

Education for Religion: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: This essay proposes a novel approach to religious education, one that stands in stark contrast to the often rigid and dogmatic nature of traditional religious instruction. The proposed approach seeks to cultivate deep awareness within students regarding their inherent limitations and their role as entrusted stewards in the grand design of God. It encourages students to move away from the temptation of godlike aspirations, such as the pursuit of boundless power and knowledge, instead positioning life on Earth as a divine destiny offering opportunities for growth, learning, and realizing one's God-given potential. This form of religious education embraces doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity, recognizing them as sources of motivation and meaning in a profound journey of faith. Inspired by John Hick's and Abdolkarim Soroush's works, this approach transcends traditional religious literacy, focusing on an encounter with the transcendent noumenal Real, and it is characterized by a sense of speechless awe, wonder, and astonishment before the riddles of existence and the beauty of the world. Ultimately, this essay underscores the importance of approaching religion as a system of relationships rather than as an ideology with all-encompassing answers.

Keywords: religion education; Islamic education; confessional education; education for religion

1. Introduction

Despite national differences, religious education predominantly follows three models: absence of religious instruction, confessional, and nonconfessional education (Gearon 2014). This essay concentrates on the second model, particularly in the context of confessional Islamic education. In doing so, following Grimmitt's (2000) typology of religious education, this essay does not engage with the informational and academic approach to education about religion. As it draws elements from both the immersive approach of education into religion that aims to guide students into a particular faith and the more reflective and personal approach of education from religion that seeks to draw ethical and spiritual lessons from religious teachings, this essay advocates a version of education for religion.

This approach, though eclectic, focuses, within the context of Islam, on cultivating a deeper understanding of God, exploring the implications of His presence and absence. This God-centered strategy, while not entirely new, has the potential to bring transformative changes to the traditionally dogmatic realm of religious education. At its core, this framework recognizes the Divine as the ultimate source of guidance, shaping the curriculum, teaching methods, and educational materials to guide students towards an awareness of God's qualities, intentions, and presence. It highlights the crucial role of educators in leading students to view God as the source of all knowledge while shifting their educational goals towards a learner-centered model as opposed to a content-centric one. Despite being deeply rooted in specific religious traditions, this God-centered approach has the potential to facilitate significant spiritual growth, and to enrich one's religious experience with the Divine by engaging in respectful dialogue with various faith doctrines and groups.

As it draws on various elements from phenomenological, psychological-experiential, and philosophical-conceptual approaches in the field of religious education (Gearon 2014), this essay argues that although these approaches offer competing educational goals and teaching strategies, they all value subjective experiences and individual perspectives, albeit



Citation: Agbaria, Ayman. 2024. Education for Religion: An Islamic Perspective. *Religions* 15: 309. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030309>

Academic Editor: Enzo Pace

Received: 17 December 2023

Revised: 22 February 2024

Accepted: 26 February 2024

Published: 29 February 2024



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from different angles. From the phenomenological tradition, this essay draws on the quest for a more authentic understanding of religious experiences and intentions from the perspective of those practicing the religion, advocating for an empathetic and open-minded exploration of various religious beliefs and practices as they are experienced by adherents. The psychological-experiential tradition emphasizes personal meaning and fulfillment as well as spiritual experience and growth. The philosophical-conceptual tradition cultivates critical thinking, challenges the indoctrinatory nature of religious education, and promotes the cultivation of “truth-seekers” over mere “reason-givers” (Peterson 2010) or “dogma transmitters”.

In theory, Islamic confessional education aims for a holistic and normative approach, emphasizing not just the transmission of Islamic creed (Talim) but also fostering spirituality, ethics (Tarbiyya), and good character (Tadib) (Zaman and Memon 2016). However, practice often deviates, presenting Islam in monolithic, idealized, apologetic, and literalist versions aligned with political agendas (Agbaria 2012, 2019). States have crafted their normative versions of Islam for educational curricula, focusing on religious norms and civic virtues essential for creating loyal and disciplined citizens, with a strong emphasis on character education aimed at fostering acceptance and compliance.

Despite Islam’s rich diversity, educational systems often simplify it into uniform versions, sidelining intellectual debates and critical perspectives in favor of a harmonized belief system to support nation-building efforts. Decontextualized and depoliticized, this “low-fat” approach to Islamic education presents Islam more as a moral orientation than a religious identity. Put differently, it is crucial to acknowledge that religious education, especially when delivered in a confessional manner, can sometimes transform into a tool of ideological indoctrination (Copley 2008; Thiessen 1984) that hinders the pursuit of intellectual and moral autonomy. In various instances, religious education becomes a pawn in the hands of nation-states, political movements, or even the aspirations of the individual, all vying to shape it according to their own objectives (Agbaria 2019).

