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Reviving the Muslim tradition of dialogue: A look at a rich history of Educational theory and institutions in pre-modern and modern times

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Reviving the Muslim Tradition of Dialogue: A Look at a Rich History of Educational Theory and Institutions in Premodern and Modern Times
Raviver la tradition musulmane du dialogue : Un regard sur une riche histoire de théorie et d'institutions éducatives dans les temps pré-modernes et modernes

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Abstract
This article aims to generate a debate within Muslim scholarship and comparative educators to engage in analysing both the historical institutions and the philosophy of education in Islam, to understand its present challenges, and to create an environment conducive to dialogue between various civilizations and educational systems. At present Muslim parents, teachers and students in contemporary educational systems face a big challenge. On one hand, a modified system of Western education is likely to leave Muslim children exposed to a set of underlying secular values and assumptions which are alien to the spirit of Islam, but on the other hand, old style Muslim schools seem unable to prepare children adequately for the needs of the modern world or to help them take part in the scientific, technological and economic progress (Halstead, 1995). At the core of this issue lies the lack of knowledge of both Western educators and contemporary Muslim theorists regarding the rich tradition of education and scholarship in Islam that ensured the coexistence of the religious and the secular through dialogue with other traditions.

Résumé
Cet article vise à générer un débat au sein de la communauté académique musulmane et des éducateurs comparatistes pour les engager à analyser, historiquement, à la fois les institutions et la philosophie d'éducation dans l'Islam ; pour comprendre ses défis actuels ; et pour créer un environnement propice au dialogue entre une variété de civilisations et de systèmes d'éducation.Actuellement, les parents, enseignants et élèves musulmans dans les systèmes éducatifs contemporains font face à un grand défi. D'un côté, un système modifié d'éducation occidentale peut vraisemblablement laisser les enfants musulmans exposés à une série sous-jacente de valeurs et assomptions séculaires qui sont étrangères à l'esprit de l'Islam, mais d'un autre côté les écoles musulmanes de l'ancien style semblent incapables de préparer adéquatement les enfants pour les besoins du monde moderne ou de les aider à prendre part au progrès scientifique, technologique et économique (Halstead, 1995). Au cœur de cette question réside le manque de connaissances à la fois des éducateurs occidentaux et des théoriciens musulmans contemporains concernant la riche tradition d'éducation et d'érudition dans l'Islam qui ont assuré la coexistence du religieux et du séculaire à travers le dialogue avec d'autres traditions.

Keywords: Muslim education systems, history, madrasa, Muslim educators, theory of education
Mots clés: systèmes d'éducation musulmane ; histoire ; madrasa ; éducateurs musulmans ; théorie de l'éducation

Introduction
For decades scholars and theorists in the field of comparative education have sought to understand educational practices in various countries and societies. A key aim of researching diverse educational systems and pedagogical practices is to enrich our view of the role education plays in organizing a society and the differences in how this is enacted by the members of each society. It is also vital to study the history of education without which we may be unable to develop the understanding of previous generations and scholars, and would

also fail to see how systems have evolved towards progress or have merely been repetitive. Owing to the Eurocentric discourse in the formation of the canons of comparative and international education and being part of a global system that attests to the prevalence of western models of education, we often marginalize theories of education and practices from other historical and contemporary traditions. One such example is the Muslim system of education that historically spanned over a vast geographical area. It was developed in very different countries and empires, expounded in different languages and disciplines by a meticulous scholarship that is believed to have "led the world for hundreds of years in virtually every known academic discipline" (Halstead, 2004, p. 517). Yet despite the fact that Islam has a rich tradition of education that goes back some 1300 years (Shamsavary, Saqeb & Halstead, 1993), very little has been written about it over the years. Moreover, in the last decade following 9/11, the *madrasa* has gained some attention in western media as an institution that educates young men to be involved in terrorist activities. This negative image or in Kadi's (2006) word, "myth", has diverted attention away from studying a system of education that has had profound influences on western education and institutions (Makdisi, 1981; Nakosteen, 1964).

