

Islamic Religious Curriculum in Muslim Countries: The Experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract

Education from the Islamic perspective, as a long life process and the function of Islamic religious education, should endeavor to teach and help students acquire different aspects of knowledge within the parameters of Islam through the use of a well designed curriculum. This paper attempts to investigate and discuss the development of Islamic religious curriculum in Muslim countries with emphasis on South-East Asia especially Indonesia and Malaysia. It begins with a brief history on the curricular reform of religious education in Arab countries and their impact on Southeast Asia. Then, it focuses on reform in religious education curriculum and the challenges faced by both countries. Some suggestions are put forward to reach cherished goals of Islamic religious education and the betterment of Islamic curricular reform in Muslim countries.

Introduction

Education is one of the most important aspects in human development and perhaps the most influential social institution in any societies. In general, education is to transmit a common set of beliefs, values, norms, understanding from the adult generation to its youths. Islam looks at education as a form of worship (ibadah) where Muslim share a common set of values based on the Quran (the fundamental and most reliable source for many fields of knowledge) and Sunnah. Hassan, K. (1989) describes Education from the Islamic perspective, as a long life process of preparing an individual to actualize his role as a vicegerent (Khalifah) of Allah on earth and thereby contribute fully to the reconstruction and development of his society in order to achieve well-being in this world and hereafter.

In order to come to some agreement regarding the purpose of Islamic education, it may be beneficial to firstly elicit a definition of education and Islamic education. Ashraf (1979) defines education as a process involving three rewards: the individual, the society or the community to which he or she belongs and the whole content of reality, both material and spiritual, which plays a dominant role in determining the nature and destiny of man and society. Therefore, education plays a very important role and is a pillar for the national development in many societies. Al-Attas (1984) maintains

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that the purpose of Islamic education is not to cram the pupil's head with facts but to prepare them for a life of purity and sincerity. This total commitment to character building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics is the highest goal of Islamic education. Here he stressed on character building that needs to be moulded together in an educational curriculum which he considers as the highest objective of Islamic education. A more comprehensive definition of Islamic education was composed at the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah in 1977, the following words:

Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of man's spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings and bodily senses. Education should cater therefore for the growth of man in all its aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate all aspects towards goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large (Ashraf, 1985, p. 4).

Therefore, as agreed by Muslim scholars in the Mecca Declaration above, it is clear that in order to develop the Islamic system and society, an educational system and its curriculum must be planned according to Islamic worldview as Langgulung (2004) stresses that Islamization of curriculum is to place the curriculum and its four components i.e. aims and objectives, content, methods of teaching and method of evaluation within the Islamic worldview.

The writers strongly believe that the function of Islamic education should endeavor to teach and help students acquire different aspects of knowledge within the parameters of Islam through the use of a well designed curriculum.

This paper attempts to investigate the development of curriculum of religious education in Muslim countries with emphasis on South-East, Asia especially Indonesia and Malaysia. It focuses on the curricular reform of religious education in Arab countries and their impact on Southeast Asian Education and the challenges faced by religious education. Some suggestions are put forward to reach cherish goals of Islamic education and the betterment of Islamic curricular reform in Muslim countries.

Islamic religious curricular has gone through four distinct periods in Islamic history. The first period is the period of development which started with the resurgence of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) in Makkah until

the end of Umayyad period. The main characteristics of religious curriculum of this period are:

- purely Arabic in nature
- strengthening the basis of Islamic religion and spreading its teaching
- based on religious sciences and Arabic grammar
- concentrate more on study of Hadith and jurisprudence
- concentrate more on Arabic grammar and literature
- the initial study of foreign languages

During this period, the mosque was the centre of activities of the Islamic society and education was the important part of those activities.

The second period is the flourishing period of education starting in the East with the emergence of Abbasid dynasty until the downfall by Tartar in 659H/1258 M whereas in the Western part of Islamic Empire the important centre is Andalusia, especially under the rules of Umayyad Khaliphate. During this period the curriculum was expanded to include non religious sciences as well as the centre also expanded to include Makkah, AlMadinah in Hijaz; Basrah and Kufah in Iraq; Damascus in Sham (Syria); Cairo in Egypt and Granada and Svilla in Andalusia.

