

4

'AQIDA (CREED)

CURRICULUM REALITIES AND IDEALS

Mohammed Rustom

Introduction

The purpose of *'aqida* (creed) is to engender the tenets of faith that are derived from the Quran. *'Aqida* is a core subset of the broader category of the K-12 Islamic Studies curriculum that essentially focuses on the “formula of divine unity, *la ilaha illa'llah*; the proclamation of the Prophet Muhammad’s messengerhood, *Muhammadun rasulu'llah*; and the six tenets of faith mentioned by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)” (Yusuf, 2007, 10). Put another way, the study of *'aqida* is of one’s beliefs and the “why” of those beliefs (Yusuf 2007, 13). In Islamic studies curricula the teaching of *'aqida* often focuses on the aforementioned six tenets of faith, namely belief in God’s oneness and His names and attributes; God’s Messengers; the divinely revealed books; the Angels; divine destiny, and the Final Day. Some curricula will include other complementary topics, but the ones listed here are commonly the foundation in one form or another.

Aside from these introductory remarks, this chapter presents the transcript of an interview conducted with Professor Mohammed Rustom on the teaching of *'aqida* and his reflections on a sample set of the existing K-12 Islamic Studies curricula. Rustom’s work has been instrumental in reinforcing Islamic philosophy as a living tradition – one which if we as educators are to incorporate into the teaching of *'aqida*, would allow us to “come away with meaningful responses to [our] contemporary predicaments, not the least of which is the answer to the meaning of life” (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 2017, 136).

The foundational starting point for teaching creed, he argues, should be the “given-ness of the situation of existence (*wujud*)” (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 137). In the passage below, he beautifully explains why understanding existence is fundamental to this pursuit:

Time implies change and mutability, and thus the fall of man, caught up as he is in the flow of time, implies a change in state, from being with God to being away from God. We sank in the downward flow of this river because we have lost our true identity, which is for us to know ourselves as God knows us, and thus to be with God in the Divine Presence. In other words, we have forgotten God by virtue of being in the realm of change and hence multiplicity. That original abode from which we came can be accessed while in the realm of change and time, so long as one remembers his true self, as the Prophet said, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” To know one’s self thus means to remember one’s self, and to remember one’s self means that one knows his own existence, which is tantamount to God’s remembering the person, since His knowledge of what that person is, is the person’s very existence (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 141).

To study *‘aqida* in a way that focuses not on what Muslims believe but why Muslims believe what they believe is more urgent than ever. We live in a time when a “plethora of contradictory worldviews” (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 144) confront young people daily. In the long run, these various philosophies present serious obstacles to the contemporary student, who is ill-equipped to actually grapple with and respond to them. Having inadequate responses to life’s big questions naturally results in a generation of youth who, intellectually speaking, can be said to have “bi-polar tendencies” (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 148). As such, it is not unusual “to encounter someone with a Muslim name who reads the Quran religiously (as he should), but who also subscribes to some secular theory which negates the very category of transcendence upon which the Quran is based” (Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 148). The greatest remedy for this, Rustom insists, is to know your own sources first. Young Muslims who are introduced to contemporary philosophies in the absence of a strong grounding in their own tradition will be intellectually unprepared to engage with the world that they inhabit in relation to who they are.

A second foundation to the study of creed that humbled us when reading Rustom’s work is the need to cultivate inward silence when aspiring to connect to God. Our collective Islamic Studies curricula often assume that learning and teaching *‘aqida* is solely an intellectual exercise. Learning outcomes and topics of study do not suffice reflecting the process by which *‘aqida* must be embodied and imparted. He writes, “In our world, filled as it

is with all kinds of cacophonous sounds and alarming images, cultivating this kind of inwardness is difficult indeed” (Rustom, “On Listening: Hearing God’s Voice in the Face of Suffering,” 2020, 42). And so when students today witness or endure personal, communal, or human hardship and suffering, they commonly question God’s wisdom, awareness, and presumed silence. Unable to come to terms with the reality of evil in the face of Divine goodness (i.e. the problem of theodicy), believers can be left confused. To respond to this, Rustom asks, is the issue more one of God’s silence or of human deafness? With this question in mind, he shares a most inspiring tale from Rumi’s *Masnavi*:

[Rumi] tells a tale of a man who calls out to God in earnest all night in prayer. But the man hears no divine response. It is then that Satan comes upon the scene and tries to convince the dejected person that there is no God to hear him, and that he should thus give up hope in the divine all together. At this point, the broken-hearted servant falls asleep and has a dream in which he comes to learn that God had in fact been answering his call all along:

The fear and love you express are what tie you to My bounty –
Under every “O Lord!” from you are many *labbayks* from Me.

“*Labbayk*” or “Here I am!” is the well-known phrase that Muslims utter during the rites of the pilgrimage. For Rumi, it is not man who says “Here I am!” Rather, it is God who says it to man, and this not only in some circumstances but always and forever. In other words, God’s presence and aid are always there, however imperceptible they may be to our limited human understanding and experience of the world. On a more subtle level, Rumi is also driving home the point that our very calling out to God is itself the divine response to our prayers” (Rustom, “On Listening,” 2020, 42).

These two starting points for the study of *'aqida*, that is, (1) beginning with a deep understanding of existence and why we exist and (2) cultivating inner silence, inform the perspective on curriculum redesign that Rustom outlines below. We had the absolute pleasure to interview him in early 2019 for his reflections on rethinking the teaching of the *'aqida* curriculum. In advance of the interview, we provided Rustom with a series of curriculum documents that are commonly used in Western Islamic schools and also Islamic education national curricula from a handful of Muslim majority contexts. He focused his reading on the *'aqida* sections but also glanced at the curriculum broadly for cross-curricular intersections. The interview transcript below contains his insights and answers to our questions.

Interview

How Would You Compare Curricula Related to 'Aqida Between Muslim Majority Contexts and Western/Muslim Minority Contexts?

What I noticed was that the curricula that come out of Muslim majority contexts generally have a much clearer understanding of what the category of *'aqida* entails. That is, when it comes to knowledge of the language of theology, like *kalam* (rational theology) proper, they are much better. The *'aqida* curricula from Muslim majority contexts written in Arabic are therefore much better grounded in the creedal terminology that is most consistent with the Islamic tradition, historically speaking. What I noticed in the Islamic studies curricula produced in Western/Muslim minority contexts is that there is a lot of emphasis on *sira* (Prophetic biography) and a heavy degree of emphasis upon the Quran and Hadith. This is very good, but there is also a 1300-year tradition whose representatives have lived and meditated upon these foundational sources of Islam – and this at a level that is much higher and more profound and learned than most of us can do today.

This historical tradition, for the most part, is not featured well in these documents, with the net effect that the Islamic studies curricula produced in Western/Muslim minority contexts do not really communicate a sustained exposition of the theology that reflects and acts on the teachings contained within the Quran, the Hadith, and the *sira* literature through the lenses of the great and most authoritative representatives of the Islamic intellectual tradition. What you get are therefore superficial presentations of these texts with very little real explanation of their meaning, content, and significance.

Take, for example, the manner in which *adab* (here taking in the science of *akhlaq* or ethics) is taught in one of the national Arab Islamic Studies curricula. Rather than teach *adab* through examples from the *sira* only, the curriculum in question draws on the teachings of *sira* literature and examples of proper ethical behavior and moral conduct throughout the vast expanse of Islamic history, looking at the Abbasids, the Ottomans, etc. By drawing on these examples of the historical manifestations of *adab* and *akhlaq* in the lives of a variety of different Muslim peoples, students are shown how Islamic belief and creed have informed every dimension of Muslim life, thought, and culture for over a thousand-year period. Much of this kind of expansive approach is missing in the Western Islamic Studies material on *'aqida*.

Let Us Look at the Other Meaning of the Word Adab, Namely "Literature."