Important as this critique might be, the challenge of circumventing indoctrination is particularly pressing in Islamic education, where the realistic mission is not the complete elimination of indoctrination and dogmatism but their minimization. The inquiry then shifts to envisioning an Islamic education that remains “confessional” while being distinctly nonindoctrinatory (Carmody 2017), alongside strategies to counter indoctrination by promoting a diverse and inclusive educational ethos (Kimanen 2015). Specifically, the pursuit is of an educational approach that presents religions as dynamic and diverse, challenging entrenched perceptions and fostering a learning environment that enables students to engage with religious topics critically. This approach integrates their experiences and viewpoints, facilitating deep reflection and personal growth.

In search of such an approach, this essay follows Harpaz’s methodology for designing educational environments (Harpaz 2020, 2021). Though it does not strictly or thoroughly apply this methodology, the essay follows Harpaz’s initial steps and is accordingly organized into three parts. The first part grapples with choosing a metanarrative. Harpaz, drawing on Lamm’s metanarratives of education (Lamm 1976, 2002), argues that “education serves three masters”: society, culture, and the individual. For the first master, society, the aim of education is to impart tools (practical knowledge, skills, codes of behavior) that graduates need in order to integrate into society. For the second master, culture, the aim of education is to mold students’ personalities in light of the values and truths of the preferred culture. For the third master, the individual, the aim of education is to enable each student to fulfill themselves and realize their unique personality. These three educational aims are supported by three metanarratives that justify and motivate educators: education as socialization, education as acculturation, and education as individuation.

The second part, still following Harpaz’s design, focuses on creating our own narrative. In this section, I introduce my own interpretation of the educational metanarrative I have chosen. The third part, corresponding to the third step in Harpaz’s methodology, proposes a description of the desired graduate. In doing so, I delineate the profile of the

desired graduate in terms of the required knowledge, skills, character traits, and attitudes. Finally, the fourth part sheds light on the potential of implementing the narrative through educational means. Here, I will share preliminary thoughts on some of the levers by which educational environments attempt to encourage students to realize the ideal image of the desired graduate, specifically through the curriculum and teaching methods.

Admittedly, other factors are not addressed here, not only because of space limitations but mainly because my thoughts and understanding of them are not yet fully formed. These pertain to assessment, organizational structure, educational climate, physical conditions, and monitoring. Most importantly, this paper should be read with vigilance, as many parts of it may be infused with ideological stances if not dogmatism. This essay articulates a perspective grounded in the author's Islamic faith, employing a specific religious language (Keane 1997) that deeply influences my arguments. Consequently, readers should perceive this work more as a reflective exposition shaped by my religious experiences than a typical scholarly paper. Therefore, I invite readers, specifically scholars and educators in the field of confessional Islamic education, to critically examine the arguments presented and seek further sources for a comprehensive understanding. The views herein contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic and religious education, acknowledging that they represent a singular, informed viewpoint rather than a conclusive resolution of the ongoing scholarly debates.

This choice of articulating my personal perspective on how confessional Islamic education should appear, or what elements it can adopt to be more critical and reflective, is inspired by Harpaz (2021, p. 35). He poses the question, "How does one go about choosing an educational meta-narrative?" In this regard, his response is enlightening:

"There is no empirical way to choose an education—for instance, to diagnose the students and then provide them a suitable education. That's a medical, not an educational, model. Rather, the choice is made by reference to a "pedagogical sentiment"; one meta-narrative appeals to the designer and resonates with his or her beliefs and yearnings. The educational choice starts with the educators' "sentimental" preference, their pedagogical identity. To be sure, the characteristics of the students impose some constraints, sometimes severe, but they do not compel the choice of one education over the others". (Ibid)

2. Choosing a Metanarrative

Bearing in mind Lamm's (2002) argument that educational systems serve three masters (society, culture, and the individual), religious education, when aligned with the aim of socialization, finds itself preparing students for their expected roles as believers and citizens, to contribute to their society's political culture, social cohesion, and economic prosperity. When the emphasis shifts to acculturation, religious education imparts the values and norms upheld by a specific religious community, grounding individuals in the collective cultural identity of that community. Conversely, religious education, when focused on individuation, seeks to empower students to explore their faith as a means of self-discovery and personal growth.

Therefore, this normative essay advocates for a religious education that does not serve any of the three "masters of education" or their pedagogical ideologies. Namely, the central challenge addressed here revolves around avoiding the co-optation of religious education for the benefit of society, culture, or the individual. Instead, this essay proposes an educational approach that places the focus squarely on serving "The Master", Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Greenberg (1986), a biblical researcher, raised a fundamental query: What is the purpose of religious texts? His answer succinctly conveys that the inherent value of all religious artifacts and behaviors lies in their capacity to symbolize a dimension beyond our immediate reality, making us more aware of it. In this sense, religious language, symbols, and rituals do not merely point to what transcends the individual but also extend beyond themselves. Religion points to what is beyond religion itself. The essence of religion is not confined to its symbols; instead, it resides in the "reality" they signify as beyond human

existence. Religion, therefore, grants individuals insight into realms of “reality” that remain otherwise concealed, enabling awareness of the profound dimension of the “beyond”.

