Teaching Beyond Normativity: What Opportunities Does Religious Education have to Create Brave Spaces and Overcome Cultural Biases?

Abstract

In His Farewell Sermon delivered in AD 632, Prophet Muhammed is reported to have declared “All humankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab also a white has no superiority over a black except by piety (taqwa) and good action.”

In this paper I will examine the content and construction of whiteness not as a matter of color or a racial category. Rather whiteness, here, will serve as a normative function by defining the expected or dominant range of human conduct and the norms of an authoritative culture.

What does it mean when we define white normativity in terms of culture? How do we make that determination, and what does it imply? These questions have different implications in different context. In this presentation whiteness defines what we call “the normal” or strongly approved behaviors. Whiteness encompasses normativity and is used as the standard and as the norm. White normativity may have arisen in part from the numerical superiority. There is a need of addressing all forms of discrimination against any supremacy in education. Subsequently, the issue of gender inequality could be considered as a target of whiteness.

Paper:

A gender blind education of teacher training

The Islamic religious education as currently theorized and practiced is limited in its capacity to contribute to promote human rights in general and gender equality in particular. I see women’s rights as the most burning human rights issue in Turkey where I am from. As a matter of fact, Turkey has historically been engaged in international legal frameworks of human rights. Non-discrimination and equality between women and men are considered as the main principles in legislation. All individuals are equal without any discrimination before the law, irrespective of language, race, color, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion and sect or any such considerations. Yet, women are still victims of discrimination at work, at home and in the society. Women suffer violations of their human rights in their whole lives. Gender inequality, combating violence against women, honor killings, forced and early marriage remain major challenges in terms of human rights. The oppression on women is one of the most unaddressed issues in religious education. Although there have certainly been things to celebrate such as overwhelming number of girls schooling and the rapidly rising awareness towards gender discrimination because of the feminist movement but if we look at the big picture women still get a very raw deal.

How can religious education address this depressing situation?

What is the role of RE in helping Muslim women to live authentically human?

What is the appropriate approach in going beyond the restricted grounds of normativity in terms of interpretations of religious sources?
How do women resist the power that comes with hegemony and cultural codes created by patriarchal society?

Islam is condemned by some as blocking the way. Some use the poor status of women in Muslim societies as justification for their reaction. Others derive conclusions from the literal interpretations of the Quran defining women as weak and inferior to men! Some depend on traditional perceptions which portray women as inherently evil, intellectually incapable, and spiritually lacking. Some find a woman’s character may be lacking in situations that require testimony and responsibility. They may even claim that women are unsuitable for performing certain tasks or for functioning in certain ways in society. There are those who are not satisfied with the situation, oppose the socially created forms of discriminations and feel responsible to overcome the barriers and the prejudice, yet they do not have a strong religiously supported voice.

As a practicing Muslim woman and a lecturer of religious education my faith pushed me to engage with the following questions during my teaching:

- Does the Qur’anic text serve to oppress or liberate people especially women?
- Where is women’s voice in the history of the tradition and today?

Developing a Teacher Training Model

These sorts of perceptions and discourses exemplified above, inspired me some years ago to give more importance to the relationship between the text and context in my courses. As I explored these questions it became increasingly clear to me I was tasked to develop a training model of establishing ground rules to help my student teachers engage with one another over the controversial issues in Islam such as gender equality, jihad, politics and other religions. In doing so, firstly I challenged the prevailing knowledge structure of the students and the “normative claims”, that is at a level of accepting everything literally and without questioning. Because the students needed to face the living tradition before opening the floor to critical reflection. They needed to acknowledge the fact that the knowing subject is temporal and is a historical being. How we know is rooted in who we are and at which time we live. There is a strong bound between our being in time and place and our way of knowing. Our knowledge is constructed. It is not given but contextual. It is not absolute, not fixed but mutable. Context is the social cultural location of the knower and has a profound effect on knowledge and the way of knowing.

I gave a high degree of emphasis in my courses to the social-historical context of the Qur’anic passages, taking into consideration the view of the first addressees as well as the whole life of the Prophet and his life practices/praxis. My hope was to help my students come to a broader understanding of the Quran. A more holistic understanding would pave a better way of translating the meaning of the text into the context of today. Otherwise their understanding of the text would be insufficient and incomplete. They may even do injustice to the text by driving rigid rules from it.