As comparative researchers, this void in research leaves our current understanding of education handicapped in its inability to make connections to a system that was once widespread in the Muslim world and resulted in great scientific discoveries and studies that fed European enlightenment thinking. This corresponds to the post-colonial argument that we need to take into consideration the "relationality and interconnectedness of western and other forms of knowledge; and further seek to explore and understand how western forms of knowledge and curriculum are indebted to non-European forms" (Tikly, 1999, p. 615). At the same time, we also need to realize that the system of education in Muslim countries has greatly evolved over the centuries and that many Muslim countries are facing challenges in their education systems. There have been attempts by various regimes in Muslim countries at both secularization and Islamization of education on attaining a more effective system of education. However, many of these changes have been implemented haphazardly and without a connection to Islamic theories of education from the past. In addition, a growing Muslim population in Western countries through migration and conversion presents new challenges for both parents and educators in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and approach towards education. All these reasons highlight a pressing need for educators, researchers and theorists to engage in a critical, unbiased and systematic study of historical and contemporary Islamic theories and practices of education.

Some Muslim scholars and religious preachers in the West including Hamza Yusuf (2003), Tariq Ramadan (2004) and others, have tried to reflect and address some of these issues in their lectures and writings. However, within the field of comparative education, little attention has been paid to this area of research. Thus, this article is an attempt to explore the establishment and evolution of Muslim system of education from the premodern era to colonialism, and also to reflect on some of its contemporary realities.

This article will focus on answering the following questions: (1) What was the nature of the Muslim educational system in Medieval times (institutions, pedagogy, thought)? (2) What led to the marginalization of the historical institutions of education in the Muslim world? (3) How have these institutions survived and continued to reform in the present era? Through these questions, my article will focus on the possibility of dialogue amongst Muslim educators and other civilizations. I will be carrying out a general analysis of Muslim education across

various countries without focusing on any particular region or country. In addition, this article will deal mostly with Muslim educational systems during the premodern and modern era and will only briefly refer to some of the contemporary issues in the third section. It must be noted that the scope of this research is very limited and does not capture the complexity of Muslim identity and educational systems that span across a large geographical area whose people speak different languages, have different cultures and have undergone varied historical experiences. Kadi's (2006) periodization technique will be used to explore the evolution of education in the Muslim world and connect the historical with the contemporary practices. In doing so, this article aims to generate a debate within Muslim scholarship and comparative educators to engage in analysing both the historical institutions and the philosophy of education in Islam, to understand its present challenges and to create an environment conducive to dialogue between various civilizations and educational systems.

The article is divided into three main sections. Following the introduction, the first section will look at the roots of Islamic education and will focus on the premodern period. Reflecting on the literature available, I will trace the establishment of various institutions of *katatib, madaris* and *masajid* (plural of mosque) that have served as hubs of learning in the Muslim world. Even though it is beyond the limited scope of this article to deal with the Islamic philosophy of education in detail, a mention will be made of some key Muslim intellectuals such as Al-Jahiz, Ibn Sahnun, Al Farabi, Avicenna and Al-Ghazali, all of whom contributed to discussions on educational theory, pedagogy and didactics. The second section will deal with the encounter between Muslim education systems and colonial and modernist discourse. This stage played out differently in various parts of Islamic world. But in general the pressures of nationalism, influence of colonial powers, and secularization challenged and marginalized the once widespread system of Islamic education. This section will look at both the external factors such as colonialism, and internal factors such as resistance to reform by Muslim intellectuals that led to the marginalization of Islamic institutions and system of education. The third section will focus on the historical system of Muslim education, highlighting the resilience of Muslim institutions such as *madrasa* that has survived, albeit in a very different form, and has continued to pass on knowledge acquired through centuries. Despite the misrepresentation and erosion of Muslim educational systems, a lot can be gained from studying and engaging with Islamic theories and practices of education in the present times. Moreover, there is room for meaningful dialogue between the Western and Muslim educators and theorists. Muslims have a history of studying and intellectually engaging in Western thought and disciplines, and their own works have certainly not flourished in isolation. This article will conclude with the argument on the possibility of reviving the historical roots of Muslim education where the secular flourished along with the religious, and where a willingness to interact with other civilizations and systems of education was evident. Ultimately, the West needs to see madrasas as institutions of learning and human development and understand the roots of Islamic education thought and practice before critiquing them.

