Secular Education vs. Religious Education: Assessing the Relevance of the Islamic Perspective

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Abstract – **This paper explores the deep ethical implications of both paradigms while critically examining the philosophical conflict between secularism and religious education, particularly from an Islamic perspective. The Islamic perspective is very different from secularism, which firmly believes that religion should be kept out of public domains, including politics, education, and social structures. Islam has an integrated approach to education that promotes both intellectual and spiritual growth because Islamic teachings pervade every part of life. To maintain a coherent moral framework for public life, this paper argues that secularism's insistence that religion must stay in the private sphere compromises the ethical basis necessary for social well-being. By contrasting this approach with the Islamic educational paradigm, which combines intellectual pursuits with ethical precepts, the study makes the case that Islamic education provides a more comprehensive and ethically sound approach. In this concept, education fosters a strong sense of moral responsibility that is based on heavenly guidance in addition to academic accomplishment. By separating ethics from religion, secularism is seen to weaken the moral requirements for people and societies to thrive. Ultimately, an integrated educational system—one that fosters both intellectual capacity and moral responsibility—equips people to fulfil their divine purposes in a balanced and harmonious manner, ensuring the ethical and intellectual advancement of society as a whole. The paper concludes by affirming the indispensable role of religious teachings in education.**

Keywords: **- Islamic Education, Philosophy, Religious Education, Secular Education, Secularism**

I. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping societies, fostering intellectual development, and instilling moral values. However, a longstanding debate persists between secular and religious education, particularly regarding their implications for ethical and social cohesion. Secular education, largely influenced by Western philosophical traditions, advocates for the separation of religious influences from academic and public institutions, promoting a knowledge system based on reason, empirical inquiry, and scientific rationality. In contrast, religious education, particularly within the Islamic tradition, embraces a holistic approach that integrates intellectual, spiritual, and moral development, viewing knowledge as a means to fulfil divine purpose [18].

The secular model of education, particularly as implemented in Western and some non-Western societies, insists on maintaining a strict boundary between religious and academic instruction. Countries such as Sweden, India, and Finland have attempted different approaches, ranging from secular ethics education as an alternative to religious instruction to completely excluding religious teachings from the curriculum [17]. In India, for instance, religious education is often marginalised due to concerns about secularism, despite historical influences from various religious traditions that have shaped the country's educational landscape [21]. Islamic education, on the other hand, is fundamentally different in its philosophical foundation. Scholars such as Al-Attas argue that education in Islam is not merely about acquiring knowledge but also about inculcating *Ta'dib*—discipline, morality, and good character [18]. The emphasis is placed on integrating religious values with academic pursuits to cultivate individuals who contribute ethically and intellectually to society. Unlike secular education, which often separates ethical development from academic learning, Islamic education intertwines religious teachings with intellectual discourse, aiming for a balanced approach that nurtures both the mind and soul.

One of the central criticisms of secular education is its detachment from moral absolutes, which some scholars argue leads to ethical relativism and a

weakening of social cohesion [11]. The absence of a divine moral framework in secular education has led to concerns that ethics, when solely based on human reasoning, become fluid and adaptable to sociopolitical trends, potentially leading to moral crises in society [26]. Conversely, Islamic education provides a consistent ethical foundation based on divine revelation, ensuring that morality is not subject to fluctuating human ideologies. Despite its merits, Islamic education faces challenges in contemporary societies, especially in regions where secular policies dominate. Critics argue that religious education, including Islamic schooling, risks being dogmatic and resistant to scientific advancements [24]. However, proponents of Islamic education emphasize that it does not reject scientific inquiry but rather integrates it within a theocentric worldview that sees scientific knowledge as a means of understanding divine creation [18].

This paper examines the philosophical, ethical, and practical implications of secular and religious education, focusing on the Islamic perspective. It explores how the Islamic educational paradigm fosters moral responsibility while advancing intellectual growth, arguing that an integrated educational approach—one that combines academic excellence with ethical development—leads to a more cohesive and morally conscious society. The discussion also highlights how modern education systems can benefit from incorporating ethical teachings within curricula without compromising academic integrity. By analyzing historical and contemporary perspectives, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of religion in education and the necessity of moral instruction in shaping ethical individuals and societies.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SECULAR AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Secularism, as a philosophical stance, emerged from Enlightenment principles advocating for the separation of religion from public life, including governance and education [7]. It is rooted in the belief that human reason and empirical inquiry should govern societal structures, free from theological influence. Secular education, therefore, is founded on the premise that knowledge should be objective,

evidence-based, and universal, removing religious narratives from formal curricula [26]. This model seeks to foster critical thinking and scientific reasoning without the interference of doctrinal teachings [17].