The third period was the period of weaknesses and decadence which started in the East and North Africa with the resurgence of Ottoman Empire which lasted until the independence of Muslim countries. The most important characteristics of this period are:

- the entire curriculum was based on the transmitted knowledge
- the decline of the Arabic language
- the method was based on memorization
- the deterioration of scientific research and thinking process
- the spread of the method of summarization and repetition of what was made by early scholars.

The fourth period is known as the period of revival, awakening and rebuilding education in Muslim countries which started subsequent to the independence these countries. This process is still going on to the present time. The most important characteristics of religious education during this period are as follows:

- adoption of Western educational system
- increasing concern on natural as well as human sciences
- penetration of Western culture
- an attempt toward eliminating dualism between modern education and religious education.

Islamic Religious Educational reforms in Arab Countries and its impacts on Southeast Asia

There are many reasons contributing to the awakening and realizing their backwardness which in turn urging them to rebuild their societies and particularly their educational system. The movement toward reform and rehabilitation is led by a group of reformist to rebuild their country. Because Muslim countries in the Arab World were many we will only concentrate on one of them namely Egypt which is the earliest country to adopt Western Education in Muslim country. After that we will discuss reforms in Islamic religious education in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia.

Contemporary awakening in Egypt and its impact on education

- i. French invasion of Egypt in 1798 opened their eyes on the superiority of the French weapons and equipments that made their campaign succeed in their swift war against the Egyptian. This defeat urged the Egyptians to review the reasons for their weaknesses and suggest reform for their education. Among the prominent reformers are Rifaah Al Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak who were the first mission of student sent to France to study French educational system. They came back and made several reforms in Egyptian educational system such as to establish Darul Ulum in 1872, to be the first school for teacher preparation or teacher education. Later on their influence on the reforms of Al Azhar is also significant.
After this period, there are other reformers in Egyptian education. The most prominent one is Muhammad Abduh (1849-1904) who is one way or the other, influenced by Al Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak. He was also close contact with Jamaluddin Al Afghani (d.1897) who was campaigning against totalitarianism, ignorance and stagnancy. Muhammad Abduh made a comprehensive reforms in Al Azhar in which he taught after coming back from France, where he limited the duration of the study, vacation and holidays, reformed teaching methods and examination. (i.e. before this, in Al Azhar there was no limitation of the years of study where students can stay as long as they wished, lack of teaching methods and no standardized examination). He also demanded the cancellation of ineffective books, commentaries and footnotes and replace them with one which are more relevant to the problems of contemporary society.
- ii. The grand sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Mustafa Al Maraghy, also has devoted considerable effort to reform Al azhar which would have enabled it to go along with the need of time, where he

legislated the well known law no.29 in 1930 which included many reforms and changes related to curriculum, teaching staff, students and so on.

- iii. In 1936, another law to review the system in Al azhar which did not face the resistance as did the reforms introduced by Muhammad Abduh.
- iv. The 1961 law is probably the most important one to organize and run Al Azhar, by which modern faculties such as faculties of Medicine, faculty of dentistry, faculty of agriculture, faculty of economics, and faculty for girls where natural sciences beside the religious and linguistic sciences were established. Faculty of education was later on established.

Reform in Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia and Malaysia

Indonesian Experiences

After the downfall of Ottoman Empire the entire Muslim World was completely dominated by Western Colonial countries, particularly British, French, Spanish, Dutch and so forth. Southeast Asian countries were ruled by the British and the Dutch. The British ruled Malaya and North Borneo, where as the Dutch ruled Indonesia. Dutch rule in Indonesia lasted for over three hundred years who used iron claws to suppress private schools that sought to establish carders to fight colonialists. Islam is Indonesia's dominant religion with approximately 88% of its population identifying as Muslims, making it the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world.

