossible without the knowledge of how they are done.¹⁸

¹⁷ Qur’an 39:9

¹⁸ Ghazzālī and Faris, *The Book*, 91.

Without learning, people would not be able to function in this world and would not be able to achieve their purpose of worshipping God, which is the reason why seeking knowledge is given such emphasis in Islam.

While seeking knowledge is held to a high status, the goal is not to learn and seek knowledge for its own sake, knowledge is sought to be able to put it into action and achieve spiritual excellence. As the 12th century scholar Ibn Jawzi wrote in advice to his son, “You should know, my son, may Allah guide you to what is right, that man has been distinguished by intellect only so that he would according to it.”¹⁹ The measure of achieving excellence with knowledge is putting into action what one learns. As mentioned in Surah Zumar, “those who know” are associated with putting their awareness and knowledge of God into action through prayer and presence. The early community of Muslims were vigilant about gaining spiritual benefit from what they learned through action. One narration mentions how the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ would learn ten verses of the Qur’an and would make sure to understand them and put what they learned from them into action before they learned more saying, “We learned sacred knowledge and action together.”²⁰ One of the reasons that they focused on putting their knowledge into action is because they recognized the warnings against gaining knowledge for the wrong reasons or gaining knowledge and not acting on it. The Qur’an mentions how it is disliked to God that people talk about what they do not do

¹⁹ Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Alī Ibn al-Jawzī, Ashraf Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, and Abū. Rumaysah, *Sincere Counsel to the Students of Sacred Knowledge : an Advice to His Son Abū'l-Qāsim Badr Al-Dīn ‘Alī* (Birmingham: Dār as-Sunnah, 2011), 38.

²⁰ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah and Muhammad Mahomedy, *Muḥammad the Perfect Teacher : an Insight into His Teaching Methods* (Heidelberg, South Africa: Muslims at Work Publications, 2016), 55.

themselves,²¹ and in several ahadith the Prophet ﷺ warned about the punishment for those who sought knowledge for the wrong reasons. Scholars have also written extensively about the importance of combining knowledge and action to achieve spiritual excellence and to attain eternal salvation. In a famous quote from Ayyuhal Walad, Imam Ghazali states: “Knowledge without action is madness and action without knowledge is void. Know that the knowledge which does not remove you from sins today and does not convert you to obedience, will not remove you tomorrow from hellfire.”²² Ibn Jama’ah also notes in his book on etiquettes for students, “Understand that all of what has been covered...of the excellence of knowledge and scholars applies only to those righteous and pious scholars who practice what they preach.”²³

The connection between knowledge and spirituality is not only understood regarding prerequisites and outcomes, but spirituality was understood as a means to gaining knowledge as well. The famous jurist and scholar Imam Shafi’i narrates a story in which he sought advice from a teacher on helping him retain his memory and knowledge, and his teacher advised him to give up sin since knowledge is a light of God which He does not give to those who constantly engage in sin.²⁴ If a student wants to acquire true beneficial knowledge, then they are expected to constantly renew their spiritual intention and purpose in seeking knowledge to be granted more of it. In the Qur’an this connection between spirituality and learning is mentioned, in Surah Baqarah

²¹ Quran 61:2-3

²² Ghazzālī and Mayer, *Letter to a Disciple*, 16.

²³ Badr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Shah, *Etiquette Of The Learner*, 23.

²⁴ Badr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Shah, *Etiquette Of The Learner*, 4

God says “...Be mindful of God and God will teach you...”²⁵In Ibn Jawzi’s *Sincere Counsel to The Seekers of Sacred Knowledge*, there is an entire chapter dedicated to that verse, encouraging students to pay attention to following the guidelines of God and perfecting their deeds. Other scholars include similar advice and topics in their books dedicated to students, constantly reminding them to purify their hearts, renew their intentions and be aware of the traps of seeking knowledge for the wrong reasons if they truly want to become people of knowledge.

The emphasis on the purpose of knowledge leading to righteousness and spiritual excellence is clear within the Islamic tradition, and this is not limited to religious knowledge. Knowledge that is outside of the religious sphere also has spiritual potential, depending on the intention of the learner. If a person seeks knowledge of medicine, accounting or other non-religious topics for the purpose of earning a permissible living, helping the community, or just learning more about the world this can be a reason for someone to become closer to God. As a famous narration states, “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, wherever he finds it, he is most worthy of it”²⁶ meaning that knowledge that should be sought can be from various sources and taken on for beneficial reasons. Similarly, a person can study these topics and use their knowledge to take advantage of people, earn an impermissible living, or become distracted by their studies from worship and other obligations, and this has a negative spiritual impact.

²⁵ Qur’an 2:282

²⁶ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 4169

Traditional Methodologies for Spiritual Development

Islamic scholars across history have written many treatises and books on spiritual development and education. Scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Imam Al-Ramli, Imam Al-Jawzi, and Ibn Al-Miskawahy are just a few names that have written on this topic of methods of spiritual development. The basis for many of their methodologies can be found in the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. While there are a multitude of approaches that are mentioned, this paper will focus on methods that are generally mentioned regarding children and those that overlap across various scholarly opinions.