In contrast, the Islamic worldview integrates Tawhid (the oneness of God) into all aspects of life, including education [18]. Islamic education is based on the principle that knowledge is a divine trust (*Amanah*) and should serve both intellectual and moral development [24]. Unlike secularism, which delineates the religious and the rational, Islam sees knowledge as interconnected, where divine revelation (*Wahy*) and reason (*Aql*) work together to guide human actions [3]. Thus, Islamic education does not merely aim at cognitive development but ensures that moral and spiritual dimensions are equally nurtured [10]. Secularism often positions religion as a private affair, arguing that education should remain neutral and free from theological influence [6]. However, critics argue that such neutrality is not truly value-free, as it promotes a worldview rooted in humanism and rationalism, which itself becomes an ideology [1]. On the other hand, Islamic education insists on the integration of faith and knowledge, asserting that ethical values should not be contingent upon societal shifts but anchored in divine guidance.

III. ETHICAL AND MORAL DIMENSIONS

A significant critique of secular education is its tendency to detach ethics from religious morality, thereby making moral values relative and subject to human interpretation [11]. Proponents of secularism argue that ethics should be derived from reason and societal consensus rather than divine mandates [26]. However, critics contend that without an absolute moral reference, ethical standards can become fluid, changing based on cultural and political contexts. This relativistic approach has raised concerns about a potential erosion of moral accountability in society. Islamic education, on the other hand, embeds ethics within a divinely ordained framework, ensuring that moral values are not left to human subjectivity [18]. The concept of Ta'dib (discipline and ethical refinement) is central to Islamic pedagogy, emphasizing personal and social responsibility based on Quranic injunctions and Prophetic traditions [24].

The Islamic approach to education instills virtues such as honesty, justice, humility, and responsibility, providing individuals with a moral compass that transcends societal trends [3]. This structured moral foundation ensures that ethical standards remain consistent and universally applicable, unlike secular moral constructs that evolve with changing societal norms.

In contrast, modern secularism often argues that morality should be adaptable and context-dependent, shaped by human experiences and social contracts rather than fixed divine commandments. This, however, leads to ethical dilemmas, particularly when societal norms conflict with fundamental human values. For example, debates over issues like abortion, euthanasia, and genetic engineering demonstrate how secular ethics often struggle to provide a unified moral framework [1].

IV. RELIGION IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

The Indian Constitution is firmly secular, yet it does not adopt an anti-religious stance, unlike the French concept of laïcité, which enforces a strict separation between religion and state. Instead, India follows the principle of *sarva dharma sambhāva,* which translates to *"equal treatment of all religions"* [8, p. 26; 12, p. 36; 13, p. 144]. This principle does not mandate the exclusion of religion from public life, including education, but rather promotes equal respect and representation of all religious traditions. Consequently, the Indian approach to secularism allows for religious content in schools, provided that no specific faith is privileged over others. The Education Commission of 1964–66 recommended that teaching about religion in an objective, academic manner should be incorporated into the Indian school system [14, para. 1.79]. However, this recommendation has not been fully implemented, and Indian schools do not include a dedicated subject on religion in their curriculum [22, pp. 54–56]. Despite the absence of a formal subject, religious elements persist in the educational environment, influencing the curriculum and school activities in various ways [16].

India's education system comprises both non-denominational schools and confessional institutions. While non-denominational schools affiliated with state education boards do not formally teach religion, confessional schools affiliated with religious communities continue to operate. These include Hindu *patshalas,* Muslim **madrasas**, and schools run by Sikh, Jain, and Christian organizations [13, p. 148]. Such schools cater to specific religious communities and incorporate faith-based instruction alongside standard academic subjects. However, this discussion primarily focuses on non-denominational schools, where the treatment of religious content remains complex and contested. Although non-denominational schools do not explicitly offer religious education, elements of religious and cultural significance permeate the curriculum and the school environment [16]. Subjects such as history, literature, and moral education often include references to religious traditions and practices, reflecting India's deep cultural and religious diversity. This blurring of lines underscores the unique secular approach of India, which, rather than eliminating religious content, seeks to ensure pluralistic representation and equal respect for all faiths.

V. THE ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW

Historically, Islamic education has been instrumental in shaping civilizations, producing scholars who excelled in both religious and secular sciences [21]. Classical Islamic institutions such as the *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad and the Al-Qarawiyyin University in Morocco were centers where disciplines like mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and theology were studied in harmony [9]. The emphasis was on holistic education, where students were trained not only in intellectual pursuits but also in moral and spiritual refinement [18]. In contemporary times, the Islamic educational model faces challenges due to the dominance of Western secular education, which often marginalizes religious instruction [17]. Many Muslim-majority countries have adopted secular educational structures, sometimes at the expense of Islamic teachings, leading to a disconnect between The relationship between religious values and modern academic disciplines is explored in reference [24]. However, there is a growing movement to revive an integrated educational model that combines scientific and technological advancements with ethical teachings derived from the Quran and Sunnah [18]. The ideal Islamic educational

paradigm does not reject secular knowledge but rather harmonizes it with divine guidance, ensuring that education serves both worldly success and spiritual fulfillment. This balanced approach is considered essential in cultivating individuals who are intellectually competent, morally upright, and socially responsible [10].