The establishment of Sekolah Tinggi Islam

Japan occupied Indonesia for three years, during which Dutch schools were totally closed down and replaced by Japanese curriculum including language of instruction. Indonesian fighters for independence suggested that since all tertiary level of education were closed by Japanese, it is high time that Islamic higher institution of learning (Sekolah Tinggi Islam = STI) be established. The idea was suggested by Majelis Shura Muslimin Indonesia (Masyumi) along with the establishment of armed forces called Hizbullah (God's Party). The prominent personalities leading the school are:

The Sekolah Tinggi Islam started with four faculties i.e. Law, Religion, Economics and Education. After independence, Religious faculty was sponsored by Ministry of religious affairs and became Government Institute of religious knowledge (Institute Agama Islam Negeri = IAIN) whose curriculum was planned by people graduated from Al Azhar. It is logical that the curriculum of IAIN in early days of its establishment was carbon – copy

of faculties in Al Azhar before the latest reforms in 1961. The institute originally had three faculties like in Al Azhar, i.e. Usuludin, Shariah and Arabic language, later they added faculty of tarbiyyah (education)

Organization like the Muhammadiyah during the Dutch rule even set schools using Dutch as a medium of instruction to compete with the schools established by the Dutch. Other organizations such as Nahdatul Ulama (NU), Persatuan Islam (Persis) and Al -Irsyad continued to maintain "Pesantren" (religious training centre for Advanced Islamic Studies), "Madrasah" (Islamic schools) and "Pondok" (Muslim boarding schools) which they had been managing, so much so that bumiputera (the son of the soil) children need not have to go to Dutch government schools for their education.

In the early fifties the government tried to set up schools for the training of religious teachers (Sekolah Pendidikan Guru Agama-PGA) by putting some of the existing "Madrasah" under the management of religious affairs. The objective was to train religious teachers in government schools where religious knowledge was also taught. This was followed by the setting up of "Sekolah Guru Hakim Agama" (SGHA) to cater to the needs of the Muslim jurists both in Shariah and the State courts. The Muslim organizations and Muslim community alike were quite disappointed with the scope offered by both the PGA and SGHA.

Muslim organizations such as Muhammadiyah continued to be self-reliant in the management of their schools. All they needed to do was to comply with the government regulations and current requirements. "Pesantren" too began to mushroom since the fifties. A press statement issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the later part of the seventies put the figure at 20,000 "Pesantren" with 9 million students. It is estimated that current figures have far exceeded these numbers As a result of 40% increase in the Indonesian population from 150 million in the seventies to a 220 millions currently.

Rapid Development of Islamic schools

Currently, the popularity of madrasas is rising in parts of Southeast Asia. According to Ronald A.L (2001), almost 20-25% of primary and secondary school children in Indonesia attend *pesantrens* (Islamic religious schools). Indonesian pesantrens have been noted for teaching a moderate form of Islam, one that encompasses Islamic mysticism or Sufism. Among the factors that contribute to the rapid development of Islamic schools in Indonesia lately was government's inability to cater to the educational needs of all children. The problem therefore was partly resolved by the existence of private schools and the dissatisfaction with the scope offered by the PGA and the SGHA in the fifties. The government, however, has been trying to improve the situation by:

- i. accepting the standard of “ madrasah” so that they would be at part with public schools.
- ii. uplifting students of “madrasah” for admission into equivalent public schools at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels.
- iii. recognizing the private madrasah certificate as equivalent to the state (government) madrasah certificate to enable leavers of private madrasah to continue with their studies in equivalent government schools.

It is interesting to highlight that the rapid development of Islamic schools in Southeast Asia is also due to the influence of the Islamic revivalist phenomenon world wide, particularly the international Conferences of Muslim Education first held in Makkah 1977, Second in Islamabad 1980, Third in Dakka (Bangladesh), 1981, Fourth in Jakarta 1982, the Fifth in Cairo 1987 and Sixth in Makkah 1993 and the Seventh in South Africa 1996.