Roots of Muslim Education: Institutions and Thought
The significance of education in Islam can be traced back to the very first revelation to the Prophet, in the cave of Hira, instructed him to "Read..." (Quran, Chapter 96: verse 1). The verses of

Quran that emphasize the necessity of learning and enjoin it on Muslims are numerous[1]. In addition, the literature of prophetic traditions (*hadith*) is filled with such sayings from the Prophet Mohammad: "To acquire knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim, male and female," (*Al-Bukhari*) and "Seek knowledge from the day of your birth until the day of your death."(as cited in Bahonar, 2004) Therefore, education is the foundation of Islamic civilization, and "a lifelong pursuit of learning is a characteristic ideal of Islamic piety" that every Muslim must aspire to achieve (Günther, 2006, p. 368). The Prophet Mohammad was the first Muslim educator who taught his companions the Quran, guided them in questions of jurisprudence, explained to them the complex Islamic system of inheritance, and on the whole imparted to them a code of life that was to guide their social and religious interactions. At the advent of Islam, it is said that there were only 17 persons from Quraish who were able to read and write, but owing to the needs of the new religious and political system, reading and writing were keenly encouraged (Al-Baladhuri, as cited in Shalaby, 1954, p. 457). At this time non-Muslims also took the task of teaching reading and writing, as in the battle of Badr, several captives were set free on condition that they taught a certain number of Muslims to read and write, as their ransom (Al-Mubarrad, as cited in Shalaby, 1954, p. 17). As the Muslim society grew through conquest and conversion, the place of knowledge also evolved in a unique way. The result was the foundation of a vibrant civilization with various institutions and a growing scholarship that served as an inspiration to other civilizations which "made room for the flourishing of the secular in the midst of the religious" (Kadi, 2006). The zeal for education in the earlier centuries was realized through the emergence of books and bookseller markets, with scholars travelling large distances to acquire knowledge from learned teachers, and the mushrooming of educational institutions such as *katatib*, bookshops and libraries, houses of learned men, literary salons of Caliphs, *masajid* and madaris. The three institutions that were the most widespread and important in the premodern period during the first years of Islam in the seventh century until the 19th century were the *kuttab*, *masjid* (mosque) and the *madrasa*.

The *kuttab* (place of writing; also called a *maktab*), along with the masjid, is probably the earliest learning institution in Islam, and is mentioned in the writings of scholars such as Ibn Jubair, Ibn Batuta and Ibn Khadun (Shalaby, 1954, p. 17-18). The *kuttab* arose in the first Islamic century to provide elementary education outside the mosque to students of varying ages (Kadi, 2006). The *kuttab* was run by a teacher (*Mu'allim* in Arabic) who taught subjects including memorization and recitation of the Quran, reading, writing, spelling, voweling letters, arithmetic and some basic religious duties (Kadi, 2006). Shalaby (1954) states that *katatib* (plural of *kuttab*) were often adjoined to the mosque as well as in private premises. The number of *Katatib* and *Mu'allims* in the Muslim world increased rapidly and on a large scale until almost every village had its own *Kuttab* if not more than one (Shalaby, 1954).

Undeniably the most classic institution of learning in Islam has been the *Masjid* (mosque). The Prophet's mosque in Madina was the institution that was fundamental in spreading the message of Islam and a seat of learning for the companions, who later passed on the knowledge to the following generation. The Prophet used to teach his followers on both religious and secular knowledge in the earliest mosques of Islam (Al Bukhari, as cited in Shalaby 1954, p. 48). Since the early times of Islam, *Halaqas* (study circles) have been held in mosques and centuries have continued to witness this flourishing activity up to the present period (Shalaby,

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[1] Other important verses from the Quran on the subject include Chapter 58, verse 11; Chapter 9, verse 122; Chapter 16, verse 43; Chapter 39, verse 9; Chapter 20, verse114.

1954, p. 47). The students in *masajid* (plural of *masjid;* mosques), almost always adults, came to gather knowledge from learned religious scholars who specialised in various disciplines including Quran, hadith, law, jurisprudence, theology, dogma, language, poetry, oratory, and later foreign sciences such as medicine, logic, astronomy (Kadi, 2006; Shalaby, 1954). The study circles had an informal structure and were open to all. The students had the choice of subjects or classes corresponding to their educational level. Among the most prominent *masajid* (mosques) were the Prophet's mosque in Medina, Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, Ummayad mosque in Damascus, Zaytuna mosque in Tunis, and Azhar mosque in Egypt (Kadi, 2006). These *Masajid* became hubs of learning with illustrious scholars and bright students coming from all over the Islamic world.

