

Islam as Education: Pedagogies of Pilgrimage, Prophecy and Jihad

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A. J. Ghiloni's book *Islam as Education* is an interfaith and interdisciplinary account of the Islamic religious tradition's focus on education and knowledge seeking. Ghiloni, a student of John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, takes as his task to become a student of the Islamic religious tradition. In doing so, he brings together different readings of what it means to an educated person across Muslim and Christian philosophical texts. Ghiloni notes at the beginning of the book that "[e]verything written here, I learned from someone else. This book is a book about education, but it is as much a record of being educated" (p. xv). Ghiloni's education includes exploring the Islamic philosophical tradition, the readings of contemporary philosophers, and frequent references to the Qur'an and hadith tradition. Ghiloni's studies led him to make the major argument of his book, which can be summed up by the following quote: "There is a better way to understand Islamic knowledge—as *paideia*, as a way to cosmopolitan learning in a universe inscribed with signs" (p. 47). With this statement, Ghiloni explicates that Islam as education is an avenue through which non-Muslims can find touchpoints to connect with and understand the Islamic tradition and faith.

Ghiloni breaks his study of Islam as education into two parts: Part 1 is about *paideia*, or systems of training and knowledge, while part 2 focuses on pedagogies, the methods used in the training process. Each section is further subdivided into chapters. Part 1 is divided into "Loving Knowledge" (chapter 1), "Civilizing Knowledge" (chapter 2), and "Preserving and Adapting Knowledge" (chapter 3). Part 1 somewhat oversimplifies the history of Islamic education around the basic themes of loving and preserving knowledge. While Ghiloni cites medieval scholars such as Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, he fails to engage deeply with scholarship about Islamic educational institutions more broadly. In these chapters, it is sometimes difficult to follow the connections Ghiloni makes between philosophical and poetic works, such as the love story of Layla and Majnun and the role of madrasa-based education in Muslim societies. Part 1 exemplifies Ghiloni's romantic take on Islamic education, akin to Shahab Ahmad's philosophical account of Islam, that both attempt to condense and expand what Islam is and means to Muslims and non-Muslims and eschews disciplinary approaches.

Part 2, “Pedagogies,” deals with “Seeking Knowledge: Pilgrimage” (chapter 4), “Defending Knowledge: Jihad” (chapter 5), and “Limiting Knowledge: Prophecy” (chapter 6). In these chapters, Ghiloni begins to draw connections between various Islamic practices and the philosophy of education of John Dewey. Part 2 is where the interdisciplinary and interfaith aspects of the book become more evident. Ghiloni weaves between Islamic concepts such as pilgrimage and jihad and Dewey’s thoughts on similar topics. The chapters deal with a myriad of questions: Are teachers akin to soldiers? Is travel and returning home a necessity for the knowledge seeker? Is some dependency on others for knowledge, not the default, rather than an anomaly? These latter chapters are content-rich, and the connections were intriguing. Dewey’s writings, coupled with Islamic conceptualizations of educational pedagogy, worked well together because both illustrated a larger perspective of education beyond schooling. Ghiloni describes these twin approaches as encouraging: “cosmopolitan learning in a universe inscribed with signs” (p. 47).

In reading *Islam as education*, Ghiloni circumvents some of the differences that might arise in a more traditional interfaith or intra-textual reading of Islam through the lens of Christianity or Judaism. The book makes a compelling case for Islam as an intellectually varied faith tradition, which Ghiloni argues offers opportunities for non-Muslims to engage with Islam. “Islam’s enduring-evolving ‘ilm tradition serves as a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims. Knowledge is Allah’s ‘most generalized attribute,’ wrote a 14th-century jurist, ‘more expansive and generalized’ than divine will or power. God Teaches” (p. 166). Statements like these litter the pages of Ghiloni’s text as he blends poetic and religious elements within the Islamic tradition to mixed effect. The technique is both intriguing and distracting, as it is sometimes difficult to focus on the flow of Ghiloni’s argument. The book could have also benefitted from more editing, as there is an overuse of metaphors and several grammatical errors. Despite these stylistic and technical issues, Ghiloni provides a compelling interpretation of Islam as primarily an educational endeavor rather than a theological, political, or legal one.

Overall, what is unique about Ghiloni’s book is his personal journey through various readings of the Islamic tradition and how he sees these readings in line with contemporary philosophies of education. Ghiloni concludes with a call to those who are interested in other faith traditions to engage with Islam’s diverse sources.

For those seeking to learn from religious difference, the cosmopolitanism of Islamic knowledge is a useful entryway. Islamic paideia is expressed not only in theology and jurisprudence but also in philosophy, paradox, and poetry—orthodoxy supersized. In a world rendered Islamically, the universe is a place where trees are like pens, seas like ink. (Q.18.109; 31.27)

With this statement, Ghiloni advocates for greater interfaith dialogue and more interdisciplinary studies of Islam and other faiths. As Ghiloni himself makes clear in his conclusion, this book is for educators who are interested in Islam, interfaith studies, philosophies of education, and especially, but not least, lovers of knowledge.

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