Hence, the role of religious education suggested here is to guide students on a journey to encounter “the beyond”. This quest involves engaging with questions and answers that hint at the idea that human existence holds more significance than meets the eye. Embracing and acknowledging this “beyond” dimension opens the door to searching meaning for a range of concepts such as glory, wonder, miracle, holiness, purity, reverence, devotion, repentance, redemption, and renewal, to name a few. In the following sections, I will argue for an autonomous, nonideological approach to religious education, differentiating religion from ideology and highlighting the intrinsic asymmetry in the relationship between humans and the divine.

3. Creating Our Own Narrative: Religion Is Not an Ideology

Ball et al. (2011, p. 4) identified four basic functions of an ideology in making sense of the world: “(1) explanatory, (2) evaluative, (3) orientative, and (4) programmatic functions”. “An ideology explains the state of the world, sets standards for evaluating social conditions, orientates individuals with an identity, and sets forth a program of action” (Ball et al. 2011, p. 9). Within this framework, religion can readily be construed as a manifestation of ideology, given that religion is frequently postulated as “a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it” (Durkheim 1915, p. 225). While acknowledging the potential for oversimplification, it remains defensible to posit that both ideology and religion, among other facets, aid their adherents in interpreting the past, navigating the present, and envisioning the future with a sense of coherence, consistency, and control. Concurrently, religious doctrines and movements often spawn new ideologies aimed at societal betterment or advancing specific group interests. At times, political agendas and ideological stances are cloaked under the guise of religious faith, especially when a regime bases its legitimacy on religious doctrine.

Despite the intertwined relationship, the distinction between religion and ideology is crucial for our purposes. To do so, one might draw on the distinction proposed by Brown (2019) between the concepts of ideologies and worldviews. Brown identifies ideology as a set of beliefs regarding what is considered morally or ethically correct, contrasting it with a worldview, which encompasses beliefs about what is perceived as factual or true. This differentiation suggests that ideologies carry a prescriptive or normative weight, advocating for how things should be, while worldviews are descriptive and concerned with understanding how things actually are. According to Brown, this indicates the potential for a worldview to be formulated independently from any ideological biases (Brown 2019). In Hadi and Zwayyer (2023, p. 1912) words: “Faith is not “ideology” so that it can be deepened and consolidated, and religion is nothing but a heart condition, a feeling, a sense of feeling and a sense of feeling. Mystical, vaguely perceived, subjective and individual meditative experience in human’s relationship with the hidden, wise, dominant power that manages everything”.

In the field of religious studies, this distinction benefits from Hick’s conceptualization of the difference between the “Real” as it is in itself (noumenal Real) and the Real as it appears in the act of human perception (phenomenal Real). Hick uses the term “the Real” to refer to the transcendent reality that is authentically experienced in various religious traditions in different ways. He suggests that this transcendent reality, apart from some purely formal characteristics, is ineffable and beyond the reach of human concepts. This underscores a distinction between the Real as it exists in itself (noumenal) and the Real as it is experienced and conceptualized by human beings (phenomenal). For our purposes, religion is to be located in the realm of the noumenal Real, whereas ideology is identified with the phenomenal Real.

In Islamic studies, the differentiation between religion and ideology insightfully draws upon Abdolkarim Soroush’s distinction between the immutable essence of religion and

the mutable nature of religious knowledge. Soroush characterizes religion as inherently flawless, sacred, and unchanging, contrasting sharply with religious knowledge, which he views as flawed, earthly, and subject to constant evolution (Soroush 1995, 2000, 2009). He argues that while religious knowledge is perpetually incomplete and influenced by cultural contexts, requiring ongoing reconstruction, religion itself remains pure, free from cultural encumbrances, and untouched by human interpretations (Soroush 1995, 2000, 2009). Soroush firmly believes that religion is beyond alteration, whereas our understanding of religion is dynamic, capable of expansion, contraction, and necessitating purification from cultural assimilations (Soroush 1995, 2000, 2009). He further delineates within religion the “essentials”—Islam as a belief system—and the “accidental”—Islam in its historical context (Soroush 2009), positing that true adherence to Islam involves embracing its core tenets while discerning them from its historical manifestations (Soroush 2009).

Most importantly, Soroush (2001) reminds us that ideology, at its core, is a clarion call for reform within the world in which it exists. Indeed, every ideology harbors an opposition, a protest, and a dissenting stance against the current state of affairs. Ideologies carry a fervent desire to reshape the world in their own image. To do so, all ideologies aspire to bestow upon individuals the power to govern their lives, establishing them as the ultimate architects of their destinies and the immediate environment. Ideologies proffer the assurance to their adherents that, if faithfully followed, they will ultimately attain their desired destination, whether it be a revolution, reform, or any form of salvation, including *Tikun Olam* (a concept in Judaism signifying the mending of the world). Religion, on the other hand, is devoid of such fallacious promises.