I think that a lot of people are scared away by or uninterested in words such as "theology," "creed," "*'aqida*," or what have you. But the word "literature" does

not pose these kinds of potential problems. Muslims have produced some of the best literature in the world, and not just in Arabic, but also in Persian and numerous other languages and local vernaculars. Where literature is important in conveying Islamic theological beliefs is precisely in the fact that literature and artistic writings have been major means by which all kinds of theological teachings and doctrines have been communicated throughout Islamic civilization. Pre-modern Muslims have never simply regarded literature as something that edified the mind; rather, it was used to provide the means for an entire cycle of Islamic education to a person, from ethics and creedal theology to history and Quranic commentary.

This explains why some of the greatest literary figures of the past were also skilled in all of the Islamic sciences. When they wrote their literary works, they brought these disciplines together into a unified vision of reality. Among the best examples of Islamic literary works that beautifully conveyed Islamic theological beliefs and even practices in a way that was generally easy for people to understand can be found in such classics as Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy b. Yaqzan*, Sam'ani's *Rawh al-arwah*, Rumi's *Masnawi*, and Sa'di's *Gulistan* (all of these texts are available in English translation).

With these points in mind, let us turn our attention to a student who goes through an entire Islamic studies curriculum and certainly does not read, much less hear, of let us say ten classics of Islamic literature. He will know some Quran, Hadith, *sira*, and a few major names such as al-Nawawi and al-Shafi'i. I find that strange. When it comes to theology, what the student will have is a basic understanding of the six tenets of faith, with little to no real understanding of what they mean, which is to say nothing about the great authors and literary works that have explained and commented upon these tenets. Beyond simply regurgitating beliefs, the student must be given access to the breadth of the Islamic intellectual tradition, which includes works in creedal theology, poetry, philosophy, and creative prose.

In other words, the Islamic studies curricular documents that I have looked at – both those written for Muslim majority and Muslim minority contexts – give the impression that *'aqida* is ultimately conceived along lines that connect certain statements of belief back to the Quran, Hadith, and *sira*, and in some cases in the lives of the great Muslims of the past. This is neither useful nor sufficient in any serious way. We are lucky because we actually have an entire living literary, intellectual, spiritual tradition which has developed that early initial energy for all of these years, adapting them in different contexts.

You can give a student a verse from the Quran, explain its meaning in relation to what Muslims believe, and then tell her that this is what she is supposed to believe. This would be appropriate for a child. But as the student gets older and comes to see how complex the world is and how intelligent civilizations other than Islam have been, she will naturally look for that same kind of depth

in her own tradition. So as she moves along an Islamic schooling curriculum, she needs to be shown how some of the greatest people to have lived had internalized the teachings from the Quran, the Hadith, etc. This, as I see it, is what is by and large absent from these curricula: The missing link here is Islam's entire intermediary intellectual and spiritual tradition.

Why Does the Teaching of Theology Need to Draw on the Wider Islamic Tradition?

From my interactions with graduates of Islamic schools, they walk into my undergraduate classes with a strong Islamic identity. But when it comes to theology and Islamic belief, all they know is basically dogma. Some end up studying the sciences in university, which in a sense presents them with a mirror image of the kind of Islam that they have been taught in Islamic schools: A dry, exoteric, legalistic, and scientific vision of the world with very little room for introspection and conceptual growth. Yet some of these students are by nature thinkers, meaning they may to some degree seek to understand the world in a deeper way.

Because they have never been shown the profundity of their own tradition and are not equipped to recognize its merits and usefulness for their own lives even if it is presented to them for the first time in university, such students end up seeking to fulfil their intellectual curiosity with other forms of learning which seem entirely new to them and which are pervasive in the Eurocentric academy at any rate. Thus they end up taking courses on Dostoevsky and Plato (at best), and tend to become mesmerized by the Western canon.

But if Islamic studies curricula can impart knowledge and love of the Islamic canon to students before they go out into the "real world" of higher education, students will have a much firmer grasp of the content of their faith and their own identity will not simply be a socially constructed one, but an intellectually and spiritually grounded one. As I said, the Islamic theological and intellectual canon should not entirely consist of technical and abstract books of theology and *kalam*, whose content would evade most teachers, let alone students. We need to conceive of the canon and the styles of works that make it up along very broad lines.