These Conferences had deliberated on this religious education from elementary to tertiary level and produced guidelines for the implementation. The question is how far Muslim countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, have responded to these guidelines and implemented them in their curriculum. The international Conferences of Muslim Education mentioned above should be a stepping stone toward the unified religious curricular reforms in Muslim countries for the years to come.

Malaysian Experiences

The history of Islamic religious education before independence

In general the history of education in Malaysia started with the emergence of 'Pondok' schools as well as Arabic and religious schools towards the end of the 19th century. In the early 20th century, educational institutions became more structured and worldly knowledge was included into the religious school curriculum. It was during the rule of the British that vernacular schools were introduced. Schooling amongst the Malays started with the opening of Penang Free Schools in 1821. Education in Malaysia may be obtained from government-sponsored schools, private schools, or through home-schooling. The education system is highly centralized, particularly for primary and secondary schools, with state and local governments having little say in the curriculum or other major aspects of education. Standardized tests are a common feature of Malaysian educational system.

The history of Islamic education in Malaysia dated back as early as 13th century when Islam first came to this region (Abdul Halim, 1995). Islamic education can be divided into four stages:

- Centered around teachers' houses
- Centered around mosques, suraus and madrasahs
- Centered around religious institutions called 'Pondok'. (literally , Hut school)
- Centered around religious institutions called 'Madrasah' schools

At the early stage it was carried out in a very informal way and it suited the environment at that time where it centered around teachers' houses (rumah-rumah guru). Students came to teachers' (normally known as Ulama) houses to learn reading Quran and fardhu Ain (basic Islamic teaching).

Due to the increasing number of students flocking at the teachers where the later could not accommodate all of them, came the idea of religious education to be centered around mosques, suraus and madrasahs. Teachers used to sit with their students in circles. The role of these teachers/ ulama' was not merely that of a teacher but also to act as advisor to the villager's families and communities. These teachers/ulama' were easily received by the society even sometimes they were called to palaces to teach the king of the state and their relatives.

After graduating, these students would go back to their homeland, either pursuing their studies to the Middle East country or often open their own study circle/halaqah. They also formed a link in the chain between one ulama' and another.

Subsequently, it centered around religious institutions called 'Pondok' (literally, Hut school). Pondok are traditional religious schools which dominated the Malay world education system in the earlier part of 14th century i.e. pre colonial and even during colonial period. The Pondok institution was the first and most influential legacy in Islamic education in both Malaysia and Indonesia (called Pesantren).

The management of these Pondok differs from place to place and there was no standard set of syllabus. However, the mode of instruction was similar to that practiced in Makkah and Cairo before the advent of modern methods of teaching. Rosnani (1996) mentioned that many scholars have discussed the origin of Pondok institution in Malaysia, whether it originated from Sumatera, Indonesia or Pattani, in Southern Thailand. However, she argues that one cannot dismiss the possibility that the pondok institution was an influence of Makkah education of that era because the content and the teaching methods in pondok institutions were comparable to those in the Al Haram Mosque in Makkah and many pondok teachers had taken the pilgrimage to Makkah and deepened their knowledge of Islam. Some of the famous ulama (Tok guru) in the middle of 19th century were Tok Selehor, Tok Kenali, Tok Kemuning, Tok Ku Pulau Manis, etc.

For example, Tok Kenali (Tok Guru Haji Muhammad Yusof), has built reputedly oldest pondok in Malaysia. The Tok Kenali pondok became a famous centre of learning which led to large numbers of people from different states coming to learn at the pondok, and subsequently other pondok schools were opened by some of his former students. This tok guru/teacher-pupil relationship and teacher-pupil network spread to Southern Thailand, Sumatera, Pattani and Indonesia.

