Abdullah Saeed, "Islamic Religious Education and the Debate on its Reform Post-September 11" in *Islam and the West. Reflections from Australia* (eds. Shahram Akbarzadeh & Samina Yasmeen; Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005) 63-76

Saeed argues that since September 11 many commentators, especially Western, have wrongly assumed all Islamic religious educational systems and institutions are virtually identical and that this is the most important source of anti-Western attitudes among Muslims and a breeding ground for terrorism and violence.

Education in the Early Islamic Period
Saeed identifies three different strands of Islamic education in the early Islamic period:
1. Juridical-theological. The earliest and most important strand, commencing with the 7th century Qur'an, later incorporating the Hadith, *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *tarikh* (history), *fiqh* (law), *kalam* (theology) and related disciplines, e.g. Arab linguistics.
2. Philosophical-scientific. During the 8th and 9th centuries CE many Greek scientific and philosophical works were translated into Arabic.
3. Mystical-spiritual. These emerged from the 8th-9th centuries, with orders such as Qadiriya and Naqshabandiya later developing. This system accorded little attention to the other two strands of education.

Major centres of learning developed in Damascus, Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Baghdad and Cordoba, with libraries also established throughout the Muslim world. Between the 8th and 11th centuries scholars were encouraged to become accomplished in a broad range of disciplines, ranging from the Islamic disciplines to philosophy and the natural sciences.

Nevertheless, the juridical-theological disciplines remained dominant up to the modern period. In the caliphates or emirates Islamic law was the law of the land. Different schools of law predominated in different regions: Hanafi in the Ottoman Empire; Maliki in areas like North Africa and Spain; Shafi'i in Egypt; Hanbali in parts of Arabia; and Ja'fari in Iran.

The early Islamic age of great intellectual achievement began to wane in the 12th century, with an increasing tendency to prioritiese "religious" disciplines over "non-religious". Abu Hamid al-Ghazali is particularly responsible for formally separating religious and non-religious disciplines and his ideas continue to dominate Islamic education. Ghazali particularly associated the purpose of knowledge with happiness in the hereafter, placing religious sciences at the top of his hierarchy. While he saw some non-religious discipline as "useful" and "relevant", he attacked metaphysics as highly dangerous (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), a threat to metaphysics. This led to the marginalization of the philosophical-scientific disciplines.

From Individuals to Institutions
Formal state-supported educational institutions were established in the 10th and 11th centuries, e.g. al-Azhar in Cairo and Nizamiya in Baghdad. Prior to this students typically moved from one scholar (*alim*) to another or from one town to another, each with its own area of specialist knowledge. Al-Azhar and Nizamiya were primarily set up

to train judges, administrators of justice and other state bureaucrats. Similar institutions developed elsewhere in the Muslim world.

However, creativity "gave way to mediocrity, preservation of the 'heritage', and blind imitation" (66). Uncritical rote learning, memorization and unquestioning acceptance of authorities became standard. Philosophical-scientific learning declined. Several leading jurists issued fatwas prohibiting the teaching of philosophy, believing it would corrupt the faith and lead to questioning of the fundamentals of religion. Some philosophical works were burnt. Some philosophers had to flee for their lives. By the early 19th century Islamic religious education in key centres of learning (Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad, Damascus) was typically restricted to religious disciplines and reliance on memorization and rote-learning, unaffected by developments in Europe.

Reform Debate in the Modern Period

One of the first to advocate reform of Islamic educational institutions in keeping with modernity was Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) who, in contrast to most other contemporary Muslims, positively regarded Western civilization and intellectual practices. He urged the adoption of Western methods of education, the inclusion of secular subjects, learning foreign languages (e.g. English) and discarding superstitions. But when Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) tried to effect such reform in the al-Azhar seminary he was opposed by the *ulama* of al-Azhar.

The debate on reform continued in the 20th century in almost all key Muslim communities, with reformers urging that the distinction between religious and non-religious disciplines be rethought, curricula be broadened, etc. But it was recognised that the "key strategy for improvement was a radical shift in the purpose of teaching and an overhaul of the key pillars of what was considered valid practice in teaching" (68). This has led to the establishment of some "modern" Islamic institutions of higher learning and some state-funded schools in which Islamic religious education is taught alongside secular subjects.

Institutions of Higher Learning

The Islamic University of Saudi Arabia concentrates entirely on Islamic studies, with five faculties: law, theology, the Qur'an, the Hadith and Arabic. Modern methods of teaching and assessment are used, though the framework is authoritarian, with th teacher dominant and a lack of training in critical thinking. The whole curriculum aims at producing graduates who rely on memorized knowledge.

The International Islamic University of Malaysia also incorporates medicine, engineering, science, architecture and information technology, though all faculties have a strong Islamic ethos. Both English and Arabic are used for instruction, even in teaching Islamic disciplines. But even here teaching and learning continues, to some degree, to operate in an ethos of traditionalism.

In the 1950s and 1960s the IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri – State Institute of Islamic Studies) system was established in Indonesia, seeking to bring secular and religious education under one roof and to produce Muslims with a more modern understanding of Islam and its role in a modern society. Modern institutions and modernization tend to be viewed as not incompatible with Islam. Students and lecturers were given freedom to explore and discuss even ideas in conflict with traditionally accepted

dogma, e.g. the less orthodox views of Ibn Arabi, the excesses of Sufism and the theology of the rationalist thinkers of Islam.

Public Schools

In the 20th century Muslim states have replaced *kuttab*, traditional non-formal elementary schools, with schools that have more broadly based curricula. Religious education in such schools tends to emphasise a few, relatively safe, basic principles of Islam. Most students emerge, after 10-12 years, having memorized prayers for the daily rituals, learning some basics of Islam and some Islamic values and norms.