But as the students and study circles increased, and studies developed and new subjects and debates came into being, Muslims realized that these could not be adequately conducted in the mosque, which was primarily a place of worship (Shalaby, 1954). By the 10th century, social and scholarly needs led to the emergence of the third enduring Islamic educational institution, the *madrasa* (place of study) (Kadi, 2006, p.314). From 11th century *madaris* (plural of *madrasa*) were built by members of ruling elite and soon became the ubiquitous colleges of Islam, starting with the network of Nizamiyya *madaris*, first built in Baghdad and then elsewhere. Each *madrasa* had an administrative structure, defined body of residents (staff, faculty and students) and distinct curriculum. Teachers and staff were salaried and students received a stipend in addition to free education and residence. Curriculum comprised of books on hadith (prophetic tradition), legal thought, Arabic language, logic, medicine, poetry and others. The general modes of instruction were similar in the various institutions of Islamic education including the *madrasa* where reliance on memory was highly prized, repetition was cultivated, and dictation was valued given the usefulness of citing materials verbatim during disputation (Kadi, 2006). Discussion of texts were personal and transmission based, focused first on the teacher's commentary on issues, then on his probing of the student's understanding and ability to solve difficult problems (Kadi, 2006). Boyle (2006) interprets this focus on memorization in Islamic education as playing a role in relation to knowledge, learning, understanding and reasoning, all of which have nuances that do not adhere in Western conceptions of these words. Drawing on her study of *madaris* in contemporary era, Boyle (2006) demonstrates that "Quranic memorization is a process of embodying the divine—the words of God—and as such is far more learner-oriented and meaningful process than is typically described" (p. 480). Influential Muslim jurist Al-Ghazali pointed out that memorization of the Quran is generally considered the first step in understanding and does not necessarily preclude comprehension later on. Günther (2006) explains that "Al-Ghazali makes it very clear that for him, true knowledge is not simply a memorized accumulation of facts but rather 'a light which floods the heart'" (p. 382). Through Al-Ghazali's works such as *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion (Ihya ulum al-din)*, which elaborates his views of teaching and learning, he has come to be seen as one of the greatest architects of Islam's educational philosophy and ethics (Günther, 2006).

In addition to Ghazali, there have been various Muslim scholars from the medieval or premodern period who have contributed to educational thought through discussions on educational theory, pedagogy and didactics (Günther, 2006). Given the limited scope of this article, it is impossible to engage with the richness and depth of Muslim educational thought in the premodern era. However, referring to some of these works is important in understanding the nature of educational thought in premodern times that led to a vibrant and progressive

system of Muslim education. Günther (2006) asserts that even though education never actually developed as a separate discipline, one can talk of "a rich, diverse and original pedagogical tradition in Islam," which is not dissimilar to the one in medieval Europe. Günther (2006) notes that by studying the medieval Arabic texts of various scholars, we can observe that elements of ancient Arab and Persian culture and the Greco-Hellenistic heritage were creatively adapted and incorporated into Islamic educational theory. From the eighth to the 16th century, there was also a continuous tradition of Arabic-Islamic scholarship dealing with pedagogical and didactic issues and reflecting a range of individual scholar's stances, ethnic origins and geographical affiliations. Writing on education included works by Muslim theologians, philosophers, jurists, litterateurs, hadith scholars and scientists. Ibn Sahnun, a ninth-century Tunisian jurist, for example, wrote a handbook for teachers focusing on issues of teaching and curriculum development in early Islam, which has become a document of remarkable significance for the history of pedagogy (Günther, 2006).

In contrast to Ibn Sahnun's text for elementary school teachers, the Iraqi litterateur Al-Jahiz wrote a text for teachers dealing with questions of learning and teaching at advanced level from a literary-philosophical point of view. Al-Jahiz emphasized independent thinking but argued that a good memory is needed and valuable for learning as a process, otherwise the results of the study would not last. Al-Jahiz also advised teachers to take the mental ability of students into account and deal with them gently. The 11th-century Iranian philosopher Ibn Sina or Avicenna focused on various aspects of child psychology that must be taken into account when teaching the young. Ibn Sina's work focused on insights into certain physical, emotional and intellectual aspects of child development, which for him were the starting point for exploring aspects of importance to a child's education from infancy to adolescence (Günther, 2006).