With respect to theology or *'aqida*, the best way to teach the practical implications of a God-centered vision of the world is by way of *akhlaq*. To this effect, in some of these curricula that I have reviewed, virtues such as *shukr* (gratitude) are integrated with the teaching of *'aqida* by looking at how they were actualized in the faith and practice of the Prophet, whose conduct and behavior is *the* model of course. But who to better explain the relationship between the Islamic virtues and *'aqida* than someone like al-Ghazali or Rumi, whose works are basically commentaries on the *'aqida* and *akhlaq* that was taught and lived by the Prophet?

Where Is the Disconnect Between the Essential Topics Covered in 'Aqida, and How Is It Mapped onto Curriculum Learning Outcomes?

The six tenets of faith are like the five pillars of practice. Those are the foundations. Islamic studies curricula that emphasize this are not wrong in any way in trying their very best to present the tradition in terms of its theology. In fact, the six tenets of faith are broken up into three broad categories: Teachings about God (*ilahiyyat*), *nubuwwa* or prophecy, and the *ma'ad* or eschatology. Needless to say, these categories all go back to one essential point: Our relationship to God, which is taught to us by the prophets and the fruits of which we will encounter the other side of death. But the problem today, particularly for students, is how to make sense of these three categories in a way that is relevant to their concerns and therefore meaningful for their lives in this rapidly changing and globalized world which is their reality.

For a lot of students it is very difficult to understand why any aspect of theology really matters to their lived experience as global citizens. I came to learn this fact the first time I tried to teach Islamic theology to my students. We got into the usual materials covered in the Islamic creedal primers: God's essence, His names and attributes, etc. The students simply could not understand why God needed to have "essential and necessary" attributes, and how or why that mattered to them. Those who did get it thought it either an interesting mind game or a sophisticated way of speaking about God. But beyond that, these creedal primers had nothing to say to the students. Indeed, most of the discussions in Islamic theology are rather technical, and can really cause confusion in a student, or, just as bad, disinterest and therefore disengagement.

The fundamental problem in the way that *'aqida* is taught in Islamic schools is not in the concentration upon the six tenets of faith, but in the degree of emphasis that is placed upon each of them and the manner in which they are conceived of and communicated to students. If, for example, we teach students about any aspect of the unseen realm (*'alam al-ghayb*), we cannot simply present it to them as being amongst the transmitted lore or *sam'iyat* of Islam and expect them to acquiesce to it at every level of their education. At a certain point, they should come to know that many of the finest minds ever produced by Islam sought to explain the nature and function of the unseen world, and how our lives and actions in the phenomenal realm (*'alam al-shahada*) that we participate in on a daily basis are inextricably tied to the unseen, both at the present moment and, ultimately, with serious consequences after we die.

To simply tell a student that they must believe in the unseen realm, and then to expect them to accept any aspect of it as mere dogma, fulfils the requirement of delivering an important "teachable" when it comes to *'aqida*. But it does not

give students an ultimately intellectual or literary way of thinking about the realm of the unseen. Eventually, the entire realm of the unseen will come to occupy the intellectual infrastructure of their young minds, but will not dominate the landscape and horizon of their vision of reality and thus will ultimately become yet another “thing” that they have to acquiesce to without any real proof, knowledge, or unshakeable conviction.

With the realm of the unseen seemingly so distant a reality, students will naturally only become more and more interested in the realm of the seen, of this world. And this, down the road, leads to an essentially materialist worldview and consequently (in most cases) a materialistic mindset that defy the very *raison d'être* of being a Muslim. Treating the realm of the unseen in this way, it also becomes much easier to offer simplistic explanations of important theological topics down the road, like that of God's decree and determination or *al-qada' wa'l-qadr*, an abstraction which is emphasized in Islamic schooling in a very abnormal manner over and against, for example, things that are much more relevant to every student's immediate and lived experience, such as God's love, care, and concern for human beings and all sentient creatures.

