

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND CONTEMPORARY SECULAR EDUCATION: AIMS, METHODOLOGIES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON HUMAN FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study critically compares traditional Islamic education and modern capitalist/secular education by examining their respective objectives, methodologies, and outcomes. It seeks to identify the epistemological foundations underlying each system and analyze how these foundations shape their approaches to human development.

Methodology: This research employs a comparative and analytical approach. Data sources include primary texts (Qur'an, Hadith, classical Islamic writings) and secondary scholarly works in Islamic educational thought, modern educational philosophy, and critical pedagogy. The study utilizes qualitative content analysis, with selected texts analyzed systematically according to clear criteria. The comparative framework is structured around three key dimensions: educational aims, pedagogical methods, and the resultant conception of human identity and social role.

Findings: The analysis reveals fundamental divergences between the two educational systems. Traditional Islamic education is characterized by a holistic approach rooted in moral and spiritual cultivation (tazkiyah), emphasizing human relationships, inner self-development, and the integration of knowledge with ethical conduct. In contrast, modern capitalist education operates as an instrumental system prioritizing economic productivity, institutional efficiency, and the formation of individuals as functional units—workers, consumers, and voters aligned with the demands of secular, market-oriented societies. The study identifies an epistemological rupture wherein modern education is grounded in instrumental rationality and the material conception of nature, while traditional Islamic knowledge is oriented toward spiritual contentment and the cultivation of virtue.

Contribution: This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a structured comparative analysis that moves beyond normative critiques to provide a systematic examination of the epistemological, pedagogical, and anthropological assumptions underpinning both educational traditions. It provides a foundation for further inquiry into alternative educational models that seek to integrate traditional values with contemporary institutional contexts.

KEYWORDS: Islamic Education, Capitalist Education, Secular Education, Comparative Education, Tazkiyah, Instrumental Rationality

1. INTRODUCTION

Every society in the world is founded upon some worldview, and the institution that actualizes this worldview and grants it historical continuity is the education system. It is often observed that people come to view their own traditions, knowledge, and history as inferior in comparison to modernity. The reason for this is not that people have become excessively rational, but rather that a dominant system comprising education, law, the modern state, science, and other related structures has interposed itself between traditional and modern ways of life.

Consequently, people find it difficult to understand their history, traditions, and knowledge, and education comes to be viewed merely as a political and economic decision.

This article compares two major educational paradigms: traditional Islamic education and modern capitalist/secular education. However, it is necessary to clarify that "modern education" is not a uniform system; it includes liberal, humanistic, civic, critical, and religious forms. Similarly, "Islamic education" was not devoid of institutions, patronage, examinations (ijāzah system), state-supported madrasas, and professional hierarchies throughout its history. This article does not aim to present idealized or one-sided narratives of either, but rather to articulate their key conceptual differences with academic rigor and nuance.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The following key terms are used in this article with specific meanings:

Islamic Education: An educational paradigm whose primary purpose is the spiritual (rūḥ), moral (akhlāq), and social (ijtimāʿī) cultivation of the human being, rooted in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and classical Islamic sciences (such as tazkiyah, taʿdīb, and adab).

Secular Education: An educational system that separates itself from religious influence and is founded upon rationalism, empiricism, and the goals of the nation-state.

Capitalist Education: An educational model that focuses on shaping individuals as "human resources" or "productive units" according to market needs, centralizing competition and employment, and transforming knowledge into a commodity.

Modernity: A historical, economic, and cultural project built upon the Industrial Revolution, secularization, and instrumental rationality.

Tazkiyah: The Islamic concept of purification and cultivation of the self, which is the primary aim of education.

Instrumental Rationality: A form of rationality that focuses on the efficient relationship between means and ends, often prioritizing efficiency and predictability over ultimate purposes (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have previously attempted to compare Islamic and Western educational systems, but much of this work has either fallen into romanticized narratives or outright rejection of all aspects of modernity.