In addition to Ibn Sahnun and Al-Jahiz, the 10th-century Turkish-born philosopher, social scientist and musicologist Al-Farabi focused on student-centered learning and the art of instruction (Günther, 2006). He was among the first Muslim scholars to suggest and integrate curriculum for higher learning of both the "foreign" and "religious" sciences, with the foreign being those grounded in Greek and the religious being those based on the Quran and its interpretation (Günther, 2006, p. 373). Al-Farabi focused on the art of instruction in detail and conceived of it as an interactive process that involves both the teacher and the student. He advocated using various methods of explanation and a student-centered learning process that "facilitates the student's own voyage of discovery" (Günther, 2006, p. 376).

Halstead (2004) adds to this list of Muslim work on education by mentioning Nasir al-Din Tusi's text *Akhlag-i-Naseri* and Ibn Maskuya's *Taharat al-A'arag*, both which contain detailed discussions of moral education and other educational issues. In his famous book, *Muqaddimah*, the great historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun outlines the aims of education, the curriculum and the skills of teaching and also provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of Islamic knowledge (Halstead, 2004). He follows the by now standard bifurcation of knowledge into that which is revealed (*naqliyya* or transmitted sciences, such as theology and jurisprudence) and that which is discovered ('*aqliyya* or intellectual sciences, such as medicine and mathematics). Other texts, including *Siyasat-Namah* by Nizam-al-Mulk and *Ghulistan and Bustan* by Sa'di, examine topics like education, teaching, learning, youth, love and devotion (Halstead, 2004). This list of works by Muslim scholars, though far from complete, highlights the existence of a dialectical and progressive approach towards education

in the premodern era of Islamic education. However, this tradition was discontinued in the following period that marked the integration of the Islamic world into the colonial system.

Muslim Education's Encounter with Modernity and Colonialism
During the Middle Ages education in Muslim countries gradually began to stagnate for various reasons, and this made it easier for the Western imperialist expansion for Western systems of education (Halstead, 1995). Between the 19th century and the middle of the 20th, most Islamic lands were colonized by various Western powers that questioned norms, practices and traditions that characterised the Islamic way of life at the political, economic, legal, social and individual levels (Kadi, 2006). The policies of the colonials and the establishment of modern institutions had a deep impact on the normative, psychological, and material aspects of Muslims' lives. In the Indian subcontinent, the British adopted policies that made it difficult for indigenous institutions to grow and undercut the power base of colonized people (Talbani, 1996). Such measures included the confiscation of properties owned by religious organizations like *madrasa* and the establishment of a parallel educational system. The traditional educational institutions resisted change and became anachronistic in the modern world. In many colonies the concept of education fundamentally changed as secular education became necessary for employment. Muslim teachers and students then faced secular schools that not only ignored religion but also introduced entirely new curricula, school structures and teaching methods. The methods of instruction were impersonal and utilitarian, far from those that had been used in *katatib*, *masajid* and *madaris* through the previous millennium (Kadi, 2006). Even though a large number Muslims began to accept and participate in the new secular educational systems, opposition to modern education by traditional Muslims and scholars continued.

Talbani (1996) reports that colonization also changed the objectives of education in *madaris* from achieving bliss in the hereafter and providing government bureaucrats to defending the faith against colonial infiltration. Hence, *madaris* continued to produce religious scholars trained to defend religion and protect traditional values. This narrowed down the focus of *madrasas* and their students to studying religious disciplines. The objective of this education was not to get individuals positions in government, teaching, or any other vocation, but only to achieve religious knowledge to serve the faith (Talbani, 1996); therefore, Muslim education become marginalized as it was separated from the modern ideas of social and scientific progress. During this period there were heated debates between Muslim educators and scholars, with some advocating reform and others refusing it (Kadi, 2006). It is argued that during this era Muslim education seemed unwilling and unable to respond to the rapid expansion of knowledge, particularly scientific and technological, that was taking place in the West, and it came to be depicted in Western and Western-educated circles as backward and obscurantist (Halstead, 1995). It is important to note that in addition to the external factors of colonialism and western forms of education, there were also internal factors that led to the stagnation and subsequent marginalization of Muslim system of education. A. L. Tibawi, a traditionalist Muslim writer, complains, "Islamic education is a mere shadow of its past.... Its modernization has led to its complete transformation" (1972, p. 192). It is alleged that Muslim education gradually began to stagnate since the Middle Ages, partly because of the rigidity with which the subject matter was defined and partly because of a sterile pedagogy which put much emphasis on memorization, made extensive use of physical punishment and required studies to be carried out in Arabic, a language foreign to an increasing number of Muslims outside the Arab lands (Halstead, 1995).