My work, throughout the time has involved into further steps of exploring how we might reconceive Islamic Religious Education to offer a fresh insight into God-human being relationship through a personal quest and a search for common good. Because one of the big challenges, and hopefully achievements was not only a matter of creating sound interpretations but also to structure those interpretations into a teachable format.
This paper will propose a teacher training model coined by the presenter as Conceptual Clarity Model (CCm) to put forward how the universal vision of the text can help students to move beyond normativity and open up themselves to a new horizon and a decisive direction in general and towards gender equality in particular. The aim is to present at REA this model and discuss its dimensions with the invited colleagues.

Description of the Key Aspects and the Aims of the Model

As shown below the model has 5 key aspects, reflections on the current situation, exploring text and context relation, reflections on personal development, reflections for common good, integration of the content with an effective pedagogy.

Before presenting a brief overview of the model I have a focus particularly on “reflective thinking”. Recently, reflective thinking became a very popular expression among religious education teachers and it is highly underlined in almost every subjects of the curriculum in teaching religion. Here we need to remind ourselves that reflection is not an intellectual act
only. The Qur’an values reflective thinking and presents it as a psychological process and also as an action-oriented and historically embedded act.¹

**Reflections on the current situation.** Not all students will have the same degree of knowledge over the issue. This is a phase in which students uncover the much of the pre-knowledge they have in stock, bring their living experiences, their common codes of conduct, reflect on their feelings and action regarding the issue. They explain common understanding and practices around the issue, question on what is the evidence of their understanding, what experiences promote this understanding and behaviors. To lead a discussion of ongoing argumentations around the issue, teachers could ask such questions:

What is happening? What do people think and say? How do they behave? What do they believe and what do they value?

Shortly, this is a phase of collecting ready-made answers or inspirations from existing success to provide foods for thoughts and pushing students to move from their comfort zone.

**Exploring of text and context relationship.** A historical-critical analysis where the students uncover the spirit of the text and develop the ability of discerning messages that are directed to the original hearers of a specific time and place and those that are intended for general audiences of every time and place. It is crucial for teachers to develop contextual thinking in a discursive tradition which has produced historically contingent categorizations of doctrines and practices. The historical-critical study takes place around the questions of what happened before and during the time of the Prophet? What did the Qur’an bring to the fore? What developed in history? What are the essentials for today? and more.

The objectives in terms of developing students’ skills are:

- Experiencing that the context is the background and the horizon at the same time.

- Gaining a broader perspective on the ethos of the knowledge in the Quran as well as its moral and intellectual grounding.

- Being aware of the link between past, present and future while communicating with the text.

**Reflections on personal development.** This is a phase where the student has an option to ask the question of what does all mean to me personally?

- Teachers will develop students’ knowledge and understanding about:

- Ways to enhance the role of religion in personal development

- The meaning of being steward on earth

¹ *And all things we have created by pairs that haply, you may reflect.* (51/49)

*Do they not reflect on the Qur’an? Or are there locks open their hearts?* (47/24)

*Man should reflect on what he/she was created from.* (86/5)

*Will you not then reflect?* (37/155)

*And verily you know the first creation. Why, then, you do not reflect?* (56/62)
- The meaning of “knowing yourself”

- The relation between socially or culturally behaviors and personal choices

The students should be concerned about the human tendency that resides in mind and heart to reveal the role of feelings, deliberations, values, and commitments such as our tendency to perceive ourselves favorably and ignore the situations of others. Or in other words, we judge ourselves according our ideals and judge others according to their wrong actions!

Some questions to raise awareness in this key learning could be:

Is there any relation between religion and prejudice? What are the experiences that may shape prejudice? What are the negative feelings that are sometimes just felt internally and sometimes expressed openly? What are the examples of faulty generalizations to certain groups or individuals? What are the discriminative behaviors as well as thoughts and feelings towards race, gender, disabled, sexual orientations, faiths and religions?

Reflections for common good. This phase is a search for a theology which has a public language and develop students’ appreciation of and commitment to socially just ways of living. Skills in forming and maintaining positive relationship towards other need to be improved.

Without delivering static ”truths” or determined attitudes teachers should encourage students through raising concern for the welfare, rights and dignity of all people and how equity is effected by cultural norms and social practices.

Some leading search questions and themes could be:

As people of faith how can we contribute to the common good and become caring members of the society? What are the means? What are the characteristics of a relation involving intimacy, commitment and permanency? Does social distance affect our acceptance of the different?

In this regard, students become involved in finding out examples of narratives, tales and symbols from the history of religions that were meant to shape social structures; in examining carefully and critically social practices so as to identify the causes and the possible results of promoting oppressions of other groups and viewing the other as a threat; in analyzing the harmful consequences of seeing the world literally in black and white and having the mindset which classifies people as those who are acceptable and those who are not; in examining exaggerated beliefs that members of a group possess a certain trait that defines the group. e.g., all Muslims are...., all Hindus are....