1. Connecting to the Qur'an: The first approach to spiritual development that scholars discuss is creating a strong relationship between children or the student and the Qur'an. The Qur'an is understood to be the foundation of spirituality and knowledge, and the Prophet's ﷺ character was described by his wife A'ishah as the Qur'an, earning him ﷺ the nickname "the Quran walking."²⁷ The Qur'an is a source of spiritual knowledge and development that has been used since the time of the Prophet ﷺ, as mentioned in a hadith narrated by a younger Companion "We were with the Prophet ﷺ, and we were strong youths, so we learned faith before we learned Qur'an. Then we learned the Qur'an and our faith increased thereby."²⁸ In regard to the Qur'an as a foundational source of knowledge, Nasr states "The Holy Quran is the complete and final Revelation, so that it suffices for man's guidance and salvation; and there is no other knowledge-except based upon it and

²⁷ Abul-Husain Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith 746

²⁸ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 61

pointing to it-that can guide and save man.”²⁹ Imam Al-Ghazali specifically mentions that the student in school should first and foremost be occupied with learning the Qur’an.³⁰ In elementary schools in early Islamic civilizations, the learning of the Qur’an preceded everything else and other studies often were complimentary to Qur’anic learning such as the study of calligraphy.³¹ Studying the Qur’an goes beyond just memorization and knowing how to read it, but it extends to understanding its meanings, applying its moral teachings, and learning the adab associated with learning it that can be applied to studying in general. In mentioning why it is essential in teaching students Qur’an, Imam Ramli mentions that it is “knowledge of mighty status”,³² meaning that what is learned from the Qur’an is of the utmost importance and must be taught in a way that inspires reflection and connection, so that the student holds onto it as a guidebook for their life.

2. Mindful consumption: Ibn Miskawahy, a 10th century scholar, mentions in his book “The Refinement of Character” that spiritual training should start with bringing awareness of the purpose of eating and encouraging children to be

²⁹ Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 119.

³⁰ Ghazzālī, *On Disciplining the Soul = Kitāb Riyāḍat Al-naḥs, and on Breaking the Two Desires = Kitāb Kasr Al-shahwatayn : Books XXII and XXIII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences = Ihya’ ‘ulūm Al-dīn*, trans. Timothy Winter (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 77.

³¹ Hussain, Clarke, and Siddiqui, *A Social History of Education in the Muslim World*, 87.

³² Ramlī and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 49.

moderate in their eating.³³ Imam Al-Ghazali discusses a similar sentiment, encouraging simplicity and discouraging extravagance, in both food and clothing. He mentions that children should be kept from expensive, overly embellished clothes and especially that which is unlawful according to Islamic law (i.e. gold and silk for boys).³⁴ The purpose of this is to spiritually acclimate children to contentment and gratitude, and to keep them away from showing off. Arrogance and showing off are spiritual diseases that have consequences on the spiritual development of a person and their relationship with God. As the Prophet ﷺ said, “No one who has the weight of a seed of arrogance in his heart will enter Paradise.”³⁵ Limiting consumption and luxury also serves the purpose of motivating children towards achieving detachment from material things, since they do not become used to having the finest things, they can learn to place value in other things besides just material wealth, not allowing them to be distracted from their ultimate purpose.

3. Focusing on adab/akhlaq: Imam Malik, the famous 8th century Islamic jurist mentioned in a well-known statement that his mother would send him to his teacher and say, “take from his manners before you take from his knowledge.” Scholars and teachers were understood to play a role in the character development of children, and education without character development was not considered

³³ Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Miskawayh and Qusṭantīn Zurayq, *The Refinement of Character = Tahdhīb Al-akhlāq* (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World : Distributed by KAZI Publications, 2002), 51.

³⁴ Ghazzālī, *On Disciplining*, 77.

³⁵ Muhammad ibn Yazid ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah*, hadith 4173

complete. Ibn Jama'ah states in the beginning of his book, "One of the most important struggles any intelligent person should undertake, right from the age of adolescence, is to acquire excellent etiquette in one's character."³⁶ Ibn Miskawayh mentions that the child should be taught to give preference to others when eating, when to remain silent or to speak around others, and not to do things like spit, curse, or blow their nose in the company of others.³⁷ Imam Al-Ramli discusses teaching etiquette firstly in regards to food, then related to respect for others, such as making space for people and standing up to greet people when they walk in the room.³⁸ The approach for teaching adab was to help children understand that all things have a right, and there are proper ways to approach everything-to treat everything discipline and honor. One of the main approaches early scholars approached teaching character is through praise. Imam Ghazali mentions that "whenever a good trait or action manifests itself in the child, he should be admired and rewarded with something which gives him joy and should be praised in front of others."³⁹ Regarding bad character traits, the scholars often recommended reprimanding the child and bringing notice to that behavior so that the child understands that behavior is negative. The purpose of the praise and reprimanding is to habituate good character in the child that lasts long-term, as good character is just as important as knowledge from the statement of the

³⁶ Badr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Shah, *Etiquette Of The Learner*, 13.

³⁷ Ibn Miskawayh and Zurayq, *The Refinement*, 51.

³⁸ Ramlī and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 91.

³⁹ Ghazzālī, *On Disciplining*, 77.

Prophet ﷺ, “the best of you in Islam is the best of you in character when they possess understanding (of the religion.)”⁴⁰

4. Learning through action: One of the key tools for spiritual development is active worship: prayer, charity, dhikr, helping others, fasting, etc. Teaching children acts of worship is an essential aspect of their spiritual development, and the earliest generations spiritually habituated their children through encouraging them to do worship. As a narration mentioned, when the Prophet ﷺ encouraged people to fast on the Day of Ashura, a special day on the Islamic calendar, the Companions would encourage their children to fast as well and give them toys to encourage them.⁴¹ While this fast was not obligatory for anyone, let alone children, the Companions wanted their children to excel spiritually and get used to doing extra acts of worship to get closer to God. While talking about good deeds and good character is beneficial, actively doing good things often is more effective in spiritual development. This is exemplified in the life of scholars such as Imam Ghazali who were known to be people of the highest levels of knowledge but were also spiritual masters and dedicated a significant amount of time to worship. Many of the top intellectual schools were also known to be places of dhikr and prayer during the early periods of Islam, combining the two aspects of knowledge and spiritual works.⁴²

⁴⁰ Muhammad ibn Ismail Al-Bukhari, *Adab al-Mufrad*, hadith 285.

⁴¹ Muḥammad Akram Nadwī, *Al-Muḥaddithāt : the Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007), 39.

⁴² Hussain, Clarke, and Siddiqui, *A Social*, 169-170.