The Seminary as a Challenge to Reform

There are many seminaries (*madrasas*) where reform has not occurred. In Pakistan there are nearly 10,000, with nearly 30,000 in India and Indonesia (called *pasantren*). The Deobandi seminary in India has several thousand students. They vary from institutions that rely on rote learning and memorization to some that encourage exploration and creativity.

Jamia Salafiya, an Ahle Hadith seminary in Faisalabad, provides a typical example of a seminary in Pakistan. Students enrol at around 12 years of age. After eight years of study successful students get a certificate (equivalent to a Pakistani BA), entitling them to become imams or religious education teachers at school level or at similar seminaries. The curriculum is traditional, highly authoritarian and centered on some Islamic disciplines. There are far more traditionalist seminaries in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Reform Debate Post-September 11

When, following September 11, "Western commentators have argued that traditional Islamic religious education provides Muslim militant extremists with the ideological basis for activities that are anti-Western and terrorist", they are referring to *madrasas* and Islamic universities. Jeffrey Goldberg of the New York Times spoke of one million students studying in the 10,000 *madrasas* of Pakistan, with militant Islam being at the core of most of these schools.

Saeed maintains that despite the rhetoric "there is little evidence given for a strong connection between terrorist acts by certain Muslims and Islamic religious education in general" (73). He argues that "Islamic religious education has existed for the past 1400 years in many societies and across the continents, yet on the whole its institutions do not have a record of producing terrorists" (73). He also observes, "None of the Muslim extremist groups or their well-known leaders, as named by the American FBI, are graduates of Islamic religious educational institutions. This applies even to bin Laden and to Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Egyptian Jihad. The nineteen hijacker (and the twentieth, currently in prison in the US) named by the FBI as responsible for the September 11 attacks were not graduates of Islamic religious education" (73) [This raises the question: from where did this leaders and the hijackers get their Islamic religious education?]. He argues, "If Islamic religious education is responsible for terrorism and anti-Westernism, then we should be witnessing terrorism and anti-Westernism on a global scale" (73).

A wide range of Muslims criticize the brand of reform (dubbed "CIA Islam") urged by many Western commentators, who would like to see references to violence, Jihad and

intolerance towards non-Muslims and the West removed from the religious education curricula, evidently via the coercive power of the state. Saeed even considers that the war on terror may be the biggest stumbling block to the reform of Islamic religious education. He believes that history shows that for Muslims a climate of confidence, prosperity, security and freedom is of importance for reform and change, whereas external threats have the opposite effect. At the end of the day reform of Islamic religious education must come from inside Muslim communities.

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While there is much in this article to commend, particularly Saeed's preparedness to critique Islamic religious education, there are also some dubious conclusions. Saeed's argument that there is no real link between Islamic religious education and violence and terrorism is unconvincing. In *Desperately Seeking Paradise* Ziauddin Sardar, who was born in Pakistan, relates his own experiences.

In Islamabad Sardar spoke with Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, the principal of one of the oldest Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan. Sami-ul-Haq related how his students came "to learn a pure vision of Islam", from a curriculum focusing on the Qur'an and the Shariah. He added, "We teach an undiluted, chaste version of the Shariah" (222), largely based on rote learning, memorization of the Qur'an, memorization of select portions of the *hadith* and of the legal opinions and rulings of 8th century, classical jurists. He recoiled with horror when Sardar asked if they studied philosophy, insisting they taught pure Shariah, which also had no room for Sufi thought nor Shia thought, regarded as a deviation from Islam.

One of the students, in his twenties, told Sardar that Shi'ites are not Muslim and do not belong in a truly Islamic republic. He was asked why, if he was a Muslim, he did not wear a beard. Sardar replied it was not necessary for a Muslim to wear a beard. The student retorted that this is required by the Sunnah and that anyone who does not follow the Sunnah is not a Muslim. Sardar answered, "So why aren't you riding a camel?" To the confused student Sardar explained, "It's Sunnah to ride a camel. The Prophet spent a great deal of his life on the back of a camel." The student pointed out that today we have cars and buses. Sardar pointed out that if there had been razor blades in Muhammad's day he might well have used one. Sardar then noted the student was wearing *surma*, black lining under the eyes. The student responded, "It is Sunnah." Sardar pointed out that it the applicant contains lead and could damage the student's eyes and poison him. When Sardar tried to explain that many things Muhammad did were a product of his times and not essential to Sunnah the student shouted angrily, "Who are you to say what is and what is not the Sunnah? You don't even have a beard" (224).

Sardar left, his mind filled with images of this "medieval perception of Divine Law", reflecting that:

> Far from being a 'seat of learning', *madrasah* Haqqania was a hatchery of hate. It was producing not men of education and learning, but narrow-minded bigots absolutely certain their way was the only right way. How long before they reach critical mass and start fighting with all who disagree with them…How long before they declare war on the Shia? How long before they turn Pakistan into their hellish version of paradise? The

total lack of humour, the conspicuous absence of the joy of life so evident in the madrassah, convinced me the students had to be taken seriously (224).

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Sardar recalls his conversation with Rustum, a barber in Rawalpindi. The conversation turned to Shariah. Rustum asked:

> What would I, a barber, do if the bearded ones became the masters of our society? What I want is a decent living, proper education for my children, a proper roof over my head. What their Shariah will give me is public floggings, beheadings, compulsory beards and lock my poor long-suffering wife and daughter behind purdah (228).

Against Saeed there is every probability that unreformed Islamic religious education will contribute significantly to an environment in which, given other agreeable circumstances, violence will be inevitable.