Thinking Creatively about Muslim Education: Exploring Yusef Waghid's Maximalist-Minimalist Frame

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Abstract: The South African Muslim scholar, Yusef Waghid,conceptualized Islamic education by creatively using the maximalist-minimalist theoretical frame. Waghid brought into the discussion numerous interrelated concepts and terms that helped to construct his conceptualization. In response to this process and application to this genre of education, this essay review evaluates Waghid's text.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Conceptualization, Maximalist, Minimalist, Theoretical Frame

Introduction

Of late American/European think tanks and foundations seemed to have become obsessed with their focus upon the state of Muslim educational institutions in and outside the Muslim heartlands. The reason for their fixation was based on the problematic notion that Muslim educational institutions such as the Darul-'Ulum (i.e. Muslim theological seminaries) and madaris (i.e. Muslim schools) have been effectively contributing towards the training and graduation of Muslim extremists/radicals. And as a consequence of their negative perceptions of these Muslim institutions, they have persuaded Muslim nation-states such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to implement radical educational reform. The reports produced by, among others, the Brussels based International Crisis Group titled Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military (2005), the CRS Report for Congress titled Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background (2006), and Jeanne

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Moulton's report titled Madrasah Education: What Creative Associates have learnt (2008) are typical examples of the interest that has been shown by the think tanks, foundations and governments.

Whilst these developments might be viewed by these liberally oriented Western interest groups as significant steps in possibly curbing the increase in Muslim radicalism and towards the creation of an altered, acceptable western-friendly educational environment, the questions that we would like to pose in response to their highly arguable views are: have they seriously considered the causes of the rise in Muslim radicalism? Have they made any attempt to examine the philosophy of Muslim education before enforcing reforms in some of these predominantly Muslim countries? Have they partnered with stakeholders in these countries to deal fairly with these institutions? The conclusions that may be reached are: (a) that they have not undertaken a sober assessment of the rationale of Muslim educational institutions and (b) that they have unwisely recommended the imposition of their western liberal educational agendas onto these Muslim societies with the sole intention of indirectly influencing and controlling the Muslim mind.

In the light of these – perhaps – debatable observations and preliminary conclusions, let us turn to and review Professor Yusef Waghid's timely text that made reference to some of the above-mentioned issues. Professor Waghid wrote Conceptions of Islamic Education: Pedagogical Framings that was published 2011 by Peter Lang Publishing Inc. in New York (pp.i-xiii & 1-142, ISBN 978-1-4331-1203-4); this work, which critically reflected upon the conceptualization of Islamic education, appeared as the third volume in the 'Global Studies in Education series' issued by Peter Lang under the general co-editorship of A.C. Besley et al. Waghid, who has been the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University – one of South Africa's premier universities - for the past five years and who was conferred the prestigious 2011 National Research Foundation Special Recognition Award for being a Champion of Research Capacity Development at South African Higher Education Institutions, forms part of a cadre of Muslim scholars who have passionately engaged with educational ideas and practices over the years. He belongs to a coterie of scholars who have given much thought to appropriate ways of clarifying the state of Muslim education in Muslim minority communities and to some

extent in the Muslim heartlands. Even though Waghid benefitted from the intellectual contributions of respected scholars such as Professor Sayed Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931) who explored the nature of Islamic education (1991), he sought different methods of conceptualizing Islamic education; as a consequence of his intense research in the area of Islamic education - some of which appeared in earlier peer-reviewed publications (1994, 2006, 2009), Waghid produced this wonderfully thought-out text under review with the objective of sharing his particular conceptualization of this critical term.

Waghid provided a lengthy preface (pp. vii-xiii) in which he laid bare his arguments for writing this text within a South African context for an audience beyond his country of birth. Apart from summarizing the contents of each of the chapters, Waghid inadvertently left out the summary of the final concluding chapter (p. xiii). Nonetheless, in the first chapter Waghid addressed the book's underlying theme and that is 'Conceptions of Islamic Education' (pp. 1-14). Herein Waghid introduced Islamic education by bringing into view and unpacking three pivotal educational concepts, namely tarbiyyah (nurturing), ta'lim (learning) and ta'dib (good action) (pp. 2-5) that do not possess a single meaning but a set of multiple meanings. The constitutive meanings of each of these concepts, Waghid contended, should be discussed and explored along a maximalist and minimalist continuum. He juxtaposed the one concept (i.e. maximalist) against the other (i.e. minimalist) so that we get a fair sense of why he employed the two and what he really meant when he used them.