Scholarly Work on Islamic Education: Al-Attas (1999) identified the concept of taʿdīb as the essence of Islamic education, wherein the purpose of knowledge is to produce adab (good manners and social order) within the human being. Makdisi (1981) highlighted the institutional structures of classical Islamic madrasas (the ijāzah system, endowments, and patronage of teachers), demonstrating that Islamic education was not entirely informal. Zaman (2002) and Hefner (2007) have shown the complex role of ʿulamā and madrasas in the modern period. These works indicate that while economic and political dimensions existed in Islamic education, its central focus remained the spiritual and moral formation of the human being.

Critical Theories of Modern Education: Illich (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) demonstrated that modern schools produce obedient workers and consumers for the capitalist system. Foucault (1995) identified schools as key instruments of "discipline" that control bodies and minds. Polanyi (1944) showed how modern economics separated society from its moral and social relations, creating a "disembodied economy."

Research Gap: Existing literature often suffers from either romanticizing Islamic education as purely spiritual and non-economic or portraying modern education as a monolithic capitalist conspiracy. The novelty of this article lies in acknowledging the internal diversity and historical complexity of both systems, while still articulating their core paradigmatic differences in a balanced, evidence-based manner.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a comparative and analytical study employing qualitative content analysis.

Selection of Texts:

Primary Islamic Sources: The Holy Qur'an (particularly verses concerning knowledge, tazkiyah, and reflection), selected aḥādīth from the Ṣiḥāḥ al-Sittah (e.g., "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim," "I have been sent to perfect noble character"), and classical works such as Imam al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* and Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah*.

Secondary Modern Sources: Works by Al-Attas, Makdisi, Illich, Bowles, Gintis, Polanyi, Foucault, Weber, and Zaman that focus specifically on the philosophy of education and its social effects.

Policy Documents: Analysis of British educational policies in the subcontinent (Macaulay's Minute of 1835) and modern Pakistani educational policies (e.g., National Education Policy 2009).

Method of Analysis: Texts were coded according to three themes: (1) aims of education, (2) pedagogical methods (teacher-student relationship, institutional structure), (3) concept of human identity.

Limitations: This study compares the general paradigms of traditional Islamic education and modern capitalist education. It does not include an examination of all alternative educational models worldwide (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf).

4. Comparative Analysis: Two Educational Paradigms

The following table clarifies the key differences between the two educational systems:

Aspect	Traditional Islamic Education	Modern Capitalist Education
Nature	Moral, social, spiritual process	Economic, political project
Foundation	Human relationships	Impersonal institutions
Teacher's Role	Spiritual, moral, social guide	Knowledge worker, employee, facilitator
Student's Role	Seeker of knowledge as sacred trust	Human resource, productive unit
Objective	Cultivation of inner self (<i>tazkiyah</i>)	Integration into capitalist system
Knowledge	Sacred trust (<i>amānah</i>)	Commodity
Structure	Circles (<i>ḥalaqāt</i>), informal	Formalized system imposed from above
Values	Moral upbringing, piety	Work, efficiency, discipline, competition
Outcome	Service to society	Service to system, state, market

This table demonstrates that the difference is not merely one of "capitalism versus spirituality," but rather instrumental versus personal/ethical conceptions of knowledge and the human being.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS: NUANCE AND CONTEXT

Each major claim is examined here with evidence and historical nuance.

5.1 Islamic Education: From Romanticized Image to Historical Reality

It is correct that spiritual and moral formation was the center of education in the Islamic tradition. The Qur'an states: "It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves... teaching them the Book and wisdom, and purifying them" (Q. 62:2). However, historically, Muslim societies had formal madrasas, state patronage (*awqāf*), and professional hierarchies (*qāḍī*, *mufī*, teacher) (Makdisi, 1981). Even al-Ghazālī, in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, connects legitimate means of livelihood with knowledge.

Therefore, the claim that Islamic education had no relation to livelihood is historically inaccurate. The correct claim is that livelihood was not made the ultimate purpose of knowledge in Islamic education; rather, it was considered a secondary consequence and a social necessity.