5. Learning from the righteous: Another important tool for spiritual development is through connection and mentorship with those who are spiritually advanced. This connection is with both the people of the past and the living. As Imam Ghazali stated: “he (a young person) should be busy at school learning the Quran, the Traditions (hadith), and tales of devout men, so that love for the righteous may take root in his heart.”⁴³ By teaching stories of those such as the prophets, Companions, and righteous people of history, it gives children a model of who they can become, personifying spiritual excellence instead of only discussing theory. In regard to those who are alive, it is essential for spiritual development to be in good company, and there are several prophetic narrations regarding the effects of good and bad company on an individual. Children tend to follow what those around them are doing, so when they are put in the company of those with good character and those who love God, it can be assumed that they will follow suit. Imam Ramli comments on this idea of keeping children around good people saying, “he should sit around them (the righteous and people of good deeds) so that his nature becomes like theirs.”⁴⁴ This emphasis on good company was understood to be with peers and with teachers and mentors, with the purpose of influencing the child on multiple levels with positive spiritual influences.

⁴³ Ghazzālī, *On Disciplining*, 77.

⁴⁴ Ramlī and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 67-68.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN THE U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM

To understand the challenges that Islamic schools in the United States face, it is essential to understand the general philosophy of education in the United States in comparison to the Islamic educational philosophy. While many people consider the United States to be a “Christian country” the truth of the matter is that many of the philosophical principles that drive the country are secular principles that are intermixed with Protestant Christian thought. Due to the negative experiences of many European immigrants in regard to religious authority, there was a major emphasis from the earliest founders of the American government to have separation between church and state. Instead of church and religion being the ultimate authority in deciding law and the morality of society, human reason became a key influence in the philosophical foundations of the country. As Eck notes:

The spirit of the American Revolution tilted toward New Light individualism, encouraging an ‘egalitarian theology’ and a ‘Christianity of the people’...the result was a ‘revolt against Calvinism’ by those who placed greater weight on the authority of private judgment than on that of an educated ministry and the ‘collective will of the church.’ This revolution of American religion created a popular theology that blurred the boundaries between sacred and secular.¹

This approach to religion in the public sphere has its benefits, in that it allows for religious pluralism to exist, since there is no overarching religious group or sect that controls the government and societal morals. On the other hand, the consequences of this

¹ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America : How a 'Christian Country' Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 2001), 22.

approach has not just been the separation of church and state in terms of legal decisions, but it has impacted the very concept and role of God and religion altogether. Religion has been relegated to what people choose to believe in and follow in the privacy of their home and religious space but should have no impact on the public domain. This takes God out of the conversation on topics related to the public sphere and morality. Instead of connecting God and theology to what happens in the world and society, human reason and ideas of worldly progress are the deciding factor of what is considered moral or immoral. As George Holyoake, often regarded as one of the fathers of secularism, stated regarding secularism: it is that which “divides life into what is secular and what is religious, and would cosign all matters of religion to the sphere of private interests.”²

This philosophy has not just influenced public discourse and government, but it also has shaped the Western system of education. John Dewey, one the major educational philosophers in American history, discusses the purpose of education as that which makes a child a good citizen, by the measures of democracy and a progressive society, not by the measures of any religious authority or deity.³ One of the distinctions of the general public education system is that it is a religiously neutral institution, in which religion is not taught. Holyoake advocated for a secular education system, which he described as “known by the sign of separateness. It means knowledge given apart from theology. Secular instruction comprises a set of rules for the guidance of industry,

² George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism a Confession of Belief*, by George Jacob Holyoake (Chicago: Open court Pub., 1896), 1.

³ John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975)

commerce, science, and art.”⁴ He also noted that the role of the school and the instructor is to “impart a knowledge of the duties of this world; and the proper business of chapel and the church is to explain the duties of the next world.”⁵

Holyoake, Dewey and other advocates for a secular approach to education felt that the purpose of education was to develop the individual to develop skill sets in the matters of this world, such as business, art, and leadership. Religion and God are separate from these matters in their approach, and morality and authority can be found in society and human reason.

This secular approach is significantly different from the Islamic educational philosophy. The foundation of the Islamic educational philosophy is that the purpose of the human is to be a worshipper of God and servant of His on the earth, and education should encourage the learner towards achieving this goal at the highest potential. It is impossible to separate religion and spirituality from the concept of education in Islam, since the ultimate aim of life and learning anything should be to reach spiritual excellence and closeness to God-whether the subject of information is religious or non-religious. All learning should be infused with Islamic values and perspectives, since God is the ultimate Creator and Authority over all things. Therefore, whether one is learning Quran or biology, the ultimate purpose should be to learn and implement from that knowledge whatever will bring a person closer to God and whatever benefits humanity. While these philosophies remain strong within the Islamic educational approach, many Islamic

⁴ Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 56.

⁵ Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 57.

schools in the United States struggle to grapple with the influence of the broader secular society and culture.

CHAPTER 4

ANAYLYSIS OF CURRENT ISLAMIC SCHOOL CURRICULUMS

Islamic Schools in the United States

The history of Islamic schools in America started off with the Clara Muhammad schools in the 1930s, with full-time Islamic schools being established later in the 1970s mainly by Muslims of immigrant backgrounds. According to ISPU, data shows that Islamic schools only serve around 4% of the Muslim children in America, but they are a growing option for many Muslim families.⁶ Although these are small numbers, Islamic schools in the United States serve as a key community institution for American Muslims, alongside Mosques. Initially, the purpose of many Islamic schools was to preserve cultural and religious traditions for Muslim immigrant families. As time has passed, Islamic schools have served as a safe haven for many Muslim children from religious discrimination and negative influences of public schools, as well as a space that instills Islamic values and knowledge in students. There are several reasons that parents choose to send their children to Islamic school including: The hope that their children will learn Arabic, protection from negative environments, smaller class sizes, or curricula that are grounded in Islamic values.⁷ With diverse reasons that parents choose to send their children to Islamic schools, these schools are expected by parents and stakeholders to

⁶Nicole Steward-Streng, Shaza Khan, Samar al-Majaideh “Improving Islamic Schools: Attracting and Retaining Qualified Teachers in U.S. Full-Time Islamic Schools Through Analysis of Compensation,” Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and the Islamic School League of America, (June 2024), 3, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://ispu.org/improving-islamic-schools-full-report/>.