Of course, the discussion of God's love is not normally treated in discussions on the six tenets of faith. But when we speak about God's unity (*tawhid*), which is the first and most important of the tenets of faith, love can come up since God has the attribute of love, which means that He is qualified by love and is loving. Today, and perhaps more than ever before, the nature and reality of God's love is a *sine qua non* of a child's religious education. Juxtapose this with the aforementioned emphasis on *al-qada' wa'l-qadr*, which most Islamic schooling curricula blindly dive into with little to no real conceptual apparatus and understanding of what this teaching is all about. Most students will never be able to wrap their minds around *al-qada' wa'l-qadr*, and indeed most scholars will also admit that they themselves cannot do it. God's love, by contrast, can be understood, felt, and experienced by all in a real and essential way. And it therefore will make a lot more sense to students when trying to explain the nature of God, the purpose of life, etc.

So there needs to be a kind of reframing and a new understanding of the different pedagogical postures that our Islamic schooling curricula take with some of the most basic issues. Again, explaining the nature of God's love can and should be rooted in the foundational sources of Islam, which are best made sense of by the greatest representatives of the Islamic love tradition, such as 'Abd Allah Ansari, Ahmad Ghazali, 'Ayn al-Qudat, Ibn 'Arabi, Rumi, Ibn al-Farid, Yunus Emre, and Hafez. These spiritual and intellectual giants wrote about and even sung of the reality of God's love in an unparalleled way; and, thankfully, their most important writings on the topic are all available in English translation.

Are There Other Inherent Tensions and Pitfalls in the Way 'Aqida Is Presented to Students?

Yes. Allow me to give you a concrete example. In a certain Grade 4 Islamic studies curriculum one of the learning outcomes is to “describe” God. Now why would a nine-year-old need to do that, and, more importantly, how can he do so? This view is motivated by a particular, and even simple-minded, theological mindset. Seeing that the Quran and Hadith say things about God, His names, attributes, and actions, the understanding, as stated in this curriculum’s learning objective, is “to be able to learn that the Quran/Hadith contains descriptions of God.” In other words, if we impart this knowledge to young people, they will somehow be able to “describe” God – note here that the emphasis is not on understanding or knowing God, but on “describing” Him, which is a very different thing.

How, then, would the typical student who in a sense is a victim of some peoples’ ultimately misplaced theological concerns and hang-ups be taught to describe God? It will normally be done along metaphorical lines, which is why the learning objective continues to say that it seeks to allow students to “understand that the verse of light [Quran 24:34] describes God metaphorically.” To be sure, the verse of light has and still is read along metaphorical lines on the assumption that God cannot actually be “light,” like the light which illuminates our room, etc. But it has also been read and still is read, and perhaps even more consistently, along literal and symbolic lines. So two key registers of interpretation and explanation that are a very normal feature of Islamic thinking are here swept away from the outset in favor of a very particular kind of desire to pin down what a “correct” description of God should sound like.

The final learning objective of the curriculum in question then states that students should be able to “state the metaphorical meaning of God’s physical features.” Now why would a nine-year-old ever need to do that? It is because, once again, the Quran and Hadith speak of God in seemingly anthropomorphic ways, and it is assumed that this is going to be relevant and meaningful for a nine-year-old. Yet anyone who has spoken to a child of this age will tell you that she has a natural and beautiful way of interacting with these kinds of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and they do not pose any real threats to her beliefs. In fact, on many levels, it is probably reassuring to students to be able to think of God along more human lines, since that is all that these young people have ever seen and known. The subtlety and complexity of Islamic thinking in other words needs to be brought to a student’s attention when she is intellectually mature and ready for it.

