Authority, autonomy and selfhood in Islamic education – Theorising *Shakhsiyah Islamiyah* as a dialogical Muslim-self

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Abstract

This paper investigates the philosophical tensions between secular-liberalism and Islam, and reviews Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge, personhood and education, in order to conceptualise *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* as an authentic and credible form of personal agency within an Islamic worldview. It begins by examining the liberal critique of Islamic education and explores notions of authority and autonomy in Islamic educational theory. It proposes that these tensions exist to varying degrees in all educational practice. Some theoretical work to develop an Islamic understanding of personal autonomy as selfhood is presented and translated into a concept of *shakhsiyah Islamiyah*. Finally, the possibility of understanding *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* as a dialogical Muslim-self is explored.

Keywords: autonomy, self, dialogic, personhood, Islam, liberalism, religion, secularism

Introduction

This paper scrutinises the philosophical tensions between secular-liberalism and Islam, and reviews Islamic conceptualisations of personhood and education, in order to develop a deeper understanding of *shakhsiyah Islamiyah*¹ as an authentic and credible form of personal autonomy within the Islamic worldview. It has two-fold aims; first, to address misconceptions of Islamic education as indoctrination that has no place in a secular-liberal world; and second

¹ This is a compound term and there is no short definition. Details of how the term has been put together, it's history and purposes are found in the section below called *Shakhsiyah Islamiyah* as Muslim Selfhood

to begin to explore where and how notions of a form of autonomy might be found within a broad Islamic 'philosophy' of education. Islam has a rich history of educational thought and there is an emerging field in English detailing diverging perspectives (Bagheri Noaparast, 2016; Günther, 2020; Memon & Zaman, 2016). This paper puts forward some initial ideas within a broad Islamic paradigm as outlined in Figure 1 and the accompanying appendix and hopes to launch a more nuanced and detailed debate within this emerging field.

The term autonomy usually has specific secular-liberal connotations and in this configuration, it is not easily absorbed into an Islamic worldview. In this regard, I sometimes use the term agency to express features of personal autonomy when discussing Islamic notions of this concept. It would be disingenuous and superficial to simply claim shakhsiyah as a form of autonomy without rigorous theoretical interrogation from both secular-liberal and Islamic perspectives. It is also essential to address the critique of Islamic education as transmission-based and teacher-centred if a claim about an Islamic notion of autonomy is to be taken seriously. This paper therefore proceeds through a theoretical analysis of similarities and differences between Islamic educational theory and secular-liberal conceptualisations of dialogic pedagogy. Whilst there are complex and nuanced variations within each tradition, for the purposes of this paper, I work with broadly conceived notions of each tradition in order to frame the discussion, develop a comparative argument and present some ideas. Limitations of space prevent a more nuanced discourse of intra-tradition variation.

I begin by discussing and problematising the liberal critique of Islamic education. I then present an outline of typologies of Muslim education and introduce holistic Islamic education, before exploring notions of authority and autonomy in Islamic education. I propose that these tensions exist to varying degrees in all educational practice. I then develop an Islamic understanding of autonomy as selfhood and translate it into the concept of shakhsiyah Islamiyah. Finally, I explore the possibility of understanding shakhsiyah Islamiyah as a dialogical Muslim-self.

Secular-liberal theory, education and personal autonomy

A useful definition of personal autonomy that is authentic to the enlightenment rationalist

secular-liberal tradition is detailed in Table 1. This definition is predicated in agency and describes specific personal characteristics, including questioning, reasoning, critical thinking and taking a position. In doing so, this definition offers opportunities to consider these features of autonomous thought in relation to features of productive educational dialogue. It also allows for an evaluation of whether such educational dialogue encourages the development of these features in those who engage in it on a regular basis.

Table 1 Characteristics of an autonomous individual (Dearden, 1975, p. 7)

Having offered an established liberal conceptualisation of autonomy, I shall now interrogate the assumptions underpinning it and the liberal dilemma that it has generated.

The liberal dilemma

There is a growing body of literature on what has been called the ‘liberal dilemma’ (Burtonwood, 2000, p. 269), where the fact of pluralism, that is the existence of faith-based education in secular-liberal societies (Alexander, 2015; Merry, 2007), demonstrates incongruity between the liberal values of equality and autonomy. This dilemma refers to the challenges liberals face from cultural and communitarian groups who do not prioritise liberal values, particularly the value of personal autonomy (Burtonwood, 1998). Classical liberalism, with its rationalist and enlightenment heritage, has become open to the accusation that it is a monism shaped by the Christian and colonial heritage of Europe (Parekh, 2002). Parekh contends that classical liberals like Locke, Montesquieu, Kant and Mill, drew on Greek rationalism and Christian universalism to devise a worldview, which justified the colonial endeavour as a means of bringing a vision of the good life, that is critical rationality, choice and personal autonomy, to backward peoples. According to classical liberalism, this vision can be rationally demonstrated and is thus binding on all human beings (Parekh, 2002). Parekh’s argument bears some similarity to the UK government narrative of Fundamental British Values as a means of assimilating non-liberal values and cultures, which has been extensively problematized as seriously damaging to Muslim educational experiences in UK state schools (Faure-Walker, 2019; O’Donnell, 2016; Sian, 2015). Similar developments are happening in other ‘western’ contexts and directly impacting Muslim children and young