⁷ Sabith Khan and Shariq Siddiqui, *Islamic Education in the United States and the Evolution of Muslim Nonprofit Institutions* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 86.

accomplish a multitude of things: provide quality Islamic education, instill Islamic values, and provide quality “secular” education that is competitive with other schools’ standardized testing.

With the pressure that Islamic schools face, one area that they have focused on is the academic success of their students. Trying to compete within the secular education system for many Islamic schools has meant conforming with the secular system in their structure and approach towards education. For many Islamic schools, this means that any discussion regarding religion or spirituality is relegated to Islamic studies and Qur’an classes, while other subjects are taught in the same way they would in other educational institutions. In doing so, there is a sort of separation being placed between the religious and non-religious, creating a disconnect in the student’s mind. There are several consequences of Islamic schools adopting the bifurcation between the sacred and the mundane that is the hallmark of secular educational institutions. One of the problematic consequences is that students may fail to understand the meaning of Islam as a way of life and something that is holistic. When students separate knowledge between the sacred and the secular, or that which where one should consider God and that which is unrelated to Him, then the goal of secular philosophers such as Dewey and Holyoake has been accomplished and Islamic schools will have lost the core principles of Islamic education.

In his analysis of the current state of Quranic studies within Islamic schools, Dr. Samir Mahmoud notes how the secular approach of separating the “secular” from the “sacred” has affected Islamic education: “...Islamic educators have retreated to the safety of their isolated discipline of “Islamic Studies” teaching it as an appendage to the secular

curriculum while in neighboring disciplines (the so-called secular subjects), ice-cold reductionist perspectives are being normalized within a Muslim student’s educational training and are brought to bear on the Quran and a Muslim’s traditional worldview.”⁸ The possible result of this reality within many Islamic schools is confusion regarding the religion and the purpose of Islam in one’s life overall. One of the main goals of many Islamic schools in the United States is to create a positive Islamic identity within students but by adopting the approach of secular education systems, students may have the Muslim identity but lack the traditional worldview and spiritual understanding of the world and their ultimate purpose.

Overview of Islamic School Curriculums

Since 2006, the number of full-time Islamic schools has grown from around 235 full-time Islamic schools to 320, not including *madrasas*, Qur’an schools, and weekend schools so it can be expected that there is a wide array of approaches to teaching Islamic knowledge and spiritual development.⁹ The reason for such diversity is that although all Islamic schools may teach the same subjects, there is no overarching authority dictating what educational approaches are applied and what perspectives of the religion are taught across the board. In *Curriculum Renewal for Islamic Education*, the authors identify 5 different general orientations that Islamic schools follow in regard to their educational approach: Appended, Integrated, Grounded, Character, and Civic.

⁸ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 18.

⁹ Islamic Schools League of America, “ISLA Database Project Status Report,” (July 2023), 1 <https://theisla.org/database-updates/>.

The Appended curriculum approach is when a school mirrors state curriculum and adds in Islamic perspectives and content where they deem fit. The general approach is not that different from many secular institutions, with an Islamic studies and Quran class added in. The Integrated approach is described as one where Islamic values are instilled across a given curriculum. The Grounded approach is one in which the curriculum is written based on Islamic worldviews, instead of challenging what is already written in a secular curriculum. The Character curriculum approach is where schools prioritize Islamic character over Islamic content, and the Civil approach places a focus on Muslims as citizens with social responsibilities.

While this is the general school and curriculum approach that most of these schools take, in regard to their teaching of Islamic studies, the authors note that all of them first focus on teaching foundational beliefs and ritual observances (prayer, fasting, etc.) and throughout the years reinforce these through teaching aqidah, fiqh, hadith and Qur'an.¹⁰

Curriculum Overview

Although the separation between the religious and non-religious subjects is an inherently problematic understanding from the traditional Islamic worldview as noted earlier, the main place that Islamic schools try to instill spirituality is in the Islamic studies classroom and curriculum. Due to this, it is important to assess the current curricula and analyze the methodologies of spiritual development they utilize if any. For the scope of this paper, some of the current Islamic studies curriculums such as Safar Publications, Faith Publications and IQRA foundation as well as some individual schools curriculums will be analyzed in light of the discussion on spiritual development from a

¹⁰ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 8-9.

classical scholarly perspective. For some of the analysis, Curriculum Renewal for Islamic Education will be referenced, and other sources from classical scholars will be referenced as well. The goal is not to critique any of these curriculums from a negative angle, but to highlight where the current state of Islamic curriculums is in regard to spiritual development and what could be done better. The following are a list of subjects and focuses of most Islamic studies curricula either within schools or curriculums designed by publishing companies.

- Quranic studies: The curricula mainly focus on *Tajweed* skills, and memorization of the Qur'an. Interestingly, this focus on reading and memorization is focused on for younger students, in elementary and middle schools, and seems to be removed for many high schools. For high school students, the focus seems to shift from memorization and recitation to Quranic exegesis and understanding. Only one of the reviewed curricula included adab with the Qur'an in their curriculum mapping.¹¹
- Aqidah (creed): Most of the curricula focus on teaching students to understand Tawhid (Oneness of God), especially in the elementary grades, and this is reinforced across grade levels. They also focus on explaining beliefs about other matters of creed such as beliefs of prophets, angels, divine decree, and the afterlife. Some of the curricula include discussions only on the attributes of God, while others include a focus on learning the Names of God and how they interact

¹¹ IQRA Foundation, "IQRA Quranic Studies Curriculum," IQRA Foundation, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://iqrafoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IQRA-Quranic-Studies-Curriculum.pdf>.

with people. For high school students, many of the curricula include aspects of comparative religion and understanding the world in relation to Islamic creed.