Conversely, religion is not an ideology; it is a system of relationships in which humans humbly acknowledge the inherent limitations of their understanding and control over their destiny and the world at large. Unlike ideologies, religion fundamentally negates what ideologies bestow upon their adherents: the profound sense of dominion over one's existence and the world. In this manner, religion poses a challenge to both the excessively deterministic, almost fatalistic, structuralist explanations of reality and the voluntarist and “agentist” accounts asserting that the social and material structures of the world can be transformed at will.

Yet, admittedly, religion can readily be reworked and subsumed into an ideological project, becoming a blueprint of “right and wrong” and a list of the “permitted and forbidden”. When molded as an ideology, religion functions as a rigid framework that furnishes unequivocal answers to the intricate challenges of life, dictating what it perceives as the correct path to serve one's faith. By prescribing generic solutions and clearly defined routes to redemption, salvation, knowledge, happiness, health, and wealth, religion, in its ideological form, augments humanity's sense of dominion and authority over its existence and progress.

To steer clear of the pitfalls of arrogance and hubris, it is imperative not to approach religion as just another off-the-shelf, ready-made ideology. When religion is perceived as a system of unequal relationship between humans and God, who is whole, absolute, and transcends the grasp of human language, comprehension, time, and space, it compels the believer to embark on a profound exploration of the meaning, scope, depth, and boundaries of this system of relationship. In commencing this journey, individuals must first recognize that certain facets of existence surpass human understanding and lie beyond human control. Crucially, it should be understood that God may not always be responsive to human inquiries. God's presence and engagement with humanity may be apparent, but it can just as well be veiled. God's response may either endorse or reject the believer's quest, with no definitive way to ascertain except through hope.

Indeed, the accountability to God and His answerability weigh heavily on the believer's soul. The performance of the commandments and religious practices is his duty. Without fulfilling these duties, he lacks the entitlement to stand before God. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that these duties will be accepted by God. The transformation of actions (أفعال) into acts (أعمال) hinges on their orientation and purpose (for a more in-depth

discussion on the distinction between acts and actions, refer to [Isin and Nielsen 2008](#)). In the religious context, actions are undertaken for their intrinsic sake, while acts are performed for the sake of God. Actions evolve into acts when they shift from self-serving to being devoted to the service of God. Acts are actions characterized by a singular intentionality: compliance with the will of God.

In another light, actions manifest as tangible and quantifiable expressions of faith, often taking the form of rituals. Intent serves as the moral and spiritual backdrop for these actions, endowing the same action with varying significance depending on the intent that propels it. Devotion, in turn, acts as the emotional and spiritual driving force behind both action and intent, fostering a personal connection with the divine. When a religious action is presented with a pure intention of serving God and is imbued with sincerity and unwavering commitment, it can be regarded as an act of faith, one that holds the potential to earn God's love and recognition. Nonetheless, God's answerability is promised but not immediately discernible or instantly verified. Perseverance in awaiting God's response is an integral facet of the asymmetrical relationship with God. God communicates with humanity through His scriptures and subtly, through the veils of the world's natural phenomena and humanity's manifestations of grace, kindness, wonder, solemnity, and eminence.

Within the system of relationship between humans and God, human beings occupy a unique space, one that is neither entirely virtuous nor completely malevolent. On one hand, they are destined for greatness and carry the profound responsibility of serving as God's representatives on Earth. Consequently, humans are bestowed with divine dignity, an honor that remains immutable and beyond the reach of other beings. This inherent attribute signifies that from the moment of their birth, individuals possess a sacred and inviolable humanity. Surat Al-Israa (17:70) states "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference".¹

On the other hand, the Quran acknowledges human frailty. It underscores that "mankind was created weak" (An-Nissa 4:28), "man is ever hasty" (Al-Israa 17:11), "man has ever been, most of anything, [prone to] dispute" (Al-Kahf 18:54), "mankind was created anxious" (Al-Maarij 70:19), "And We had already taken a promise from Adam before, but he forgot; and We found not in him determination" (Taa-Haa 20:115). These verses remind us of the intrinsic imperfections and limitations that are an inherent part of the human condition.

Despite their inherent imperfections and frailties, it is imperative that the fundamental humanity of human beings is never violated. God, in His wisdom, has chosen humanity as His caliphate (khilāfah) on Earth. Human beings are entrusted with the mission of acting in the name of God, but not on His behalf, as elucidated in verses 30–33 in chapter 2 (Surat Al-Baqara):

(30) And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority". They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know".

(31) And He taught Adam the names—all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, "Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful".

(32) They said, "Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise".

(33) He said, "O Adam, inform them of their names". And when he had informed them of their names, He said, "Did I not tell you that I know the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth? And I know what you reveal and what you have concealed".