Although there was no standardised content and no limitation in the years of study: the pondok curriculum shared some common features of the subject. All pondoks usually include the basic disciplines such as Tauhid, Al-Quran, Fiqh, Hadith, Nahu, Sarf, Tasawwuf and Akhlaq. After years of study and considered as 'alim' or knowledgeable by their 'guru' these students would come back to their respective villages to teach and some would go abroad to further their study to Makkah, Cairo, Pakistan or India. When these students went to Al Azhar University and other Middle East countries:,they were taught and trained with the curriculum of that particular place of study and easily got influenced with it. Thus, when they returned to their home countries:,they usually joined the existing pondok or established a new one. They would planned and implement either totally or partially the curriculum they had went through in their early days as students. Thus, it was not a surprise to find out that many pondoks or madrasahs curriculum were the 'carbon -copy' of Al- Azhar and other Middle Eastern countries. This situation continues until now since the academic results or certificate given by these pondoks and madrasahs are not generally accepted by mainstream universities,thus many of these students have to continue their education in locations such as Pakistan, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

At the end of 19th century, especially after World War 1, with the influence of 'Islah movement' led by reformists Sayyid Jamaluddin Al Afghani (1839-1879) and Muhammad Abduh, (1849-1905), many religious 'madrasah' schools were established in many places in Malaysia as alternative to pondok school where a number of Muslims who felt that the pondok schools could not deal with the challenge of colonial education and its curriculum only confined to *fardu 'Ain*. . The Malaysian reformists ideas came from Sheikh Tahir Jalaludin and Shiekh Ahmad Al Hadi who were very much influenced by Al-Afghani and Abduh (Al Attas). In order to overcome the problems, the Madrasatul Mashoor al-Islamiyah was established by Shiekh Ahmad in Pulau Penang in the year 1916 using Arabic as the language of instruction, taught Fiqh as well as secular subjects. According to Rosnani (2004) Sheikh Ahmad abandoned the memorization method of study and narrow religious curriculum and initiated student activities such as debates and rhetorics.

With these Madrasah system, Islamic education not only focused on spiritual, fardu Ain and Tauhid but it became more comprehensive, it

included other subjects in the curriculum such as Arabic language, Maths and Geography.

Islamic Religious Education during the British Period

Japan conquered Malaysia (1941-45) and was defeated to the British in 1946. The British then made few educational reforms starting with Barnes Report (1950) and Fern Wu Report (1951). Briefly, the Barnes Report stated the lack of religious instruction in schools had led Malay parents sent their children to learn religion in the afternoon sessions which were very tiresome. The committee suggested 'jawi' be omitted and religious instruction be taught instead. Barnes Report also suggested only one system of primary education (national primary school) to be held. Fenn Wu Report suggested and supported 'trilingual' where Malay, Chinese and English languages should be encouraged to be the medium of instruction. As a compromise, the government passed the Education Ordinance 1952, where the promotion of national school system by gradual introduction of English into Malay Vernacular schools and Malay and English languages into Chinese and Tamil Vernacular school and also recommended the maintenance of English national type school. Interestingly, it also recommended that religious education be provided to pupils either within school premises or in suitable premises close by as part of the school lessons (Hussein, 1957).

During the British period education was divided into religious and non religious education. Here has the beginning of the secular education in Malaysia. Secular schools in Malaysia were largely an innovation of British colonial government. Many of the earliest schools in Malaysia were started in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. The oldest school in Malaysia is the Penang Free School, founded in 1816, followed by Malacca Free School later changed to Malacca High school in 1978. While the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) was established in 1905 based on English Public School. Many of these schools still carry with them an air of prestige although there is no formal difference between these schools and other schools.

Islamic Religious Education after Independence and the Impact of National Educational Policy

Formal educational policies came into place after Malaya's independence in 1957. The task of the new government was to establish a national education system which, while making the Malay as the national language of the country, the languages and cultures of non- Malay communities are preserved and sustained. The most important development was the implementation of The Education Act 1961 where The Razak

Report (1956) and the Rahman Talib Report (1960) became the basis for the formulation of this Act. The main features of the Razak Report are; a uniform national education and centralized examination system, A Malayan - oriented curriculum, one type of national Secondary school, English and Malay language compulsory and Bahasa Melayu as the main medium of instruction. While the main features Rahman Talib Report are: Free primary and universal education, automatic promotion to Form 3, Establishment of schools Inspectorate, Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction, Religious/moral education as basis for spiritual development, emphasis on teacher education.