people.

The difficulty for classical liberalism is that the argument that personal autonomy rests on truths considered rationally demonstrable and universal has been widely challenged. Whilst classical liberalism argues that reason must challenge dogma, many communitarians and non-western peoples challenge non-negotiable liberal truths as dogmatic and oppressive. The classical liberal argument is that secular education is essentially neutral, and enables impressionable young children to make autonomous decisions about their beliefs; in contrast to faith education which necessarily proclaims 'self-evident' truths (K. Moti Gokulsing, 2006) about the superiority of that faith, and is thus indoctrinatory, limiting children's right to autonomy (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005; Tinker, 2009). This perspective has been undermined by the contention that the liberal definition of personal autonomy is actually Eurocentric, and although it presents itself as rationally demonstrable, it rests on 'self-evident' truths about rationality that are far from universal, thus turning the 'liberal dilemma' into an intractable problem, as identified by the communitarian critique. In classical liberalism the concept of the rational autonomous individual is constructed in the abstract (Rawls, 1971). Such an individual is free from any cultural context. The communitarian critique of classical liberalism is that human beings are always socialised into particular communities, and these communities will therefore influence how autonomous individuals make choices in life and relate to others (MacIntyre, 1989; Sandel, 1998).

The liberal-communitarian debate has spawned a vast literature including feminist, religious and racial critiques that is increasingly focused around intersectionality. Christman and Anderson (2005) and Mahmood (2004) cover these issues in some depth. Burtonwood (2000) identifies that feminist, Afro-centric, Islamic and other critiques are partly concerned about the loss of communitarian values to an unfettered liberal emphasis on the individual person and personal autonomy. Whereas secular-liberals may feel they have won hard fought rights for the benefit of all, non-European communities have their own values and ideas of cultural development. For some westerners, the rest of the world should accept rights that they assert as rationally demonstrable, so that everyone can reach the same developmental stage as the West. Implicit in this view, however, is a notion of 'intellectual-cultural superiority', which

could be described as little different to the notions of racial superiority that drove colonialism (Mehta, 1990). There has been some response to this in the form of the development of the indigenous knowledge movement and a drive for culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ahmed, 2012; Bishop, 2008; Smith, 2003; Stonebanks, 2008). Against this broad backdrop, there has been specific scholarship on the issue of Islamic faith education in secular-liberal societies.

Secular-liberal societies and faith-education

The liberal-communitarian debate has generated nuanced positions on each side; which lead to new perspectives on individual-community relations and Islamic faith education (Merry, 2007; Panjwani, 2009; Tan, 2014). Panjwani attempts to seek out an 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls, 1993), between Islamic and liberal conceptions of autonomy, rationality and educational aims, in relation to the dominant educational discourse in British Islamic faith-schools. He argues that this approach enables social cohesion without demanding submission of one worldview to another. For Panjwani, it is essential to recognise the role of historicity and human agency in the lived enactment of both traditions; this requires new enactments that can achieve overlapping consensus (Panjwani, 2009). Merry's approach is to recognise that liberal theory is vague about how much weight should be given to autonomy as the central feature of a liberal education. He highlights the tension between autonomy and tolerance as key liberal virtues. A disproportionate emphasis on autonomy could undermine tolerance by generating coercion towards a liberal lifestyle and undermining the values central to cultures that perceive individuals as intrinsically part of an organic holistic community. Merry considers the idea of wellbeing as an alternative way of understanding how individuals can attain a flourishing worthwhile life. Nevertheless, wellbeing still requires children to have the capacity for autonomy, to be able to independently choose worthwhile pursuits, and to ensure the possibility of choosing a life outside of their community (Merry, 2007). Tan (2014) accepts that rationality and autonomy are always situated within an ideological framework. She cites Thiessen, a Christian educator who identifies 'normal rationality' and 'normal autonomy' as being situated within a convictional community that has its own context, history, language and practices (Thiessen, 1993). Nevertheless, Thiessen's conceptualisation incorporates some dimension of liberal ideology, in that there must be evidence for beliefs held and critical openness towards one's worldview. This requirement for

evidence and critical openness should not be restricted to internal questions within a tradition; but also requires the capacity to evaluate one's existing worldview against other worldviews. This would ensure that the individual's life choices are based on a careful evaluation of her own worldview, as well as alternatives. Merry and Tan go on to describe Islamic theories about rationality and autonomy; yet as outsiders to the Islamic tradition, they are not interested in constructing theory but rather, describing historical ideas.