5.2 Modern Education: From Uniformity to Diversity

Modern education is not limited to the capitalist system. In socialist systems, the aim of education was the formation of the "new human being," and in liberal democracies, civic education is an important aim (Dewey, 1916). However, in the current era of "neoliberal education," the logic of the market (competition, efficiency, profit) has come to dominate nearly all educational institutions.

Example: Oxford University introduced a formal grading system in 1792 (Postman, 1992). Before this, a teacher would simply grant permission (*ijāzah*). Grading transformed education into a numerical competition, serving the needs of the capitalist system.

5.3 The Relationship Between Knowledge and Livelihood: Islamic vs. Capitalist Perspectives

The article claims that fundamentally linking knowledge with employment is un-Islamic. This is partially correct. Consider Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's educational project. He established Aligarh College to provide Muslims with English education and government employment (Macaulay's Minute of 1835 forms an important background). This was a complex historical process involving colonial accommodation, Muslim social reform, and modern institutional development.

But was Sir Syed's position "Islamic" or "capitalist"? Distinction is necessary here: Islamic civilization had both scholars (*muḥaddith*, *faqīh*, *mufasssīr*) and professionals (physician, architect). However, it was never a principle that the sole purpose of education was to obtain a job. The stronger argument is that the relationship between knowledge and livelihood should be secondary, not primary. The modern system has so centralized this relationship that today we ask: "What job will this degree get me?" – whereas the Islamic perspective asks: "How will this knowledge improve my character?"

5.4 The Colonization of Nature and Instrumental Rationality

The claim that modern science is based on the "colonization of nature" is supported by scholars such as Merchant (1980) and Horkheimer and Adorno (2002). They argue that modern science, by treating nature as a dead, mechanical object, justified human domination over it. In contrast, the Islamic tradition views nature as *āyāt Allāh* (signs of God) that should not be corrupted.

However, this claim is not anti-science but rather anti-scientism and anti-instrumental rationality. Modern medicine has saved human lives, but forgetting its limits has also led to environmental destruction. The Islamic perspective teaches placing science within ethical and spiritual boundaries.

6. Practical Implications for Contemporary Muslim Education

Based on the above analysis, the following practical recommendations emerge:

Make Tazkiyah Central to the Curriculum: Not only add information, but cultivate students' character, empathy, and sense of responsibility. This requires weekly learning circles (ḥalaqāt), direct teacher mentorship, and service-learning programs.

Foster Cooperation instead of Competition: Transform the grading system to resemble the ijāzah system, where a student's competence is assessed through a teacher's authentication rather than numerical scores.

Do Not Make Employment the Ultimate Goal: Universities should not only hold "job fairs" but "life fairs." Teach skills, but also teach that the true purpose of knowledge is God's pleasure and service to society. Livelihood will follow as a result, not as a goal.

Re-center the Good Teacher: Instead of large campuses and infrastructure, encourage good teachers. Do not view teachers merely as "knowledge workers," but give them the status of spiritual mentors.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study compares general paradigms. Future researchers could conduct empirical comparative studies of educational systems in specific Muslim countries (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia). Additionally, research could explore how contemporary alternative schools (e.g., Waldorf, or new-generation madrasas) are blending these two paradigms.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has clarified the fundamental differences between two educational paradigms: traditional Islamic and modern capitalist/secular. Where Islamic education centers on the spiritual and moral formation of the human being (tazkiyah), the direct relationship with the teacher, and viewing knowledge as a responsibility, modern education transforms the human being into a productive unit, the teacher into an employee, and knowledge into a marketable commodity.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge the diversity within both traditions. Islamic history had institutions and professional structures, and modern education has humanistic and civic models. The central point of this article is that the modern system has so centralized the relationship between knowledge and employment that moral and spiritual values have been pushed to the background, whereas in the Islamic system these values remain central.

Constructive Recommendations:

Muslim societies should adopt modern scientific and technical knowledge, but frame them within Islamic ethics and tazkiyah.

Educational reforms should change not only institutions and infrastructure but also mindsets.

Teacher training should produce not mere information providers but character builders.

If these reforms are possible, the Muslim ummah can raise a balanced, ethical, and virtuous generation that strives for the betterment of the world, not merely as another cog in the capitalist system.

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