- **Fiqh (Islamic law):** Islamic jurisprudence is a major aspect of Islamic studies being that understanding guidelines for worship and life are an important aspect of being a Muslim. For some curricula, one of the main focuses is fiqh, starting from the basics of prayer and purification for younger students. Some curricula were broad in their teaching of fiqh, teaching about subjects such as food, marriage, and business. Depending on the grade level, the reasons behind and logic of how Islamic law and specific rulings were included.
- **Seerah and Hadith:** Another key focus of many curricula is teaching the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Since the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is supposed to be the main role model of the Muslims, it is an essential subject for Muslims to learn about who he was and what he did. Most of the curriculum focuses on the historical aspects of the Prophet's life, teaching the major events that occurred in his life. One curriculum also included the study of *Sham'ail* (the characteristics and personality of the Prophet's life) to teach students about who he was in a more holistic sense.¹² Besides teaching about his life, they focus on his teachings through hadith, but this is typically done through integration based on the topic. If the topic is marriage for example, hadith are used to explain Islamic perspectives on marriage.

¹² IQRA Foundation, "IQRA Sirah-Hadith Curriculum," IQRA Foundation, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://iqrafoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IQRA-Sirah-Hadith-Curriculum.pdf>.

- Akhlaq: Many of the Islamic studies curricula include an aspect of akhlaq/character building. Within the curriculum, many of them focus on things such as the general moral compass a Muslim should have such as respecting parents, being kind, swallowing anger, etc. Others focus on particular aspects of adab such as the adab of eating, entering a mosque, or greeting other people. Some Islamic schools have monthly “tarbiyah” programs that focus on aspects of character such as patience and modesty, in order to encourage good character outside of the classroom.¹³

Spiritual Development within Islamic Studies Curriculums

While the curricula are generally focused on knowledge through information, many of them claim to help students develop spiritually and increase them in their love of God. One such curriculum publishing company states on their website, “Our curriculum focuses on the students to foster love for Allah and start a lifelong relationship with Him. Through that they learn to develop a deep understanding of what it means to worship Allah in our everyday lives.”¹⁴ While many schools and curricula may aim for spiritual growth in schools, there is still a desire by many stakeholders for these curricula to be more spiritually effective. In 2011, ISPU released a study on the state of Islamic schools in the United States in which they mentioned, “The very essence of Islamic schools is the

¹³ Brighter Horizons Academy, "Tarbiyah," Brighter Horizons Academy, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.bhaprep.org/tarbiyah/>.

¹⁴ Faith Publications, "Islamic Studies Curriculum," Faith Publications, accessed March 2, 2025, https://faithpublications.org/islamic-studies-curriculum/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAp4O8BhAkEiwAqv2UqLUa9BZmuwKZm4qV5ErdTGPTpdo44AcqQzMtRd9Op18_o4h2SAi1ShoCXs0QAvD_BwE.

teaching of Islam. It is what defines us. We have many Islamic curricula that fulfill the cultural and traditional needs and expectations of parents and communities; however, we continue to desire more spiritual content and real-life applications.”¹⁵ Part of the reason for this gap may be that curriculums and schools are not focusing on the spiritual development of students, or perhaps because they are attempting to create their own strategies for spiritual development. Instead of trying to build their own methodologies, these schools should look to and incorporate the methods of those who had mastered spiritual development in the Islamic scholarly tradition. This section will assess the use of the strategies in the current curricula. As noted in chapter 3, strategies for spiritual development by classical Islamic scholars included: connecting students to the Quran, encouraging mindful consumption, focusing on adab/akhlaq, learning through action, and connecting with the people of righteousness (past and present.)

- Connecting to the Qur’an: Almost every Islamic school and curriculum has a portion of Quranic studies, but according to Dr. Samir Mahmoud, there is a lot of room for improvement in this space. In terms of connecting students with the Qur’an, many Islamic provide an avenue for students to interact with the Qur’an by reading, reciting and memorizing during Qur’an classes. The core problem that seems to exist is developing a relationship with the Qur’an that sparks spiritual development, meaning that students are growing in their love and following of the Qur’an, understanding that the Qur’an is the Divine Speech of

¹⁵ Karen Keyworth, “Islamic Schools of the United States: Data-Based Profiles,” Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, May 2011, accessed March 2, 2025, https://ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/2011_609_ISPU-Report_Islamic-Schools_Keyworth_WEB.pdf.

their Creator. Because of the structure of Islamic schools, most students study the Qur'an as if it is another subject, like math and science. The main connection students have at a younger age is purely through memorization, but this often taught without teaching the students about the status and importance of the Qur'an, which may lead to them only memorizing the Quran for the sake of memorization or for the sake of a grade. In many curricula, students begin learning about the meanings of the Surahs and the sciences behind what makes the Qur'an miraculous in the high school years, but by then it may be too late. If students do not take it seriously as a sacred text which is a means of Divine Guidance and spiritual connection from a young age, it can be harder for them to fully grasp this at an older age, since the framework was not developed early on. Interestingly, in the discussions of early scholars such as Imam Ghazali on the importance of children learning the Qur'an, the word used is learning, not specifically memorizing, and the purpose of them learning it is so that "love of righteousness may take root in the heart."¹⁶ This is not to say that memorization of the Qur'an needs to be put aside, memorization is a very important tool of Qur'anic engagement and highly praised in the tradition. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "He who does not memorize any part from the Qur'an he is like the ruined house."¹⁷ The point in encouraging other forms of engagement beyond memorization is to develop an understanding of the miraculous nature and to help

¹⁶ Ghazzālī, *On Disciplining*, 77.