In addition, the implementation of Islamic religious education in National Educational System was also based on the reports made during Razak Report (1956) and Rahman Talib Report (1960) where it is clearly stated that "*in any assisted school where not less than 15 pupils profess the Muslim religion, religious instruction to them shall be provided at public expense. Instruction in other religions to other pupils may be provided so long as no additional cost falls upon public funds and provided that no child shall be required to attend classes in religious instructions without the parents' consent*" (Para 121). This particular recommendation actually had great repercussion on the growth of Islamic religious schools.

Initially, Islamic religious education was taught after school hours. Starting from 1962, the Islamic religious subject was implemented and officially included in the school time table where it was taught for 120 minutes (2 hours) per week by the teachers approved by the state authority. (Education Ordinance 1957).

Rosnani (1996) is of the opinion that although these recommendations were positive, in the sense that they gave importance to religious instruction in national and national-type schools, they affected all Islamic religious adversely i.e. a decline in pupil enrolment because Malay parents saw many advantages in the national schools, firstly their children could learn religion whether in national and national-type English schools. Second, greater opportunities to further studies and, greater job opportunities that awaited graduates of national schools compared to religious schools. The decline in enrolment was due also to the automatic promotion until Form Three, the abolition of the Malayan Secondary School Entrance Examination and the establishment of national secondary schools.

The second major consequence was the transformation of the Madrasah's curriculum in accordance with the National Educational Policy where the Malay language replaced Arabic as the medium of language and the religious subject had to be reduced to accommodate new 'secular' subjects i.e. Malay language, English, Mathematics, Geography, History and general Science. The third major impact of the National Education Policy was the shortage of teachers in the Madrasah because qualified teachers left for better facilities and better pay offered by National schools. Madrasahs

institutions also had acute financial problems and had to be rescued by state religious department. Rosnani, (1996) further claimed that these factors, in addition to changing societal values brought about the decline of Madrasah and near demise of pondok in 1960s.

Paradigm Shift and Malaysian National Educational Philosophy (NEP)

To ensure that the Malaysian education system responds properly to the nation building, unity and the development of the country there were many curricula reviews and tremendous changes in Malaysia education since its independence in 1957. It was a fact that the 70s witnessed the increase of Islamic consciousness among the Muslim throughout the Muslim World including Malaysia which subsequently contributed to educational reform. A few Islamic organizations such as ABIM, Al Arqam and Jamaat Tabligh were also formed during the 70s where their dynamic activities helped to strengthen Islam in Malaysia. According to Ghazali (2000), there are many factors contributing to the Malaysian educational reform. Apart from the implementation of suggestions and report made in 1979, the changes in the political climate where people were more inclined to Islam should be considered. The influence of the Islamic movement in Iran gave a significant impact among the Muslims in Malaysia to support the Islamic party (PAS).

Then, the government under the leadership of Tun Dr. Mahathir officially introduced Islamization policy in 1983. Consequently International Islamic University (IIUM) and Islamic Banking were established. The philosophy of the University was inspired by the recommendations of the first World Conference on Muslim Education held in Mecca in 1977. According to this philosophy, knowledge shall be propagated in the spirit of Tawhid leading towards the recognition of Allah as the Absolute Creator and Master of mankind. Thus all disciplines of knowledge should lead towards subservience of this truth. Knowledge is a form of trust (amanah) from Allah to man, and hence man should utilize knowledge according to Allah's will in performing his role as the servant and vicegerent (khalifah) of Allah on earth. In this way the seeking of knowledge is regarded as an act of worship (Dairy IIUM, 2005).

Subsequently in 1982, The Ministry of education, introduced The New Primary School Curriculum (NPSC). It was implemented nation wide in 1983. The NPSC was formulated to provide equal opportunity to students to acquire basic skills and knowledge in addition to inculcating noble moral values. The emphasis of this new curriculum is on the acquisition of the three basic skills, namely reading, writing and mathematics. With a renewed emphasis on integration, it was decided in 1993 that a change of name take place. The New Primary School Curriculum (NPSC) is now known as The

Integrated Curriculum for Primary School (ICPS) (Curriculum Development Centre 1997).

