



Shaping Islamic Education to Build Muslim Youth for the Challenges of 21st Century Life

1. Building Critical Thinking

One of the most precious gifts that we can give our children is the ability to think for themselves about the issues of their life and the world in a manner where they are able to distinguish the truth from the falsehood in all matters and are not easily swayed in their thinking and judgements by the opinions of those around them.

In today's world, young Muslims are bombarded with a host of information about the Western liberal way of life and about Islam. On the one hand, the Western values and system are promoted as the most just and civilized way of life that can guarantee them happiness, prosperity and success, while on the other, Islam, its beliefs, laws and system are relentlessly attacked and accused of being oppressive, backward, uncivilized and the path to misery and discontent. Within such an environment, it is imperative that we build critical thinking within our young so that they can make sense of all of this information and be empowered to separate the truth from the lies. They will then be able to make solid and correct judgements and choices on the ideas and lifestyle they adopt, and the views they formulate about issues, world events and narratives about different ways of life.

The Qur'an repeatedly directs the believer to think deeply about issues rather than following blindly in order that they establish correct conclusions on issues, including the proofs for the existence of Allah (swt) and the truth of Islam. Allah (swt) says,

﴿وَإِخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ رِزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيَّاحِ آيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ﴾

“And [in] the alternation of night and day and [in] what Allah sends down from the sky of provision and gives life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and [in His] directing of the winds are signs for a people who reason.” [Al-Jathiyah: 5]

Allah (swt) also condemns blind following of the beliefs and views of others. He (swt) says,

﴿وَإِنْ تَطَّعْ أَكْثَرَ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ يُضِلُّوكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ﴾

“And if you follow most of those on earth, they will mislead you far away from Allah's Path. They follow nothing but conjectures, and they do nothing but lie.” [Al-Anaam: 116]

﴿وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا أَوَلَوْ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئاً وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ﴾

“And if it is said to them, follow what Allah has sent down, they said, nay we follow what we found our fathers following. What! Even though their fathers did not understand anything, nor were they guided.” [Al-Baqara: 170]

The critical method of thinking is a way of examining matters where sound judgements are made based upon clear proofs and deep study, rather than hearsay, allegations, the dominant voice in the society or superficial reactionary conclusions. This way of thinking cannot be developed by simply conveying Islamic knowledge to our children. Rather it requires for us to consistently encourage them to question and think deeply about the ideas, claims and viewpoints that are presented to them and then to decide whether to accept or reject them through carefully evaluating the soundness of the evidence that those ideas, claims and viewpoints are based upon. Furthermore, depending on the age and level of understanding of the child, different sides of the argument should be presented to them and

then they should be guided and directed in reflecting on the validity of each in order to come to the truth of the matter.

For example, take the theory of evolution and the claim by its advocates that human beings evolved from a process where less complex creatures and organisms changed into more complex ones in an essentially random manner with no guiding hand, hence there is no God. With such an absurd idea, the child should be made to question as to whether there is any example in life that they can observe where a simple structure develops into a more complex one through a random process that has no guiding hand? Furthermore, they should be made to question as to whether it is a sound judgement to believe that one creature 'evolved' into another just from observing similarities in fossil skeleton structures or body features of animals when no one was alive to directly witness and record this transformation. It is pure speculation and as ridiculous as claiming that a brick can 'evolve' into a house independent of any external power based upon the proof that both are made from similar material, even though both have no power to evolve into anything regardless of how many millions of years pass and no matter what kind of different environments they are subjected to. So how can such an absurd theory be accepted as proof to negate the existence of a Creator over the rational, reasoned argument that anything that exists and has a design needs an intelligent Being to create and design it; or the rational reasoned argument that anything that is limited or dependent upon something else for its survival or existence – which is the case for everything in this universe - cannot have made itself and hence needs an unlimited self-subsistent Being outside of this universe to have created it. That Being that created man, life and the universe is Allah (swt). There is absolutely nothing observable in life that goes against these principles. Hence, our youngsters should be able to understand that the existence of a God is a fact, based upon solid rational proofs rather than an unprovable theory based on pure conjecture as evolution is.