Such internal issues in Muslim education were then supplemented with external pressures of colonialism and western education systems, to restrict and marginalize the once ubiquitous and vibrant system of Islamic education.

Considering the Contemporary Reality of Muslim Education and the Possibility of Dialogue
In the postcolonial and postindependence period, no uniform pattern of education has emerged in Muslim countries (Shamsavary et al., 1993). Some have retained and extended a westernized system, others have attempted to bolster the status of the Muslim system so it can exist side by side with and as a viable alternative to westernized system, yet a few others have attempted to Islamicize the system completely, but remain significantly dependent on Western expertise and ideas particularly in the areas of science and technology (Halstead, 1995). It is safe to say that in the contemporary period, the role of madaris has continued to be limited and marginal, and has been recently muddied by media and politics which have connected it to terrorism. The picture of education in Islam at this stage is complex and in need of attention and study. Scholars such as al-Attas (1979) maintain that it is "confusion and error in knowledge" that is the ultimate cause of the contemporary problems facing Muslim society, including social injustice and inadequate leadership. One needs to go beyond factors of Muslim moral and spiritual degeneration to their intellectual deterioration, which was followed by the break from the educational practices and thought prevalent in the premodern era. Halstead points to the present dilemma being faced by Muslim parents, teachers and to some extent educational systems in Muslim countries in the contemporary period. On one hand, a modified system of Western education is likely to leave Muslim children exposed to an underlying set of secular values and assumptions which are alien to the spirit of Islam, but on the other hand Muslim schools of the old style seem unable to prepare children adequately for the needs of the modern world or to help them take part in the scientific, technological and economic progress (Halstead, 1995).

The very concept of education in Islam is broad and all encompassing, as compared to the Western conception of education and its purpose. Scholars like Wan Daud (1998) argue that much contemporary discussion on Islamic education betrays "weak theoretical foundations, simplistic interpretation, and intemperate application, which do not do justice to its true ideals and heritage" (p. 24). The first section of this article, which looked at Muslim scholarship on educational thought in the premodern era draws on the work done by Muslim intellectuals that formulated the "true ideals and heritage" that Daud has referred to. Halstead (2004) tries to articulate three dimensions of education in Islam based on the Arabic terms of *tarbiya, ta'dib* and *ta'lim,* all used for education. Using these three terms, Halstead suggests a possible analysis of Muslim education in terms of (1) aiding individual development, (2) increasing understanding of society and its social and moral rules and (3) transmitting knowledge. While such an analysis is by no means exclusive to Islamic thinking, what makes it a distinctively Islamic view of education is the application to these three dimensions of the principle that no aspect of a Muslim's life can remain untouched by religion (Halstead, 2004). Keeping these in mind, Halstead (2004) argues that a considerable amount of theoretical work has already been done on ways to bring other subjects into line with Islamic beliefs and values; and so as theorists we need to be involved in a process that is not merely grafting an Islamic component onto modem western knowledge, but the reconstruction of the entire discipline in accordance with Islamic principles.