The New Secondary School Integrated curriculum (NSSIC) or integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) which was guided by the recommendation of the first World Conference on Muslim Education 1977, in Makkah was introduced in 1988 for lower secondary level and in 1989 the curriculum was implemented in phase up to form five level. (Langgulung, 1993). The main focus of the curriculum is on an integrated educational approach. The approach incorporates knowledge with skills and moral values. It also combines theory with practical training. The strategy is to incorporate moral values into curriculum and the Malay language with curriculum (Curriculum Development Centre, 1997).

The Education Act 1961 has determined Malaysia's education policies for over three decades until it was repealed in 1996. The Education Act 1996 is the latest and is the most comprehensive where it stated for the first time in writing the National Educational Philosophy (Under Act 550). The official statement of NEP states as follows:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on the firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are resilient and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and the nation at large.

This National Philosophy of Education calls for "developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated, knowledgeable, competent and possess high moral standards ". (Langgulung, 1993) stated that based on this NEP, the planning of KBSM is meant to help students to develop their intellectual, spiritual, emotional as well as physical potentials in comprehensive and integrated manner. It is hope that the comprehensive and integrated development could create student who is able to adjust himself in society and contribute to the progress and the welfare of himself in order to function effectively and productively in the national development.

The Islamic Educational Challenge that has Faced Malaysia since Sept 11 - till now

It is a well known fact that the Muslim education system in Muslim world including Malaysia and Indonesia, is the extension of the Western educational system which is compartmentalised and secularized. As a consequence of the Western influence and the weaknesses of the Muslims, the religious curriculum in schools and university levels in both Malaysia and Indonesia are still compartmentalised. Rosnani (2004) claimed that the curriculum practiced in Muslim countries either borrowed wholesome or partially from the West and even the subjects and methodologies presently taught in the countries are copies of the Western. Here, it is important to note the statement made by Tan Sri Murad, the President of the social committee for the study of curriculum in national schools that "the implementation of religious education at National Schools have a lot of weaknesses because there are still many students who can't read Al Quran and write Jawi although they had attended six years of primary schools. (Berita Harian, 26/Feb/2003).

In a number of surveys and writings carried out for examples by Rosnani (1996), Sahari & Langgulong (1999) and Abdul Hamid, a religious advisor to the Prime Minister (Berita Harian 26/Feb/2003). Authors found several weaknesses of Islamic religious schools such as its curriculum, lack of facilities and financial and poor administration. However, one has to remember that People Islamic Religious Schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat - SAR) has contributed significantly to Islamic education in both Malaysia and Indonesia since before its independence. Despite the weaknesses of Islamic religious schools, informal conversations and interviews with some Muslim parents revealed that they were still interested to enroll their children at this school due to a variety of reasons:

- With the high cost of living, many Muslim parents are both working full time thus they have very limited time to teach their own children and expect the schools to act on their behalf.
- Some of these Muslim parents are interested to teach their own children, unfortunately they themselves do not know how to read the Al- Quran and either have no or very limited knowledge regarding 'fardu Ain'.
- Some parents also opt to send their children for religious classes after school hours or Sunday schools at the mosques because they feel that religious subject at the national school is not adequate or failed to meet their expectation.
- Many Muslim parents are aware and worried about the moral decadence (social ills) in the society especially among the youth keep on increasing such as drug addicts, illegitimate child, bullying, gangsterism and etc.

Thus it was not a surprise to learn that there was a mushrooming of People Islamic Religious Schools (SAR) in Malaysia because parents were concerned about their (Children's) Islamic knowledge while the national school curriculum seemed inadequate. According to a daily news paper, there were 500 SARs nation wide with 126,000 students received Islamic education in such institutions (NST, 22 Jan 2003).