Let's take another example, such as the claim that any way of life, such as Islam that rejects liberal values such as personal and sexual freedoms is oppressive. With such an accusation, we should encourage our children to question what the true fall-out would be in a society where individuals would be allowed to simply pursue their desires and do what they wish, over having the concept of accountability to a Creator and living according to His Rules and Regulations. Would the first type of society generate respect for women, or protect the harmony of family life, or ensure the rights of children? It would not, and the proof is the multitude of social problems and crimes afflicting liberal societies today, which have caused many to feel oppressed. In contrast, the society governed by the Laws of the Creator would be one which individuals have their instincts fulfilled but in a manner that is beneficial to the safety and harmony of all, for only the One who created human beings would know how to achieve this.

Hence, our children should be encouraged to employ this critical way of thinking for all matters – whether related to their Islamic beliefs, the ideas of other nations, or political events in the world. For instance, when young Muslims are presented with the causes and solutions to political problems, they should be guided into evaluating the truth of these claims. So, for example, when they are faced with the dominant secular narrative and argument that the majority of wars are caused by religion or Islamic extremism, we should prompt them to study what the true sources of the current instability and conflicts in the world are rather than just accepting these claims without question. When they do, they will Insha Allah come to realise that most wars and acts of terrorism have been caused by conflicts over power and wealth, or anger instigated by the occupation and colonization of lands by governments seeking resources, material gain, and political influence in the world rather than any religious ideology or Islamic political beliefs. Or when our children are told that the solution to the bloodshed in Syria, Palestine, or Kashmir is through the United Nations route, they should be guided to question the origin of the UN, whose interests it truly serves, and what the success rate of the international community is with regards to protecting Muslim lives and rights. Following this, they should be presented with the Islamic view and solutions to these problems, so that they will be able to understand clearly that only these offer

credible answers to these issues – for example, how only a state that sincerely serves the interests of Islam and the Ummah: the Khilafah will have the capacity and political will to mobilize its army to liberate occupied Muslim land and protect the lives of the oppressed.

Building the critical way of thinking in our children also requires for them to understand the abilities and the limitations of the human mind. They should recognize where human reason and the faculty of human reasoning can be used when thinking about matters and where it can't due to its inherent constraints. This will ensure that they apply their thinking appropriately on issues. For example, the human mind can and should be used to establish if a Creator exists or if the Qur'an is the Word of Allah or which type of system is best to govern over mankind or the reality behind political events, etc. This is because it has the capability to examine the realities and proofs required to make conclusions on such issues. In Arabic, this is termed *Aql* - knowledge for it is from human reasoning.

However, when deciding if an action is good or bad, or if a law is just or unjust, or if there is life after death, then the human mind does not have the inherent ability to make judgements on these things directly and objectively. This is because on its own, it does not have access to those relevant realities and proofs required to make sound conclusions on these matters. Rather any view he formulates will be subjective or based on speculation. Our young need to understand that to establish the truth of these issues, they need to refer to evidence transmitted from a source whose origins has been proven to be sound and true, without a shadow of doubt through the correct use of human reasoning. This source is the Qur'an – for this is from the One who has all-knowledge and awareness of these matters for He created the human being and all of creation, and hence knows best its nature and what is good and bad for it. In Arabic, this is termed *Naql* - knowledge for it is information that is transmitted from a sound source.

Nurturing the critical way of thinking in young Muslims through encouraging and guiding them to make judgements based on clear, solid proofs and the appropriate evidence is a fundamental step in building conviction in Islamic thoughts and opinions and establishing the Islamic mentality which along with the Islamic disposition forms the Islamic personality. It is the manner of building our children to not just become those who have Islamic information but rather those who embrace the Islamic concepts as their own as well as those who are independent thinkers who consistently search for the truth, rather than being blind followers of others. And it is the path to creating Muslim youth who have no doubts in their Islamic ideas and views and hence are confident in their Deen and the judgements they make on realities.

If this important approach to examining and evaluating information is not built, then Islamic ideas and knowledge may just be one of many sources of information in the mind of the child and may not affect their viewpoint towards issues or behavior in life. Furthermore, building the correct way of thinking in Muslim children should always involve guiding them to reflect on the correct application of the concept in life so that the Islamic thought does not remain as an academic subject in their mind but rather that which is applied to their life.

﴿كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُوا الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

“It (the Qur'an) is a Book We have sent down to you, full of blessing, that they may ponder its revelations, and that men of understanding may reflect.” [Sad: 29]

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