He, for example, stated that for "a minimalist account of ta'dib (goodness) considers Islamic education as biased towards the Muslim community"; according to him this is a narrow interpretation of what Islamic education actually means. He thus favored a position that advocates "a maximalist account of ta'dib … (which) considers every individual irrespective of linguistic, cultural, religious, socio-economic, political and ethnic differences as worthy of respect as persons" (p. 4). From this it is quite obvious that Waghid subtly implored individuals to opt for 'a maximalist instead of a minimalist position' within the range of Islamic education. Apart from dealing with the three constitutive meanings of the educational terms, Waghid connected them to another set of primary concepts, namely 'truth' and 'justice' that tarbiyyah, ta'lim and ta'dib try to work towards; he referred to them as the fundamental

raison d'etre for enacting Islamic education. Whilst we are in general agreement with the thrust of Waghid's argument for a maximalist rather than a minimalist position, we would like him to have explored at the outset in brief the important difference between Muslim education and Islamic education; for us and others like Farid Panjwani (2006) and Halstead (2004) there is a distinct difference, and in a text such as this we would liked to have read Waghid's insights as a philosopher of education.

Nonetheless, let us shift to the second chapter in which Waghid assessed the ummah as the democratic locale of 'Islamic education and practice' (pp. 15-38). In this chapter Waghid cogently demonstrated how individuals' – who form an integral part of the ummah (community) - deeds or actions (i.e. 'amal), their engagements or dialogue (i.e. shura) with one another and their individual striving (i.e. jihad) for justice [towards themselves and everyone else] are constructed by employing the maximalist vis-à-vis minimalist approach. By way of an example, he pointed out that "… ummatic practices that are linked to … ideals of democracy are … adhering to a maximalist view of Islamic education" and he went on to show how "the practices of a democratic community (i.e. the ummah) are not inconsistent with the primary sources of Islamic education" (p. 19). Waghid, who drew upon scholars such Jurgen Habermas (b. 1929) and Seyla Benhabib (b. 1950) that elaborated upon notions of discursive democratic action and deliberative engagement, posed significant questions before answering them in the light of the maximalist vis-à-vis minimalist approach. For example, as far as Waghid was concerned an individual's irresponsible actions are discriminatory and non-deliberative whereas an individual whose actions are responsible fall within the ambit of what may be termed 'democratic action;' an action that is "a potent means to prevent human insecurity, violence and terror" (p. 27) and one that is in line with the maximalist position. Waghid underscored the point that good action (i.e. ta'dib) through the practice of respectful disagreement (i.e. ikhtilaf), which is an essential part of upholding and conforming to democratic action, would pave the way for world peace and human happiness. Whilst we agree with this view, none of us can ignore the fact that at the existential level most of us encounter a radically different picture; one where there is calculated chaos, deliberate destruction and perennial unhappiness.

That aside, after a careful analysis of the central concepts such as 'amal, shura, and jihad that have been shaped and influenced by Islamic education, Waghid undertook a critical survey of the status of 'Islamic educational institutions' (pp. 39-84) in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Turkey before zooming on the South African madaris. He prefaced his chapter by offering a clear explanation of what is meant by the different types of Muslim educational institutions; and towards the end of his discussion in this section Waghid underlined the fact that the institutions such as the maktab and madrasa might have common external features but they differ from one another because of the individuals' – who manage and control the particular institution – perception and understanding of Islamic education. Waghid, however, commented on the maximalist perspective of early Muslim institutions before he provided an instructive survey of Muslim thought as encountered in South Asia (e.g. India), Southeast Asia (e.g. Indonesia) and Southwest Asia (e.g. Turkey) (pp. 49-56).

Even though Waghid's limited empirical inspection was pursued to confirm whether the Muslim educational institutions in these countries conformed to the maximalist vis-à-vis minimalist approach, we would also have liked him to have dealt with Muslim thought in the North African (Arab) world which included Egypt and Southwest Asian region of which Saudi Arabia is a part; there is ample evidence that point to the fact that these are two regions - or rather nation-states – that have deeply influenced the outcomes of Muslim educational developments in South(ern) Africa (pp. 56-66). Interestingly when Waghid assessed the South African madaris system, he observed that this system fulfilled the minimalist criteria of Islamic education (pp. 71-72). This observation was borne out by the empirical data that he collected; the data demonstrated that in spite of the ubiquitous 'doctrinaire education' among the madaris – a view that Halstead (2004) willingly endorsed when he studied the madaris in the British society and an issue that Waghid queried, there were and are occasions where 'imaginaire interpretations' have been harnessed in the South African madaris system; for Waghid this was indeed a positive sign and an encouraging development.