Going back to the problem of emphasizing a metaphorical register in “describing” things like God’s face and hands, these curricula are unable to account for how the Islamic tradition itself problematized the very notion of metaphorical

interpretations of God's attributes. For example, if, as was historically done, we were to say that God's "hand" mentioned in Quran 48:10 is a metaphorical way of speaking of God's power, then what of Quran 5:64 and 38:75, which speak of God's "two hands"? What does "hand" mean then, "two powers"? You can see why simplistic metaphorical readings are not always useful, and are at times simply incorrect or whimsical on their own level.

Nevertheless, to raise such potential questions in the fourth grade, and especially in such a simplistic manner and without the mediation of the long-standing and impressively diverse Islamic interpretive tradition, does more harm than good. Again, if one were to insist on teaching nine-year-olds about God's attributes, it would not be advisable or sensible to do so by way of the arcane teachings in the texts of Islamic rational theology. The most consistent and normative "theology" of the masses throughout Islam has been expressed by way of poetry, creative prose, and the material arts. Now those are media which any fourth-grader would be interested in and would be most responsive to.

How Should Differences in Theological Positions Be Addressed?

There is no doubt that, for younger students, the less detail when it comes to differences in theological positions, the better, and this because awareness of differences creates more dissension than unity in a young person's mind and soul. The vast majority of matters of belief are agreed upon. There are differences in some very technical points that deal with *tawhid* at a very high level. I once I asked a sage of our times, "May you tell me the meaning of Islam in the most basic terms possible." He answered, "*La ilaha illa'llah, Muhammadun rasulu'llah.*" It is as simple as that, and everything else is a natural corollary to this. So rather than give details to students when it comes to various and inevitably divergent theological positions, it is much more constructive to draw their awareness to the beautiful lenses through which Islamic beliefs have been viewed throughout the ages.

In other words, when we speak about God's oneness, there is no need for younger students to know that there have always been different ways that Muslim sub-communities have understood the nature of God's oneness, His attributes, etc. As students mature and their learning deepens, a good measure of an awareness of the complexity of such issues is probably in order and in many ways it will naturally flow from their developing curiosity and commensurate background preparation. But in the earlier stages of learning, students need to come away with a sense of the awe and grandeur of the topic, and how it is that the Islamic tradition has celebrated God's oneness, and not just in books and in poetry, but also in art, architecture, and music (all of which are different but equally important forms of communicating *'aqida*).

As a student matures, it is important to gradually introduce them to varying viewpoints because there are lines of demarcation between religions and between theological positions within Islam. But before introducing students to all of the other different kinds of believers that they will encounter in the world, they must have a proper sense of proportions when it comes to the issue of intellectual diversity itself – that is, they would first need to be taught why it is that diversity is there to begin with, and for that there is no better place to go than the Quran.

For a student's mind to become that elastic so as to understand the various kinds of differences that are a natural feature of our world, they will need a lot of ethical training at the beginning of their education. The more Islamic theology is framed in an ethical way for students, the more likely are they to appreciate the differences within their own tradition and be firm in the things that they are taught. Fostering ethical understandings on appreciating and respecting difference should therefore come first.

At any rate, what is more important for students than learning of differences in theological beliefs among various kinds of Muslims is for them to come to an awareness and appreciation of the differences in the various ways in which Islam is “performed,” globally speaking. This is not a theological or creedal problem per se. Rather, it belongs to the realm of praxis, for students will encounter various kinds of Islamic practices more regularly than they will different kinds of believing Muslims. After all, very few Muslims discuss their own particular Islamic beliefs when they meet fellow Muslims. But differences in practice will naturally come up when Muslims from different backgrounds and levels of education get together. Fostering respect and understanding on this level will gradually lead students to become more intellectually agile in other domains.^{1,2}

Notes

- 1 These interviews were conducted on 07 March 2019 and 21 February 2019 with Professor Mohammed Rustom by Dr. Mariam Alhasmi and Dr. Nadeem Memon.
- 2 The introduction to this chapter was written by Nadeem Memon.

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62 Mohammed Rustom

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CURRICULUM RENEWAL FOR ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Critical Perspectives on
Teaching Islam in Primary
and Secondary Schools

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Alhashmi, and Mohamad Abdalla*