Integration of content with effective pedagogy. This phase is where students work to maintain integrity between faith and life.

Teacher should make sure that accurate picture is being gained for understanding the uniqueness of each person and show that people are more than a single story. Furthermore, teachers should enrich the experiences of what it means to be fully human.

The following questions may assist in ensuring that the information explored is relevant:

What is it that exactly a Muslim believes? What is the main drive of the mind and the heart towards the Divine?
What underlying commitments about faith, knowledge and education at work? So that students can grow in what Islam calls musalama (i.e., a peaceful relationship with God, with oneself, with others and the creation).

Each of five aspects is important in its own right. Teachers may use one aspect or a combination of several, or use it as a whole depending on their aims and objectives in which they intend to develop students’ skills, knowledge and attitudes regarding the issue.

Creating Brave Spaces Using Conceptual Clarity Model

To keep the model from being too abstract, in this section, I discuss the common rules and characteristics of Conceptual Clarity by giving the example of the status of woman in the Qur’an. Within the time and space constrains I will demonstrate how this model might be used on the exploring text and context relationship aspect. This phase, encompasses two elements: Epistemology and Pedagogy.

**Epistemology:** That is what is known and how what is known can be known. Any concept of learning from religion depends on being clear about what teachers know about it. Teachers’ mastery of content should be attended to. Subject content in Islamic religious education seems to be an area which is not clear enough in teachers’ minds. We need to develop an explanatory theological framework for the teachers to enable them to present the content in such an appropriate way that pupils could beneficially learn about and from it.

Teachers should create a theological framework within a chronological and historical context. In order to understand the Qur’anic verse some must know the Arabian Peninsula, the context where the Quran was revealed, in respect to its geographical, cultural, social, political, economic and religious aspects. The historical context must be known in order to understand the Quran better, which was revealed to be understood with facts and culture playing an obvious role in the formation of the divine text. The sequence of events and dates are important in ascertaining the relationship between the events, since the chronology is an important key for the interpretation in determining the reasons and effects. The events in history can be explained in the context of causality. The events have a background. It is not possible to analyze any event properly, unless background is enlightened. Though the dating of the Qur’an is not easy, a chronology can be accomplished largely in the light of sources of history of Islam and the sources on the occasions of the Revelation (Asbab-i Nuzul in Arabic).

**Pedagogy:** That is the communication about and the critical reflection on what is known. Here theological foundations of the content must be secured to provide the learners a base to reflect on.

The leading idea of the communicative model is (1) to get the teachers to think about the historical context of the Qur’anic verses (2) to provide them with a universal theological vision of the text that will allow them to approach the actual context.

Thus teachers and students will have the opportunity to encounter the principles behind the literal meaning of the text and explore what social position their faith attributes to itself in a plural society. The advantage of this religious pedagogy is that plurality is taken seriously and the religious knowledge needs to be contextualized for transformation and change.

*What Does the Qur’an say about woman?*
(1) Epistemological Framework

This level of information requires scholarly ways of communicating with the text for a deeper understanding of how to engage the students with the core message of the Qur’an.

The following verses uncover the basic aims of the Qur’an:

- Yea, indeed: everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve. (2/112)

- [But,] behold, as for those who say, Our Sustainer is God, and then steadfastly pursue the right way - upon them do angels often descend, [saying:] Fear not and grieve not, but receive the glad tiding of that paradise which has been promised to you! (41/30)

- Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a new Life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions. (17/97)

- O mankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

- To a happy state shall indeed attain the one who causes this [self] to grow in purity. (91/9)

- …and persevere in doing good, behold, God loves the doers of good. (2/195)

The following verses could provide an insight about gender equality and the notion of individuality:

- O Mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. (4/1)

- I will not allow the deeds of any of you to be lost, whether you are male or female, each is like the other. (3/95)

- The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, pay the poor-due, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Mighty, Wise. (9/71)

It is important to note that actions have no gender:

- Verily, for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves [before God], and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-
denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for [all of] them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. (33/35)

An illustration of how to examine the role of context

Working on the following verses teachers could explain the power of context and help students realize how culture influences the way people learn, perceive, categorize, believe and behave under different circumstances. Analyses made through the lens of culture about the values of the audience, their social roles in the society, and the codes of interpersonal communication will broaden students’ understanding.