Al Zeera (2001) has done some interesting work in this area of creating a holistic Islamic paradigm that can capture the wholeness of Islamic thought and can be used in Islamic universities and educational institutions for the production of Islamic knowledge. Taking the discussion to a paradigmatic level in educational philosophy, Al Zeera shows how the western paradigms in social science namely the positivist, postpositivist, critical theory and constructivist are unable to encompass the complexity of human life and the reality of societies that combine the religious and the secular. Since these paradigms are not appropriate to the study of social science in Islamic countries, Al Zeera (2001) proposes an alternative holistic Islamic paradigm that is based on the dialectic of *tawhid* or the concept of oneness. On the one hand the Islamic paradigm is divine, spiritual, religious, eternal, constant, absolute and ideal; and on the other hand, it is human, material, rational, temporary, mutable and relative (Al Zeera, 2001). These two opposites are interwoven by the dialectic of *tawhid*. Therefore, it is through this dialectic of *tawhid* that Muslims accept contradictions in their being, in nature, and in the universe around them. Al Zeera (2001) carries out a rich discussion of the significance of *tawhid* or the unity of the Divine principle in Islam to show that the education system should address the Muslim learner as a whole person who possesses mind, body and soul, and should prepare one's faculties to realize the wholeness of life. Al Zeera argues that rooting the holistic curricula in the concept of *tawhid* and using it as a method of inquiry will develop student's critical thinking. The development of such paradigms can aid contemporary Muslim scholars to revive the rich historical tradition of education in the Muslim world that has been stagnated and marginalized over the centuries. Muslim institutions need to expand their focus of teaching and learning beyond the religious disciplines to deal with the scientific and social science fields of education. This does require interacting with non-Muslim and Western academics and institutions, something inevitable in an era of globalization.

Looking at Islamic educational institutions in the contemporary era, it is important to note that despite marginalization and recent negative propaganda, the *madrasa* has continued to survive and is playing a vital role in educating Muslims. Ethnographic studies (Boyle, 2006; Milligan, 2006; Pohl, 2006; Tawil, 2006) conducted in various Muslim countries including Morocco, Yemen, Nigeria, Indonesia, Philippines and Pakistan show that *madaris* and Islamic schools play a vital role in communities as "agents of preservation and change." Boyle (2006) in her study of Islamic educational institutions in Morocco, Yemen and Nigeria argues that these institutions ensure intergenerational transmission and maintenance of the communities' indigenous knowledge and long-standing social, educational and religious practices and values. Pohl's (2006) study of Indonesia's most innovative and successful brand of Islamic boarding schools, the *pesantrem,* highlights that contrary to media reports, religious schools are playing a key role in the emergence of a democratic civil society by upholding its main principles, including gender equality, antiviolence, pluralism and social and economic justice. Milligan's (2006) study of Islamic schools in Philippines shows a recent example of integrating secular and Islamic education. These institutions in various Muslim countries are playing an important role in building their communities by moulding the students' character and beliefs in line with the requirements of modern life.

Conclusion
While various authors have argued that "a huge gulf exists between Islamic and Western conceptions of education which is unbridgeable" (Halstead, 2004), there still exists a

possibility of interaction and dialogue between Muslim and Western educators. There is much that contemporary education and comparative education scholars can learn by studying the principles of education in Muslim historical societies. Indeed as the first section of this article outlined and as Günther's (2006) article has shown, traditional Islamic education had a number of characteristics that may seem progressive today. There was a natural integration of the curriculum and a close personal relationship between the teacher and the student. Further, within that system of education elitism was discouraged, undue attention was not paid to examinations and pupil grouping was less rigid (Halstead, 2004). Student-centered and interactive learning pedagogies were encouraged by Muslim scholars such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and others. Above all, traditional Islamic education was not an activity separated from other aspects of society; it was rooted in the community it served, responding to its needs and aspirations and preserving its values and beliefs (Halstead, 2004). Studies of Islamic institutions in present day Muslim countries including Philippines and Indonesia show that Islamic educational schools are still playing an important role in community development through educating Muslim students to become responsible citizens. Some of these Islamic schools exemplify the ability to accommodate curricular changes while maintaining long-standing traditional ways of education. In a way they present an example close to Al Zeera's conception of an Islamic paradigm that combines the religious and the secular to bolster the Muslim learner's dialectical thinking. These examples are promising in that they support the potential for dialogue between Muslim and Western educators. By focusing on the historical roots of Muslim education through looking at its key institutions and scholarship, this article is an attempt to encourage educational theorists and researchers to understand the contemporary reality of Islamic educational institutions in light of its rich heritage. Moreover, it highlights the necessity to understand how and why Muslim educational institutions were marginalized due to both internal and external factors. The article also proposes a potential way forward through broadening the current focus of disciplines that are studied in Muslim educational institutions based on an Islamic paradigm. In developing a progressive approach to education similar to the one that existed in the premodern era, Muslim scholars need to engage in a dialogue with other civilizations.

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