¹⁷ Imam Nawawi, *Riyadh As-Salihin*, hadith 1000

students foster a loving connection of the Qur'an which motivates them to engage with it beyond the classroom. There needs to be a shift in how the Qur'an is approached in schools and curricula to make the student experience with the Qur'an a more spiritually uplifting one.

- Mindful consumption: Analyzing the approaches that Islamic schools take regarding consumption is difficult since it is not necessarily a subject within that is taught, but rather a discussion within subjects or things that are set within the general school culture. Early scholars encouraged an awareness and adab with eating to protect children from spiritual effects that come with overeating such as greed and laziness. They also discouraged over-consumption of material things so that children do not grow an attachment to wealth and luxury, which often leads to issues such as arrogance, bragging and love of stuff. Regarding food, one issue that can be seen is that the general discussion around food within the curricula is about the legality of food, not ethics and spirituality. Many of the curricula mention adab of food regarding prayers to say, eating with the right hand and washing hands for example-but there does not seem to be mention of overconsumption or other ethics. Regarding clothing, much of the discussion within the curricula was about rules regarding clothing and dressing modestly, not about what clothing is spiritually superior. Within the curricula there are discussions about wealth through the concept of *zakah* and *sadaqah*. The curricula do emphasize using your wealth for good and giving it to others, not just keeping it for oneself. This helps regarding teaching detachment and reminding students of

the Afterlife, since they are encouraged to give what they have for something better in the next life.

- Developing Akhlaq and Adab: Character building is a focus in almost every curriculum that was analyzed. Within the curricula, for early grades the focus is on teaching manners surrounding daily activities such as eating, using the restroom, and walking into the masjid. For older grades, the focus shifts from manners to general character traits that a Muslim should have such as patience, constraining anger, modesty, and cleanliness. Many schools include attempts to develop positive character traits through encouraging it in the school environment. Some schools set a monthly theme for specific character traits and students are encouraged to focus on. In terms of spiritual development, the area of Akhlaq and adab is probably the most thoroughly covered aspect within Islamic schools and curricula. While this is a positive thing, one of the areas of growth that Dr. Abdullah Trevathan notes is teaching “in the moment obligation” to where akhlaq and adab are so instilled in an individual that it becomes a natural trait and reaction in a situation. He cites the importance of developing *hudur* and self-awareness in the student in order to develop an innate sense of obligation of acting with righteous character.¹⁸
- Learning through action: One of the most important aspects of spirituality is to put into action what is discussed and learned in the classroom-especially regarding acts of worship. Perhaps due to the reduction of knowledge and

¹⁸ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 87-90.

learning to that which can be gained from books, this is probably one of the largest areas of weakness and gives the biggest opportunity for growth within curricula. Many of the curricula only focus on worship under the context of fiqh. Worship is learned through the dos and don'ts, of what to do for prayer, fasting etc. Some of the curricula frame the conversation of the fiqh of worship well, starting off with the purpose of worship as a means to get closer to God, but many of these discussion points do not start until in the high school curricula. Teaching the proper steps and rules of worship is important, but this must be paired with learning the purpose behind worship and building habits of worship. Within the classroom setting the ability to do this is limited, but it is possible to do within the broader school environment through activities and extracurricular programs. One school included experiential learning as part of their curriculum, where the middle school students took part in a "Qiyam night" in which students stay in school and do the voluntary night prayer together.¹⁹ Other schools may incorporate this by reciting adhkar together in morning assemblies or after prayers. All of these are positive incorporations of good deeds that hopefully will translate into long-term habits in the student, but there is more room for growth.

- Connecting with the people of righteousness: In the capacity that they are able, Islamic studies curricula attempt to connect students with righteous figures such as the prophets, specifically the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. There is a lot of emphasis on teaching students the *Seerah* to teach students about the example of the

¹⁹ Crescent Academy, "Middle School Experiential Learning," Crescent Academy, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.crescentacademy.org/academics/middle-school>.

Prophet ﷺ and encourage them to love and follow him. One commonality within the curricula for teaching Seerah is that it is taught chronologically, as opposed to a thematic approach. A critique of this approach is that teaching Seerah only from a historical perspective causes a disconnect in terms of relevance in students' lives. Students are expected to learn and memorize names and dates, but not called to reflect on who he was as a person and how they can relate his life to theirs.²⁰ There are other genres of study about the Prophet's ﷺ life that could be included within the curricula that facilitate a stronger connection with the Prophet ﷺ and allow for a deeper understanding of who he was and how to be like him such as the *Shama'il*, *Khasa'is*, and *Dala'il*. Only one of the reviewed curricula included *Shama'il* as part of their study of the Prophet's ﷺ characteristics and personality, and if more included this as part of their curriculum could provide guidance for students and make his life more relatable. Another thing that is lacking within the curricula is connecting students to other figures outside of the prophets. While connecting to the stories of the prophets is important in providing role models for children, and this can be supplemented with learning about other righteous figures in the Islamic tradition such as scholars, warriors, creatives, etc. The purpose in doing this is to allow students who have different interests and circumstances to find different righteous people they can relate to and aspire to model themselves after.

²⁰ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 69.

CHAPTER 5
STRATEGIES TO INCORPORATE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Many Islamic schools are attempting to include more spiritual development within their curricula and approach, but there is still work to be done. One of the difficulties they face is finding methodologies that promote spiritual development. These schools should look to the methodologies that early scholars and spiritual masters implemented for spiritual development. Of course, the challenge will be in modernizing these methods and applying them to school context. Presented are some suggestions for Islamic schools to foster spiritual development within their students and school environment:

1. **Prioritizing Spiritual development:** Before addressing specifics of spiritual cultivation, the first change that must happen is a reprioritization of what matters, both within the schools and in the community. If the relationships that students have with God is the priority, then everything else within the school approach should feed into that including resources. The Islamic School League of America's statistics regarding the pay of Islamic studies show that Islamic studies and Qur'an teachers make less in comparison to other subject teachers in some grade levels such as high schools, which may reflect how much schools prioritize these subjects.¹ Resources are placed where priorities lie, and if the resources are not being given to find and support quality teachers that teach subjects that are