- And they assign daughters for Allah. - Glory be to Him! - and for themselves what they desire! When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! (16/57-58)

- And call upon two of your men to act as witnesses; and if two men are not available, then a man and two women from among such as are acceptable to you as witnesses, so that if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind her. (2/282)

- Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. And the righteous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained to be] guarded. (4/34)

- Never has God endowed any man with two hearts in one body: and [just as] He has never made your wives whom you may have declared to be as unlawful to you as your mothers’ bodies [truly] your mothers, so, too, has He never made your adopted sons [truly] your sons: these are but [figures of] speech uttered by your mouths - whereas
God speaks the [absolute] truth: and it is He alone who can show [you] the right path. (33/4)

- …but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one - or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess (4/3) ; And it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire it… (4/129)

- O Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness,- that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition! (7/ 26)

(2) Pedagogy towards Contextualization

Students are encouraged to engage with the sort of questions below so that they reflect upon the social, political, historical, religious and textual contexts in which the core message of the Qur’an is embedded. Furthermore, they develop their ability to discern between the local and time-bond dimension of the text and its universal ethos.

What is the meaning of the text for the first addressee?

What were the cultural norms at that time?

What is the nature of the message? Is it a legal, ethical or theological text?

Is it universal or particular to a specific situation?

How could the message be related to the universal objectives of the Quran?

How was the message applied at that time and what were its different applications throughout history? How could we apply it to our contemporary context?

What do you think about the universality and the specificity of the message?

Can you propose some examples of applications for today?

Can you suggest alternative ways of understanding the text?

Can you suggest alternative ways of understanding the text?

These questions create an understanding around the context of the verses which could be considered as historical and lead to the exploration of the universal vision of the message. Regarding the issue of gender, students usually come up with a sufficient and necessary conclusion for generating an understanding that women and men are equal in the eye of God, all humans are sacred and the Divine will ask respecting a person’s dignity whether woman or man. Teachers may demonstrate this fundamental truth in their educational efforts and make necessary strides to move forward by using the other phases of the model.
When you change your practice you change your education

Teaching and learning practices through CCm;

- provide a deeper, more extensive and systematized knowledge and understanding for teachers when they are often overwhelmed with the daunting task of answering the question of why am I teaching this?

- assist students to widen their perspectives and helps them take an epistemic stance on conversations about meaningful relations towards God, themselves, the other and the creation.

- help to correct the misconceptions and develop scholarly religious thinking

- contribute to students’ personal, social and moral development

The model comes from many years of researching and teaching about “basic concepts of Islam within the internal and the external factors of learning environment”, all in an attempt to give sufficient breadth to Islamic Religious Education that opens up a space to mutual understanding which the Qur’an defines as taaruf. In its creating process I built on the gained knowledge and experiences in the field of human science studies, human relationships and of course in theological researches. The first version of the model was presented at the REA Conference in 2010 in a panel discussion under the title of where are we and where might be going in RE?

Although I have been teaching with this model for almost 10 years I still see it relatively new for growth and refinement. Clearly the model cannot lead to easy implementation in the classroom. In my interactions with students I see myself primarily as a lecturer and from time to time as a coach. The time I spend lecturing usually feels easy but it is much harder when I act more like a coach than a lecturer trying to evoke their understanding, create certain challenges and placing them in certain situations for reflection. Even harder are times when I work with them to clarify their understanding of the meaning of certain concepts from an Islamic perspective.

What remains in my mind from these interactions most of the time period is the importance of conceptual clarity which I also focused in some of my works. Conceptual clarity stands out as one of the most distinctive modes of my teaching. A desire to understand clearly, to seek connections among the verses of the text and explanations of the background of the message, to know self and other or to give appropriate responses to common shared human problems sometimes worked like a wakeup call and sometimes created much confusion in the students’ minds.

I believe qualitative and quantitative studies would be useful in measuring its influence on teaching and learning practices. I welcome your feedbacks to help me see the strengths and the shortfalls of the model and go further. My concern is to invite my students move from relying upon secure acceptance of the dominant view towards fostering conceptual clarity through reflection in action and bring meaning into the context of the person today. This exploration of the link between past, present and future could be considered to be an opportunity to create brave spaces of overcoming biases and respecting diversity and valuing equality. It is spectacularly rewarding when I see my students moving up from their former state of being and reaching on a path of discovery where they can offer even a very brief refresher of seeing things in a new and different way. This is, in my understanding, what religious education is all about!
Sources grounding the presentation

The arguments in this paper are based on the following works.


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