The Jewish educator, Hanan Alexander, has begun to construct liberal theory that abandons the claim of neutrality, and replaces the 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1989) with 'a view from somewhere' (Alexander, 2015, p.39) and generates a 'pedagogy of difference' (2015, p.87). Alexander is not satisfied with Panjwani's appeal to Rawlsian overlapping consensus in dealing with the issue of faith-schools in liberal societies. He considers the Rawlsian conception to be still beholden to a claim of neutrality. Alexander critiques Rawls' idea that 'public reason' is dependent on a form of moral reasoning based on values and standards shared by everyone who enters public discourse. Alexander argues that the idea of public reason precludes moral reasoning based on religious traditions that give precedence to scripture, because these traditions do not comply with liberal values and standards of public reason. Thus, according to Alexander, Rawls maintains the superiority of the liberal enlightenment worldview. By claiming that behind a 'veil of ignorance' every individual would choose his conceptualisation of public reason, because it is the most just, Rawls presupposes the concept of rationality that he is using to make his argument. He neglects the critique that individuals do not function from behind a veil of ignorance, they do not exist in the abstract; they are not an unencumbered self, devoid of any type of identity.

Alexander asks the question, what would a liberal education without the presumption of an underpinning neutrality constitute? What should an education look like if we have to begin with a view from somewhere? His response is the idea of 'pedagogy of difference'. This is founded on the dialogic idea that we need to be both initiated into *a* robust vision of the good life, that is, a 'thick' robust moral description, which is not necessarily religious, *and* be educated with the capacity to step outside our worldview and critically evaluate it from an outsider's perspective. As there is no neutral rational, scientific or objective stance, we have to

step outside to some other worldview. This could be the secular-liberal worldview, and indeed should be so, because this is the dominant worldview in the contemporary world, although it should not be considered neutral.

For Alexander, a worldview that has the capacity of a 'pedagogy of difference' is one that has the capacity to engage in dialogue. It affirms an intelligent spirituality, that is, a search for an understanding of one's self, within the context of a learning community that has a vision of a transcendent higher good. Alexander goes on to define the features of such a community by drawing on a different liberal heritage, on the concept of 'value pluralism', popularised by Isaiah Berlin, but also to be found in the pragmatism of William James and the Deweyian tradition in educational philosophy. This liberal tradition offers education from a holistic point of view towards a way of life, but it is not totalistic. Rather it is pragmatic in the sense that although it begins from a particular culture, it is open to learning from experience. Moreover, it is synthetic, in that it is prepared to engage with opposite points of view, including those within which there is the potential for disagreement. Finally, it is ethical in the classical Greek sense of the term, in that it asks the question, what is the good life? This form of pragmatism relies on three presuppositions. First, the person who engages in it is a free agent with freewill, even if it is not total freewill. Second, this agent has moral intelligence, that is, the capacity to tell the difference between right and wrong, according to some moral theory. Finally, this agent recognises that fallibility, that is, the possibility that she might be wrong, is a direct consequence of freewill. Additionally, in this form of pragmatism, educational experiences are considered valuable, not only when the agent gets it right, but also when the agent gets it wrong. For Alexander, dialogue is the necessary consequence of living in a world in which there is no 'view from nowhere' (2015, pp.81-84). In the next section I explore ideas of autonomy from within a broadly conceived Islamic paradigm. I am clear that I have adopted a particular 'view from somewhere'; in doing so, I hope to contribute to developing theorizations that can support the work of Muslim educators in minority and majority contexts, as they grapple with the complexities of our contemporary world.

Islamic educational theory and personal autonomy: the Muslim self in secular-liberal societies

In this section, I explore ideas of autonomy in Islamic education, settling on a dialogical notion of the Muslim self as *shakhsyah Islamiyah*. Returning to the idea of double-consciousness, Muslim selfhood faces particular challenges in secular-liberal societies. I deliberately use the term secular-liberal as opposed to liberal because, as Talal Asad has shown, in modern liberal nation-states it is the secular, itself defined through a culturally and historically constituted relationship with religion, manifested as an enacted representation of individual citizenship, that 'redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion' (2003, p5). The liberal conception of autonomy is closely related to this enactment of citizenship. According to Asad (2003), Mahmood (2004), Habermas (2006), and Mavelli (2015), the secular, with its dependency on the conceptual boundaries of religion, far from being inclusive, necessarily seeks to dominate and thus exclude the religious self. As Habermas states, "given that in the liberal state, only secular reasons count, citizens who adhere to a faith are obliged to establish a kind of 'balance' between their religious and their secular convictions." However, "many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons" (Habermas, 2006, p. 8), thus generating double-consciousness.