With that said, confessional religious education should serve as a reminder to students, not only of the extent to which humanity is honored as a divine steward responsible for

Earth's prosperity and sustainability but also of human weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The argument here underscores the necessity for religious education to address this dual aspect of humanity and emphasize the ethical obligations that accompany it. This recognition of humanity's dual nature, both as an entrusted and dignified creation and as a frail and feeble entity, is what renders religion a more enriched system than ideologies centered on control, dominance, development, and progress.

Religion, when not reshaped into an ideological agenda, advocates for a more balanced and humble approach to life. While ideologies proclaim that the world can be improved because humanity is the master of their own lives and the world, religion asserts a similar notion but for different reasons. From the religious perspective, humanity is neither the master nor the proprietor of their lives or the world. The prospect of Earth becoming a better place is rooted in the belief that human beings are entrusted with various responsibilities, including the pursuit of justice (Arabic: عدل), the sanctification or purification of the self (Arabic: تزكية), and the practice of goodness, beauty, and grace (Arabic: إحسان). These responsibilities are not innate; rather, they are expected to be learned and embraced as individuals become more aware of their imperfections.

Certainly, the existence of human beings is graced with a divine capacity for learning and teaching, as exemplified in verses 30–33 of Surat Al-Baqara, as previously mentioned. In this narrative, God imparted knowledge of names to humanity, and in turn, humans were entrusted with teaching these names to the angels. It is worth noting that the verses specify that God taught humanity names, but not verbs, almost as if signifying that God equipped humanity with an understanding of the ontology of existence, encompassing the science of being, substances, properties, relations, states of affairs, and events. God, in His wisdom, grants humans a comprehensive map replete with names, legends, keys, and cartographies but does not provide a map of shortcuts or marked paths leading directly to Him. It is the hubris and arrogance of humanity that drives them to incessantly seek accelerated means of controlling and dominating their world.

In pursuing such endeavors, humanity tends to disregard one of the fundamental premises in the Quran: the enduring ignorance of God's will, knowledge, and answerability. This ignorance is repeatedly referenced in the Quran through the phrase "but most of the people do not know" (e.g., Al-A'raaf 7:187; Ar-Room 30:6; Al-Ghaafir 40:57). Most significantly, this recognition of humanity as imperfect, ignorant, and devoid of complete mastery and ownership over their lives and the world is what distinguishes religion from ideologies that endeavor to place humanity exclusively at the helm of their existence and the natural world around them. Religion, in contrast, refrains from such hubris of absolute control.

From the very outset, humanity's significant error lies not in partaking of the Tree of Knowledge but in their aspiration to be godlike. Despite God's promise that "for you not to be hungry therein or be unclothed" . . . "And indeed, you will not be thirsty therein or be hot from the sun" (Taa-Haa 20:18–19), Adam partook of the tree because he yearned to attain the kind of eternity and boundless power that God embodies. Satan enticed Adam by stoking this desire to imitate God, whispering to him: "O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and possession that will not deteriorate?" (Taa-Haa 20:120).

Humanity cannot single-handedly create everything, as they lack the necessary knowledge, which encompasses not only technical and scientific but also spiritual understanding. Nevertheless, this deficiency in knowledge should serve as the impetus for humanity to continually harness and enhance their innate capacity for learning. It is this very capacity that distinguishes humans from angels and ultimately enables them to accept God's divine bestowals. God tells us "Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant. (Al-Ahzaab 33:72).

With these words, God reminds us that our relationship with Him entails a profound test of choice. Human existence is not merely a sequence of actions and routines that automatically lead to a connection with the divine; instead, it is a succession of choices that

declare the path one has elected to follow. At the heart of this choice is the selection of God, for humans are chosen by God Himself. Unlike angels, who unquestioningly obey, humans are bestowed with free will, the capacity to choose, and even the potential for missteps. It is this potential to grapple with their weaknesses and strive to fulfill their divine roles that is regarded as their most noble attribute.

These choices are not merely abstract or personal decisions; they are actualized through the observance of religious commandments and practices, serving as tangible manifestations of the chosen path. The relationship between humans and God is depicted as a reciprocal one, with humans opting for God because God has already chosen them over creating passive beings like angels, heavens, earth, and mountains. This differentiation from previous creatures is pivotal: angels, heavens, earth, and mountains lack free will, while humans can engage in the intricate processes of choice, growth, and transformation.

Even though humans choose “Trust”, the Quran characterizes them as “unjust and ignorant” (Al-Ahzaab 33:72). This labeling should be regarded as a stark warning against human arrogance and the presumption that humans, particularly when deeply entrenched in ideological, religious interpretations and actions, possess all-encompassing answers. Such arrogance encroaches upon the divine role and fosters the erroneous belief that humans can perpetually partake of the “Tree of Knowledge”, asserting that they comprehend everything about life, the universe, and even God.