¹ Islamic Schools League of America, "Salary Structures across Teaching Levels," (March 2024), page#, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://theisla.org/database-updates/>.

strongly tied to spiritual development then it cannot be expected that students will receive quality religious and spiritual results. Some may argue it is because teachers in these fields are not state certified or have degrees, and if this is the case, then this may also be a reflection of how much priority is put into making sure that those who teach these key subjects are qualified. Another factor that Islamic schools should give attention to in prioritizing spirituality is by redefining success. The secular system of education defines success based on things such as grades and college acceptance. Students are pushed to perform well for good grades so that they can become successful in life, which is often measured by the career and wealth one makes later in life. While it is not inherently problematic to encourage students to be high achievers, if it is just for the sake of gaining wealth and luxury in the world this may be detrimental to their spiritual development. When early scholars discouraged people from dressing their children with luxurious things the point was to teach them that real value is not attached to material wealth and success. In today's context, materialism is a societal norm and a parameter for success, and Islamic schools should be the place that redefines success to align with Qur'anic perspectives, not subscribing to those secular ideals. To encourage students towards excellence, defining excellence as that which aligns with the Quranic message such as righteousness with God, good character, and being of service will allow students to have more spiritual awareness and framework to shape their lives.

2. Integration across subjects: Prioritization of spiritual excellence can also be reflected in how much Islam is integrated into other subjects that are taught. If

Islamic schools accept the secular framework and only discuss God and religion within the subjects of Islamic studies and Quran, it may create a perception that Islam is just a religion to be studied alongside other subjects such as math and science, as opposed to a complete way of life. Discussions of God and reflection in various school subjects can help cultivate spirituality for the student and help them have understand the effects of the Creator in every aspect of life. For example, teaching science with the foundational principle of seeking to understand God’s creation and patterns in the world can help cultivate presence with God in regard to nature. The Qur’an mentions nature as a sign to reflect on in many instances such as “Have they not then looked at the sky above them: how We built it and adorned it (with stars), leaving it flawless? As for the earth, We spread it out and placed upon it firm mountains, and produced in it every type of pleasant plant—(all as) an insight and a reminder to every servant who turns (to God.)”² Another example can be social studies, setting up the framework of studying history through the lens of the Quran, such as reflecting on the Ayah in Surah Hujurat about God creating people into various nations and tribes to “learn from one another.”³ This grounding of education within Islamic, God-centered principles can be done throughout various subjects to create a more spiritually reflective environment for students.

² Qur’an 50:6-8

³ Qur’an 49:13

3. Transformative Spiritual Experiences: Many Islamic schools include acts of worship such as starting with morning dhikr and supplications and praying at least one of five daily prayers in congregation. These are good first steps in habituating students to acts of worship, and this is an area with a lot of potential for growth. Islamic schools can inculcate motivation for acts of worship by doing programs and events for worship that make it exciting for students, so it becomes normalized for students. Events such as doing schoolwide or class wide fasts on days that are encouraged to fast such as Mondays and Thursdays or the 3 white days every month, and hosting iftars to encourage a sense of community and excitement around worship. Doing service days or field trips can also teach students about the importance of caring for others and teach character traits such as humility and gratitude. Experiential learning, in which students are “directly in touch with the realities being studied”⁴, has gained a lot of support in education over the last few decades and can easily be applied to spiritual development.
4. Creating a culture of awareness: One of the consistent themes that early scholars wrote about was being particular about the factors that influence children in various ways such as what they eat, how they dress, and the friends they have. While some of these factors are difficult to control, there are some ways that Islamic schools can create a structure that sets students up for spiritual success. Schools that have lunch programs can try to incorporate foods that were encouraged in the Sunnah and minimize foods that are known to have negative

⁴ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning : Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), xviii.

effects on the children such as processed sugars and junk foods. Having discussions on food consumption and the benefits of fasting can also help influence how students understand the influences that food can have on the body and the soul. There should also be a culture of awareness around positive and negative behavior. Scholars such as Ibn Miskawayh encouraged rewarding and praising positive behavior, in order to motivate the student to continue exhibiting good character.⁵ In the school environment, drawing attention towards positive character traits and rewarding it can encourage other students to develop good character and draw awareness to qualities that they need to improve on. For negative behaviors, it is discouraged to publicly shame individual students for bad behavior, but general bad behavior can be discouraged through rules and consequences within school policy.

5. Righteous Role Models: Connecting students to righteous role models is perhaps one of the most consistent pieces of advice from classical scholars. Students are faced with several sources of influence, and sometimes these sources of influence are conflicting in their values. Families, students, peer pressure within the school, teachers, social media, and the general society outside of the school are all sources that can influence student behaviors and priorities, and they all have a major impact on the spiritual development of the student. The first role model for Muslims is the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as stated in the Qur'an: "Indeed, in the Messenger of God you have an excellent example for whoever has hope in God

⁵ Ibn Miskawayh and Zurayq, *The Refinement*, 52.

and the Last Day and remembers God often.”⁶ Within every curriculum that was reviewed, students learn about the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, but as Dr. Naved Bakali notes, teaching the Seerah as a historical narrative may not be effective in achieving the goal of connecting them to the Prophet ﷺ and taking on his habits. He suggests teaching the Seerah thematically, using stories about him that address different topics such as the Prophet as a leader or as a father.⁷ Very few of the curriculum noted the use of teaching the Shama’il which then limits the knowledge that students have about the Prophet ﷺ and limits their understanding of how to follow his ﷺ example. Teaching about the stories of other righteous people is also something that Islamic schools and Islamic studies teachers can incorporate, and they should pay special attention to make sure to include examples of both men and women. It is not just important for students to connect with righteous historical figures, they should also have good role models on the ground within the school for students to learn from and emulate. Teachers within Islamic schools carry the responsibility of embodying righteous character, especially those that teach religious subjects, since they are representatives of the religion to students. Islamic schools should ensure that teachers are trained in prophetic leadership and teaching practices, and that they are maintaining a level of spiritual excellence in their behavior with students. The standards and expectations for teachers should include qualities that exemplify spiritual