The emphasis in this paper on the core liberal value of personal autonomy, is itself influenced by the dominant paradigm of secular-liberal thought. In dealing with this quandary, I refer to Mahmood's anthropological work on female Muslim religious activists in Egypt, where she identifies that liberal assumptions about agency, locating it in the political and moral autonomy of the subject, inherently shape the study of Muslims (2004). Although Mahmood self-identifies as a liberal, by drawing on poststructuralist feminist literature and detaching the notions of agency and self-realisation from liberal autonomy, she is seeking to understand her subjects in their own terms, from within their own forms of consciousness. To do so, she recognises that the desire for freedom is not an innate universal desire, rather it is mediated by specific cultural and historical conditions, thus in her study the meaning of agency "cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity" (2004, pp. 14-15). Mahmood demonstrates that this religious negotiation is with the authority of orthodoxy, family, the

state and the norms of liberal discourse. Nevertheless, to characterise it as autonomous resistance to subordination is to misunderstand the religious discourses and desires of these women's activities. To proceed, a language needs to be found that represents and is "actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience", as they arise within a particular discursive tradition (2004, p. 16).

Mahmood's paper is relevant to this study because I am seeking to draw on Islamic conceptions of personhood, knowledge and education, to examine specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity, as a means to begin theorising *shakhsyah Islamiyah* as an Islamic form of selfhood and agency, and as an aim of Islamic education. First, however, I briefly discuss some typologies of Islamic education and interrogate the concepts of autonomy and authority in relation to 'teaching Islam'.

Douglass and Shaikh present a useful typology for education relating to Muslims, "education of Muslims in their Islamic faith; education for Muslims which includes the religious and secular disciplines; education about Islam for those who are not Muslim; and education in an Islamic spirit and tradition" (2004, p. 7). This paper is concerned with the latter; its theoretical focus is to examine the concept of *shakhsyah Islamiyah* as the goal of a *tawhīdī* (holistic) understanding of Islamic education. Figure 1 provides a conceptual map of Islamic concepts of knowledge, personhood and education. The appendix offers further explanation.

Figure 1. Islamic concepts of knowledge, personhood and education

Facing difficult questions: Islamic education, teacher authority and learner autonomy

To begin exploring personal autonomy in relation to Islamic education, it may be helpful to bypass the discourse on typologies of Muslim education and ask the direct question: what do we mean by 'teaching Islam'? If the word Islam is defined as attaining peace through submission (to the will of Allah), there immediately appears a challenge to the notion of such education developing autonomy. However, further exploration of what Islam requires in relation to submission, that is, that it comes through a free choice made by an autonomous individual, takes us immediately to an inherent aporia in Islam. Through its creedal premise

of *tawhīd* (unity), Islam ignores what are usually perceived in the 'Western' mind as dichotomies, and thus, in the Islamic worldview, freedom from self (*nafs*) and others (*an-nās*) is attained through submission to Allah who is *Ahad* (the ultimate Unity). Furthermore, although Allah exhorts *insān*, human beings, to use their '*aql* (intellect), the use of this uniquely human faculty leads to a recognition of the limits of the human intellect in that Allah and the *ghayb* (unseen) cannot be properly known by it alone. Thus, whereas '*aql* has been created in order for the human being to recognise Allah through his *āyāt* (signs), recognising these signs of Allah, leads to a recognition of human feebleness, thereby leading to an acceptance of the need to become Muslim, which in Arabic is to submit to *as-Ṣamad* (the Absolute). Such a view is inherently contradictory to a humanist worldview that underpins much of contemporary secular-liberal thought. In Islamic discourses, free will and '*aql* are the two distinctly human qualities that elevate the human being above the rest of creation, enabling human autonomy in choosing to become Muslim (one who submits). Therefore, when we are talking about teaching 'Islam,' I propose that we are talking about teaching a learner to submit to Allah, because this definition arrives at the heart of the problem of autonomy in Islamic education.