It is noteworthy that, in the Islamic context, the placement of humans on Earth is not portrayed as a punitive measure but as a preordained destiny. God’s interaction with humans in the creation story is characterized by mercy and kindness. Despite the fact that “Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred”, “his Lord chose him and turned to him in forgiveness and guided [him]” (Taa-Haa 20:121–122). Furthermore, eating from the Tree of Knowledge is framed as a lapse in attention, a “slip up”, rather than a sinful act or a form of retribution. Consuming from the Tree of Knowledge is seen as a test that man did not pass, yet it appears that this failure was part of their training and preparation for their descent to Earth. This suggests that humans were created as beings meant to learn, and their mistakes are viewed as opportunities for growth. From God’s perspective, there is no anger or resentment toward humans but rather compassion and recognition of their capacity to learn from their experiences and choices. God says:

(35) And We said, “O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat therefrom in [ease and] abundance from wherever you will. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers”.

(36) But Satan caused them to slip out of it and removed them from that [condition] in which they had been. And We said, “Go down, [all of you], as enemies to one another, and you will have upon the earth a place of settlement and provision for a time”.

(37) Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is He who is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful.

In summary, religion should not be approached as an ideology but as a system of relationships. Within this relationship, humility takes precedence, as humans are required to submit to God’s will despite the ambiguities and uncertainties they may confront. This commitment is founded on devotion and a humble dialogue with God, resonating with the very essence of the word “Islam”. To engage in this relationship, one requires a ladder, steps, or, drawing upon al-Ghazali, a radiant “niche of lights” that allows exploration of how the divine permeates life and the world, as elucidated in verse 35 of chapter 24 (An-Nour: The Light):

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His Light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within the glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His Light

whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.

4. The Desired Graduate

The religious education I propose has a central objective: to cultivate deep awareness within individuals regarding their inherent limitations and their role as entrusted stewards in God's grand design on Earth. It seeks to steer them away from the temptation of godlike aspirations, such as the pursuit of boundless power, knowledge, and domination. Instead, this form of education conveys the idea that life on Earth should not be viewed as a punishment but as a divine destiny, a unique opportunity for growth, learning, and the realization of their God-given potential. It endeavors to assist students in resisting the alluring inner voice that beckons them towards ideologies that provide blueprint answers to all problems and avoid confusion, contestation, doubt, curb, and restraint. This type of religious education encourages students to actively engage in the betterment of themselves and the world they inhabit. The essence of this education revolves around fostering a sense of servitude and elucidating the intricate relationship between human stewardship and the inherent frailties of humanity. As for the question of what the desired graduate of the religious education described above should resemble, here are some thoughts on their characteristics.

As believers, the desired graduates do not seek to comprehensively explain the "fullness of existence" to themselves or others. They acknowledge that certain aspects of life are beyond their understanding and defy prediction. They live with doubt, uncertainty, and an acceptance of ambiguity, embracing their own incompleteness and imperfection. However, they view these elements as wells of growth, motivation, inspiration, and meaning. To them, faith represents an unending inner Jihad—a struggle to know, understand, and anticipate, a sacred inner battle that cannot be conclusively won but one from which achievements can be derived. Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "There shall come upon the people a time in which the one who is patient upon his religion will be like the one holding onto a burning ember".

The desired graduates are not selective when it comes to recognizing and understanding God; all words of wisdom resonate with them. Their selectivity is only expressed in choosing the "homepage" from which they navigate in God's world. This "homepage" represents the religion, culture, and community into which they were born. They belong to these aspects as much as these aspects belong to them, yet their relationship with them is complex. Intimacy coexists with estrangement, tradition with renewal, awareness of their religion's or culture's moral achievements with an awareness of moral failures, moments of pride with moments of dismay (Agbaria 2022).

For these graduates, their religion's sacred texts serve as clear sources of insight, morality, love, and belonging, but they also acknowledge that these texts can be tainted sources of anger and racism. Therefore, it is their duty to approach these sources with both identification and vigilance. The desired graduate is continually perplexed, listening and learning humbly, and living with open questions. They often hesitate, delay judgments, and refrain from drastic actions driven by false certainty.

In adopting the position of "selective pluralists" as noted by Kadiwal (2015, p. 189), no ethical boundaries are crossed. It is entirely permissible for individuals to select a religion as a means to shape their religious identity while also fostering respect for the concept of religious diversity. A "selective pluralist" recognizes and values the truths across different religions, gleaning insights that serve to deepen their own faith, yet this does not lead to abandoning their own religious beliefs and values. In the context of confessional Islamic education, the goal is to cultivate an understanding of religious pluralism that is intrinsically linked with the specific theological and historical foundations of Muslim communities (Kadiwal 2015). This approach neither diminishes the importance of Islam nor encourages relativism in relation to other faiths (Legenhausen 1999).