⁶ Qur’an 33:21

⁷ Memon, Alhashmi, and Abdalla, *Curriculum Renewal*, 74-75.

excellence, such as mercy towards students, having patience, reminding students to behave morally, and reminding them of God. Incorporating mentorship amongst students could also be a strategy to implement this principle. Schools can do this by pairing older students who exemplify good character traits with younger students and teach them about the importance of being a positive role model to those around them. These older students can be taught about the reward of the one who is a good example and the danger of being a bad example from the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ “Whoever calls to guidance will have a reward similar to those who follow him, without detracting from their rewards at all. Whoever calls to misguidance will have sin upon him similar to those who follow him, without detracting from their sins at all.”⁸ This mentorship connection will allow for younger students to have peers to look up to because they notice the status that they are given, and also creates an imperative for older students to behave righteously because they become aware that they are being watched by others.

⁸ Abul-Husain Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith 2674.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES IN INCORPORATING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

There are several challenges to incorporating the spiritual development strategies of early Islamic scholarship. One of the biggest challenges is that the scholars were generally writing with the assumption that the main parties actively training children was not just the school, but also of families and communities. The main responsibility of cultivating the child was first and foremost the parents, and teachers were supposed to support that development. As Imam Ramli says in *Riyadatul Sibyan*, “Therefore educating the child is a must for every grandfather, father and every one given responsibility, for he is a trust granted to them and his heart is open to their education. The mother should caution her child with the father, protecting him from inequity and folly...”¹ When the mother of Imam Malik encourages him to take from his teacher’s adab before his knowledge, this demonstrates a spiritual awareness that she herself possessed and desired for her son as well. Without the help of parents, strong families, and healthy communities it cannot be expected that Islamic schools alone will develop spiritually strong youth. If parents are not encouraging students to prioritize their relationship with God inside and outside of the school, then it will be difficult for schools to cultivate this relationship alone because children spend more time at home than at school. This can be done in small ways such as parents encouraging their students to reflect on the purpose of their education in relationship to God or reminding them of the

¹ Ramli and Ahmed, *Educating Children*, 15. Full citation needed.

adab they should have with peers and teachers. Parents are also major stakeholders in Islamic schools since many of these schools are privately funded. As stakeholders, parents should support and hold the school accountable to having quality spiritual education, encouraging them to make it a priority and not just focusing on the academic prowess of their education. If parents consider it to be important to have a strong spiritual development focus in the school important, schools will make it a priority as well. Parents should also reinforce and encourage spiritual development at home, because the reality is that children spend more time outside of school and they are influenced by the environment in the household. Things such as prioritizing the 5 daily prayers as a family, reading and reflecting on the Qur'an together, and modeling good akhlaq will habituate children to doing good and can help reinforce what they main learn in school. In order to address some of the major challenges that children face, especially with being in a secular society and being a religious minority, communal conversations are required about how to prioritize spiritual wellness.

Another challenge for Islamic schools regarding spiritual development is that many of the strategies used by the classical scholars are difficult implement when knowledge is limited just information that can be given from a textbook or that is taught in a classroom, especially if it's just limited to the Islamic studies class period. Many of the suggestions from traditional Islamic scholarship are holistic approaches that deal with the environment of the child, the food he/she eats, who he/she is around, how he/she interacts with wealth and luxury, etc. While Islamic schools can help facilitate some of these things such as choosing to only serve healthy foods, holding congregational prayers, encouraging remembrance of God, and emphasizing the importance of closeness

to God over status and wealth, in the context of the school structure, cultivating spirituality only through the transmission of information will not be effective. It will take shifting the environment in school, families and communities to truly transform children spiritually.

The third challenge that Islamic schools face in effectively developing students spiritually is grappling with the overall ethos in society towards spirituality. For example, one of the spiritual diseases that is listed in many books of spirituality is *ghafla*: heedlessness or distraction. Imam Ghazali mentions that heedlessness is often an outcome of being surrounded by comfort and prioritizing the life of this world, forgetting about the Hereafter. In modern Western society, heedlessness and distraction is common-especially with the advent of social media. It is reported that on average, the least amount of time that teenagers in the United States spend scrolling through social media is around 5 hours a day.² They are bombarded with mindless information that is pure entertainment, that often leads to a lack of reflection and understanding the sacred nature of things. *Ghafla* may appear in the classroom in the form of low attention spans of many students, and the need for everything to be entertaining and fast-paced. This is a problem for spiritual development which requires a level of reflection on the reality of life, the Afterlife, and one's relationship with God. It is difficult to cultivate a sense of *Hudur* in students when they are highly distracted and entertained in most of their day-to-day life.

² Jonathan Rothwell, "Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day," Gallup News, Oct. 13, 2023, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/512576/teens-spend-average-hours-social-media-per-day.aspx>.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual development should be an important matter for Islamic schools because the responsibility for the raising and cultivating of children is an *Amanah* that both parents and educators share. The ultimate purpose of the human being is to worship God, and knowledge of God is necessary to fulfill this purpose. If Islamic schools are not putting attention into helping students acquire this knowledge of God and to worship Him then what is the difference between being in an Islamic school and a secular school? Traditionally, Islamic knowledge was not limited to only a cognitive understanding of Islam-but it was understood to be a learning experience that led to the transformation and cultivation of the student. If Islamic schools limit the knowledge that is given to facts that can be memorized and tested on paper, then there is a disconnect from what knowledge has been passed down from the tradition. The scholars of the past have developed guidelines and strategies that can help to understand how to properly cultivate spirituality. While there are real challenges to doing so in today's context, there are opportunities in what Islamic schools can do to create positive development and change within their students.

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