People Islamic Religious Schools (SAR) are schools mostly built, funded and owned by individuals or a group of people offering full time Islamic religious education to the students. These schools also use the curriculum which has been standardized by State religious department or Department for the advancement of Islam in Malaysia (JAKIM). These religious schools received the grant given by the government i.e. RM 60 per year for a primary school student and RM120 for a secondary school student. However, in November 2002, the Malaysian government has stopped its state subsidy to SAR. The government gave two reasons for it i.e.: the SAR's lack of facilities which resulted students' poor achievement and lack of trained teachers and thus urged parents to send their children to national schools (NST 9/10 Dec, 2002).

Rosnani (2004) raised a few important questions regarding this issue such as why did the Ministry take such a drastic action rather than a more persuasive and democratic approach of consultation and deliberation? Why did it occur only after September 11? Was the act truly based on sincere, educational concern over the welfare of the students or was it based on political pressure from outside the country? And why do the SAR authorities, teachers and parents still regard the national schools as secular and are reluctant to enroll their children there?

This decision to terminate the financial aid to SAR has affected the religious education system adversely. It was reported by daily newspaper, STAR on January 12, 2003, over 2600 SAR students moved to national schools, 1500 students in Kelantan and 1150 students in Johor have switched to national school. However, in Perak it was reported that none of 44000 students at 10 primary schools and 37 secondary schools had responded to the call to transfer to national schools. (Star 12/1/2003). While on absorbing SAR teachers, the Ministry of education persuaded them (especially those with qualification) to apply for teaching post in national schools and promised that the government would retrain the teachers with current syllabus and curriculum (NST 22 Jan 2003).

Conclusion and Suggestion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the aims of the Islamic educational system is worthy of universal attention because of its contribution and role in the history of education, its universality and relevance in terms of integration of personality. Its function should be upgraded in order to prepare the balanced and integrated Muslim personality. We found several

weaknesses of Islamic religious schools such as its curriculum, lack of facilities and financial and poor administration

To remedy these weaknesses and problems a number of International Islamic Educational conferences have been held the first one in Makkah (1977) on the objectives, in Islamabad (1980) on the curriculum, in Bangladesh (1981) on textbook development, in Jakarta (1982) on teaching methods and in Cairo (1987) on evaluation of Islamic education. This is an ongoing process which is at the center of attention in many parts of the Muslim World and which indicates the significant questions in the Muslim world today. We therefore, suggest the following to be considered and implemented to reach cherish goals of Islamic education for the betterment of Islamic curricular reform in Muslim Countries.

1. The Muslim leaders have to recognize that the issue of Islamic curriculum in Islamic education in Muslim countries is very important because it is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge for earning a living in this world or sharpening the intellect for economic pursuits but the most important is for the perfection of soul and for the purification of personality and wisdom.
2. In order to achieve a unified religious curriculum in Muslim countries, the planners of religious education in Muslim countries have to give a strong consideration of the guidelines produced by World Conferences on Muslim Education from Makkah to South Africa .
3. All opportunities should be opened to children to acquire education particularly Islamic education for Muslim children and to develop their potentials in all fields of endeavor.
4. Contents of education should be accompanied by appropriate teaching methods and meaningful to the children and relevant to their needs and their problems to Muslim world.
5. Education has to be conceptualized to create a balanced personality of the children through spiritual, emotional and physical by expressing to the varieties of developmental aspects.
6. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes should be given attention to ensure that the new reformed religious curricular be implemented accurately in all Islamic schools.
7. A journal specializing on religious curricular studies be published monthly for the benefit of all who worked in the field of religious curriculum.
8. Concerted efforts must be made to prepare curricula and published textbooks that would replace the present unsuitable/irrelevant textbooks at nearly every level of our educational system.

9. Islamic educational Institutions need to recruit qualified scholars who have sound background in both social sciences and Islamic intellectual heritage.
10. Establish integrated religious education curriculum for all Islamic schools at all levels starting from pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary education.

In seeking to live successfully in this modern world and at the same time having a strong relationship with Islamic principles, Muslim countries have been emphasizing a great deal on the significance of the role of Islamic education and the importance of mastering science and technology.

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