As a believer who refrains from embracing zealous ideologies, recognizes their own shortcomings, and is mindful of their ignorance, the desired graduate does not construct barriers between themselves and other believers and faiths. Zealous ideologies often rely on constant fueling by zeal and the creation of adversaries, and as such, the desired graduate is cautious about the ideological exploitation of religion. They acknowledge that the truth held by others may not necessarily align with their own truth, but it is still regarded as valid and meaningful.

In this context, it is beneficial to view the plurality of religions as an integral part of how the Ultimate is revealed to humanity. According to John Hick's perspective (Hick 1985, 1989, 2006), world religions articulate varied understandings of the ultimate reality, providing their followers with distinct yet legitimate ways to respond, all of which are interpretations shaped by historical and cultural contexts of the same ultimate reality. Given that these religions propose equal paths to salvation, their adherents should equally respect and treat followers of other faith traditions.

In this sense, educating for religious pluralism represents an effort to comprehend a naturally and *priori* pluralistic and diverse world. The Al-Quran affirms, "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge" (Ar-Rum, 30:22), highlighting the divine significance of language and color diversity, likening these differences to the miraculous creation of the heavens and the earth. This suggests that God endowed humanity with an inherently pluralistic world. As such, pluralism serves as a framework for exploring the divine unity. This unity is not about merging religions but fostering their coexistence and dialogue. This perspective aligns with Nasr's view of Islam "as a planetary system which is the planetary system for those living within it. It is to be illuminated by the Sun of one's own planetary system and still to come to know through the remarkable power of intelligence, to know by anticipation and without 'being there' that each solar system has its own sun." (Nasr 1989, p. 252; cited in Aslan 2015, p. 33).

The desired graduate holds a deep appreciation for religious authorities and is open to learning from them, but always with a critical perspective. They do not grant exclusive mediation of canonical texts and religious experiences to others, whether they be Imams or Muftis. Instead, they value the diversity of interpreters and the potential for discourse and disagreement.

While they maintain a conservative stance and respect tradition, they do not sanctify authorized interpretations. They actively engage with various interpretations, seeking wisdom that can be applied to their own life and the lives of others. They explore the wealth of tradition to find sources for development, growth, and the wise worship of God.

When Prophet Muhammad sent his companion Mu'ad ibn Jabal to be his deputy in Yemen, he asked him what he would do if a problem was presented to him. Mu'ad ibn Jabal replied that he would judge by what is contained in the Quran. The Prophet then asked him what he would do if there was no reference to that problem in the Quran. Mu'ad responded that he would make a judgment in accordance with the Sunnah of the Prophet, that is the Prophet's sayings, deeds, and tacit approvals. Then the Prophet asked him what he would do if he found no reference to that problem in the Sunnah. Mu'ad ibn Jabal replied that he would exercise his opinion and spare no effort in so doing. At this, the Prophet expressed his satisfaction².

The Arabic expression used by Mu'ad ibn Jabal when he told the Prophet that he would exercise his own opinion was "ajtahidu ra'yi". Mu'ad used both the terms *ijtihad* and *ra'y*. *Ijtihad* literally means striving and it refers to independent human reasoning, while *ra'y* means latterly opinion. This incident, Hadith, names the primary sources of the Shari'ah: the Qur'an and the Sunnah, yet it also stipulates that there will always be spaces for new interpretations as there will always be problems and issues that neither the Quran nor the Sunnah address. This Hadith also demonstrates the importance of context, human reasoning, and juristic deduction in Islamic law, namely Sharia.

What is at stake here is the possibility that authority relations can “degenerate into power relations characterized by inequality, domination, exploitation, and manipulation” (Brubaker 2012, p. 241). For instance, being a Muslim, for many, represents a form of solidarity. However, when the concept of being a Muslim is idealized to a point where it is beyond rational questioning, and when the focus leans more towards the unity of the Islamic Ummah and less on its diversity, this can lead to a state of hyper-solidarity. In such a situation, the emphasis shifts towards obedience rather than embracing differences, towards authority over autonomy, and towards aspiring to religious morals and ideals that may never be fully realized, rather than focusing on the realities of the lives and contexts of Muslims. When a religious authority dictates hyper-solidarity and intellectual rigidity, we should look for the politics behind it, for the myths it builds, for the people it excludes, and for the injustices it creates.

To sum up, the attributes outlined above describe an individual who is open, inclusive, and willing to learn and adapt while also deeply respectful and mindful of one’s own tradition. For this ideal graduate, religious texts always say more than they literally convey. These texts are not about empirical facts but about deep meanings, some of which are time-bound and others eternal.