The Islamic worldview extends beyond the concept of religion in the conventional sense and is instead a comprehensive ideology that governs all aspects of human life. The pursuit of knowledge and scientific inquiry is an obligatory aspect of the Islamic worldview, directly rooted in divine instruction, as stated in the Qur'an (96:1-5).
"Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. Has taught man that which he knew not." Islamic education does not dismiss scientific inquiry but frames it within divine guidance, distinguishing itself from modern secular thought. The Qur'an repeatedly urges believers to reflect upon the physical universe as a means of understanding divine wisdom. *" Say: 'Are those who know equal to those who know not?' It is only men of understanding who will remember."* (Qur'an 39:9) Acknowledges Allah as the ultimate source of knowledge *"And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts (intelligence and affections) that you might give thanks (to Allah)."* (Qur'an 16:78). Unlike materialist ideologies, Islam connects learning with divine accountability, ensuring that scientific progress does not become a tool for moral degradation.

A reformed Islamic educational framework must incorporate modern scientific disciplines while maintaining its spiritual and moral foundations. A comprehensive Islamic educational reform should focus on reviving and integrating the contributions of Muslim scholars into contemporary curricula. This would not only restore historical accuracy but also instill a sense of confidence and belonging among Muslim students, enabling them to engage with scientific disciplines while remaining deeply connected to their faith.

VI. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM OF SECULAR AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Critique of Secular Education

One of the most fundamental critiques of secular education is its exclusion of spiritual and moral dimensions, leading to ethical relativism and a decline in absolute moral values [4]. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas [2] argues that secular education creates a dichotomy between knowledge and ethics, reducing education to a mere instrument for economic progress. According to Al-Attas [4], secularism leads to the *"desacralization"* of knowledge, where morality is detached from divine guidance. Yusuf al-Qaradawi [5] further critiques secular education for eliminating divine accountability. Moreover, secular education is not ideologically neutral. S. Sayyed [20] argues that secularism actively promotes rationalism and materialism, subtly shaping individuals according to a Western liberal worldview. Additionally, secular education has been criticised for failing to address existential and metaphysical questions. Ziauddin Sardar [19] argues that secular education avoids discussions on life's purpose, the soul, and divine accountability, which leads to a narrow materialistic worldview.

Criticism of Islamic Education and Counterarguments

While Islamic education provides a strong ethical foundation, it is often criticised for being dogmatic and resistant to scientific advancements. Critics argue that traditional Islamic education emphasises rote memory, discouraging critical thinking [19]. However, this critique fails to consider the historical contributions of Islamic education. Al-Attas [2] counters that Islamic education is inherently rational. Yusuf al-Qaradawi [5] highlights how classical Muslim scholars integrated philosophy, logic, and empirical sciences into Islamic thought. S. Sayyed [20] argues that Islamic civilisation was once a global leader in scientific discovery. Another common criticism is that Islamic education is resistant to scientific advancements [19]. However, Islamic scholars advocate for an integrated educational model. Al-Attas [4] emphasises that Islam does not reject science but instead promotes *"theocentric science."* Another challenge is its perceived isolation from global educational standards,

as critics argue that schools do not prepare students for globalised economies [6]. However, scholars like Al-Qaradawi [5] argue that Islamic education should integrate modern knowledge while maintaining its ethical foundation.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The debate between secular and Islamic education is a fundamental issue that shapes intellectual and social development. Secular education, while promoting scientific inquiry, often detaches itself from moral absolutes, leading to ethical relativism. In contrast, Islamic education integrates intellectual growth with spiritual and moral responsibility. However, Islamic educational systems must evolve, incorporating modern scientific advancements while remaining rooted in Islamic principles. One of the most concerning outcomes of secular education is the acceptance of ideologies that contradict Islamic beliefs, such as atheism, liberalism, and moral subjectivism. Despite these challenges, religious institutions remain essential in preserving faith. Islam's emphasis on rational inquiry and knowledge acquisition, as reflected in the Qur'an (96:1-5), calls for a balanced approach where intellectual and spiritual development go hand in hand.

To bridge the gap between religious and secular education, a comprehensive reform is essential. Islamic curricula should incorporate modern disciplines such as technology and artificial intelligence. Recognizing the historical contributions of Muslim scholars will restore confidence among learners. Islamic scholars must counter materialistic worldviews by presenting alternative perspectives that integrate divine wisdom with scientific reasoning. Efforts should bridge the gap between Islamic and secular knowledge through interdisciplinary collaborations. Parental and community involvement is crucial in reinforcing Islamic education.

Education must be holistic, guiding individuals toward both material success and spiritual fulfillment. A harmonised educational model—one that integrates modern advancements with Islamic values—offers the best solution. By revitalising Islamic education, embracing scientific discoveries, and challenging secular biases, an equitable and balanced system can be developed—one that preserves faith, promotes knowledge, and aligns with both divine wisdom and modern innovation.

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