Turning to the contents of chapter four in which Waghid covered educational aspects that gave rise 'Towards maximalist notions of Islamic education' (pp.85-106), we observe that Waghid brought into focus three critical concepts; they are discourses of salam

(peace), rahmah (compassion), and sa'adah (happiness) that have been used within the Muslim educational system to cultivate, enhance and reinforce the maximalist position; a position that an ethically oriented community (ummah), that cares, respects and acts tolerantly towards others, would uphold in order to counter and neutralize any form of extremism and any type of structural/physical violence. In this chapter he extracted ideas from Hannah Arendt (d. 1975) in support of some of his ideas pertaining to peace vis-à-vis violence (pp. 91-92) and from M. Nussbaum with regards to thoughts on compassion (pp. 97-101). Waghid stressed that when reflecting upon these concepts in general and happiness in particular, then we should bear in mind that they are tied to 'knowledge' and 'good action' and that they have to be viewed from a worldy and other-worldly dimension; though the two are intimately related, the latter is associated with human affairs and social interactions of this world and the former is connected to the ultimate and eternal (pp. 103).

Waghid basically argued, and quite correctly so, that one of Islamic education's maximalist goals is "to achieve happiness in society by linking such happiness to the attainment of democratic justice" (p. 103); and he further argued that the other objectives are to learn (a) how one should contribute towards the justice of one's society as well as the world, and (b) what it means to be decent/civil or a democratically just person. Waghid essentially posited the view that when individuals are taught about the rudimentary facts about democratic justice, then they would inevitably learn how (a) to recognize the freedom of others, (b) to contribute to private and public justice, and (c) to act civilly or decently – in other words, act as a democratically just and fair individual. Waghid concluded that if or when they follow these ideas, they would learn how "to be happy because happiness is linked to the realization of a democratically just society…" (p. 105).

On this optimistic note let us go to Waghid's penultimate chapter in which he addressed 'Islamic education and cosmopolitanism' (pp. 107-122). Herein Waghid reflected to what extent the notions of cosmopolitanism as a form of education are related to meanings and interpretations of Islamic education. Waghid exemplified how cosmopolitanism challenged Islamic education and how the latter responded to it as a specific liberal project. He concurred with advocates of the liberal conceptions of cosmopolitanism that cosmopolitanism

along with education "involve people who are morally obligated towards 'cultural others with the necessary pragmatist resolve to act on those obligations'" (p. 108). And as a corollary, the educational idea expressed and emphasized here in effect cements the two forms of education (i.e. cosmopolitanism and Islamic education); instead of standing opposed to one another as some might wish to argue, they reinforce – here Waghid extracted thoughts from Jacques Derrida (d. 2004) - the same idea and that is that "education has to do with connecting or relating to the other" (p. 109). And after Waghid revealed how both types of educational systems open up space for individuals to engage intensely with and listen deliberatively to one another's commonalities (pp. 111-112), he argued in favor of cosmopolitanism as an instance of Islamic education in the closing sections of the chapter.

And this brings us to Waghid's final concluding chapter titled 'Towards a madrassah imaginary: Cultivating a maximalist view of Islamic education' (pp. 123-136). In this chapter Waghid explored Islamic education from three angles with the hope that it may achieve the maximalist ideal in the contemporary environment. Firstly, he explained how an educational system such as the Islamic education model ought to develop a sense of 'responsibility for the other'; a point that Jacques Derrida underlined and which Waghid eloquently expanded upon. Secondly, he positively argued for the re-insertion of the act of 'thinking' (i.e. a form of 'critique') into the madrasah system; a system that pursues an emancipatory pedagogy and one that paves the way for opportunities for deliberative engagements, unfettered freedoms, and an equitable exchange of ideas. And thirdly, he presented the view that this type of educational system ought to construct conditions of friendship that would give rise to mutual action and communal change and create a friendly, hospitable educational environment where the maximalist ideal would be experienced. Taking into account Waghid's thoughts of how Muslim educational institutions ought to act, we wonder whether some of them will respond to this challenge and demonstrate their 'will to change' and reform.

In conclusion, we found Waghid's arguments compelling and attractive because he persuasively plotted his ideas and convincingly argued his case for a maximalist ideal as opposed to a minimalist model in Islamic education. Despite some of the questions we raised regarding, in certain sections of the text, the absence of a user-friendly

index that the publishers forgot to insert, a few typos (see pages 2, 3, 15, 23, 64, 68, 70, 78, 89, 103, and 127) and an unclear sentence in one chapter (p. 75 para 3 lines 12-14) that the copy-editor overlooked, we endorse Smeyers' (2011) response that this is a text that will not disappoint the reader. Waghid wrote a judicious and an informative text on the conceptualization of Islamic education and he made his mark by providing a different and an insightful perspective of how Muslim educational institutions should be viewed within the contemporary period. Since this book consists of many salient ideas pertaining to Islamic education, we urge educationists to not only read it but prescribe it for their students in the teacher-training colleges and in the academic programs that are offered at tertiary institutions.

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