5. Educational Means: The Curriculum and Teaching Strategies

Hick (1989) posits that the concept of the Divine surpasses the confines of human perception and language. This suggests that it eludes definitions of unity or multiplicity, essence or existence, and even morality or purpose. He asserts that the Divine cannot be discussed as though it were an object or presence. This leads me to question whether it is feasible to design a religious education framework that does not solely depend on the sacred texts and languages specific to certain religions. Instead, could we create an environment that encourages students to reflect on the Divine as revealed through their personal experiences? Is it possible to establish an educational setting that nurtures, for interested students, the ability to connect with the Divine—or the noumenal Real, to put it another way—in their language and expressions? This could happen without, or at least before, their understanding of the Divine is reinterpreted into the phenomenal Real as depicted in the religious vernacular of various traditions. In other words, can we offer a form of religious education that refrains from imposing the interpretations of the Real by different religious traditions, thereby allowing students to encounter the ineffable directly, without intermediaries? The fundamental premise here is that it is through such direct encounters that students can truly learn and contemplate how the conception of the Real is deeply influenced by the language, culture, and sociopolitical circumstances surrounding the emergence and evolution of religions.

The saying “easier said than done” aptly applies here. Considering that religious students and teachers often operate based on religious epistemologies and assumed truths, which shape their understanding of what constitutes legitimate knowledge (Bekerman and Zembylas 2017), it presents a significant challenge for them to move beyond entrenched, specific, and tangible interpretations of religion. To circumvent this issue, it is proposed that teachers adopt the role of “pedagogical bricoleurs”. This concept involves utilizing a wide array of concepts, theories, and pedagogical methods in their teaching practice (Freathy et al. 2017). As “pedagogical bricoleurs”, teachers are encouraged to navigate the interplay between the particular and the universal through reflective pedagogies that incorporate contemplation and mediation, as further explored in the works of Manning (2019, 2020).

This educational approach cultivates a sense of mystery and wonder in children, encouraging them to view the world and themselves as puzzles to be unraveled. It promotes an education rooted in the sublime, transforming knowledge of the world and self into a divine understanding. Such education elicits profound awe before God’s ineffable revelation, often leaving one speechless, with “Wow!” as a possible, yet perhaps excessive, expression of this awe. This sense of wonder is not limited to natural phenomena—whether

it be the expansive sea viewed from a cliff, the intricate beauty of coral reefs, the simple act of an apple falling, or ants industriously gathering food. It extends to a reverence for the world's cultural and religious diversity, inspiring admiration and respect.

Experiencing the serene majesty of ancient forests or the celestial dance of stars at night fosters a deep sense of humility and wonder, urging an appreciation for the rich tapestry of religious traditions. Similarly, the tranquil beauty of snowscapes or the quietude of a desert sunrise evokes peace and introspection. This educational ethos seeks not just to inform but to astonish, reawakening an innate capacity for amazement and emotional resonance with the mysteries of existence and its beauty.

God is thus encountered in the esthetic realm, not merely through ethical considerations, in the small details as well as in grand spectacles, in our own "religion", and in the faiths of others. This is an education aimed at reigniting the soul's ability to marvel at the enigma of existence, fostering a reflective reverence for the world's spiritual diversity, and celebrating its vastness.

In undertaking this endeavor, teachers shoulder a twofold responsibility. Firstly, they must lead students on a personal journey of self-discovery, assisting them in acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, educators are entrusted with imparting more extensive existential or spiritual truths, such as the constraints of human agency and the existence of certain "fixed meanings", which may originate from religious or philosophical traditions. In other words, this educational approach does not perceive religious or moral education as a mere transmission of dogmas or facts. Instead, it conceives it as a multifaceted process involving personal development, ethical reasoning, and existential comprehension. The role of the teacher is to facilitate this process not merely as an information conduit but as a mentor and guide.

6. Instead of Conclusions

The discussion highlights a shift in Islamic religious education, advocating for a flexible approach that fosters self-awareness and recognizes individuals as custodians within God's grand scheme. It suggests moving beyond the pursuit of omnipotence towards embracing life as a divine journey filled with opportunities for personal development and fulfillment of one's potential. This perspective treats religion more as a web of relationships than a rigid ideology, emphasizing human humility and stewardship over divine creation. It aims for a holistic religious education that merges faith with personal and existential growth, producing graduates who are open-minded, inclusive, and deeply conscious of the divine-human nexus.

This educational model values doubt and uncertainty as catalysts for a meaningful faith journey, advocating for inclusivity and open-mindedness. It encourages learning from various religious truths while maintaining one's faith, moving beyond mere religious knowledge to a profound engagement with the divine. The approach is marked by awe and wonder at life's mysteries, urging a pedagogy that supports individual and existential exploration with teachers as facilitators rather than just knowledge providers.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ All the verses quoted here are taken from the Electronic Moshaf project that is available through the King Saud University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/index.php?l=en#aya=33_23&m=hafs&qaree=husary&trans=en_sh. Accessed on 2 February 2024.
- ² Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 25, Hadith 22. English translation: Book 24, Hadith 3585. <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3592>. Accessed on 2 February 2024.

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