Moreover, the verb 'teach' is also at the heart of the incongruity between the terms autonomy and education, in that to 'teach' immediately implies authority. For how can there be teaching without authority? For many traditional Islamic educators, sacred knowledge comes from Allah and is not constructed by human beings: *ta'līm* (teaching) is transmission of sacred knowledge, and the teacher, as transmitter of sacred knowledge, is central to Islamic pedagogy. Combining the definition of Islam with this definition of teaching, it is easy yet fallacious, to conclude that Islamic education is pure indoctrination, because even in this definition of *ta'līm*, there is complexity. Moreover, in Islamic cultures it is well understood that the primary duty of the Islamic teacher is to develop the character of the learner; thus, the teacher-learner relationship is not just transmitting sacred knowledge but one of close direct interaction between student and teacher. It is through this relationship that sacred knowledge, reflective wisdom, and moral character are traditionally thought to have developed. So, the learner is not an empty vessel but very much an active agent, a seeker of knowledge who is looking for something from this particular teacher. Thus 'teaching Islam' has a complexity wherein the dichotomy of teaching-learning is carefully balanced and unified through a

tawhīd worldview. Furthermore, there are other ways of defining Islamic education, which are detailed later in this paper, adding nuance to the already complex classical understanding of *ta'lim*.

We can continue this discourse on the teacher-learner relationship by facing the challenge of 'teaching' per se, as a paradoxical practice, in that in any educational situation learner understandings might be restricted or supplanted by teacher-intended understandings. This exists in all conceptualisations of education, even learner-centred ones, in that teaching cannot happen without teacher input and therefore it will necessarily impinge to some degree on learner autonomy. This is what Bonawitz et al. describe as the "double-edged sword of pedagogy" (Bonawitz et al., 2011, p. 322). In their research, looking at how explicit instruction affects learning through exploratory play in pre-school aged children, they found that, although teacher instruction speeds up children's understanding of the function of a toy, it can also hinder children's further exploration of a toy, thereby restricting the learning benefits of exploratory play. They conclude that a combination of the efficiency of pedagogical transmission, with encouragement toward exploratory play, should maximise learning in the short and long term. Scaling this up to the teacher-learner relationship in traditional Islamic education, a clear practical solution emerges that requires skillful teaching: a pedagogical repertoire that is both teacher-led and learner-led. Skillful teaching involves encouraging questioning, criticality, awareness of differing arguments, and personal reflection in students; combined with the effective and precise transmission of sacred knowledge, through direct teaching and instruction. Although at the level of practice, skillful teaching addresses the question of learner autonomy in any educational situation, it does not address the more fundamental contradiction between teaching sacred knowledge and personal freedom in questioning sacred truths. In Islamic education, surely there are limits to critical inquiry, in that a learner is not permitted to be critical about matters of creed or dogma. However, this critique does not recognise the requirement in Islam to arrive at faith through the use of the *'aql* (intellect). Neither does it recognise that the *aporia* of choice-submission is inherent to the Islamic creed. It is true that the teacher is a necessary spiritual and intellectual guide, who enables the learner to appreciate the truth of Islam, submit as a Muslim through an intellectual understanding of the text, and to attain spiritual submission to Allah through reflective self-

knowledge. However, in this context, a new question arises, i.e. how far can any authority, however strong, teach this type of submission without the learner making an active choice. Without the learner's autonomous choice, the act of submission becomes meaningless. Does this mean that authority and autonomy are actually mutually defining? Rather than being a matter of either/or, is it not that both are necessary to achieve the objective of Islamic education? In the case of an adult who has converted to Islam and sought out a teacher that she wishes to learn from, there is a conscious choice, and the relationship between authority and autonomy is accepted; yet what may be said for a young child being taught in a madrasah. How far does she exercise any kind of autonomy? Does she really choose to submit? What kind of Islamic education would help support this child's education?

It could be argued, as has been famously done by Amartya Sen (1985), that there is a limit to all our choices; a child newly born has no choice but to accept the authority of her parents, and she is limited in many other ways, such as by gender, class, the language and culture of the family home, etc. Furthermore, the concept of choice only applies when a person has the capacity to choose, which itself requires the ability to think, to envisage alternatives, and to be aware of one's own feelings; in other words, to have a mind that is aware of itself, has experiences, and has beliefs about the world. Is it not the role of education to facilitate the development of such an individual? Accordingly, should not Islamic education aspire to create these skills and this capacity? Certainly, it could be argued, that the outcome of early Prophetic halaqah, where he educated the new believers, were individuals who acted autonomously in relation to their new belief and new life.

More recently, has the goal of personal autonomy been neglected in Islamic education? As in all educational communities, a range of contemporary Muslim thinkers have reflected on these issues (al-Attas, 1979; Davids & Waghid, 2016; Panjwani, 2009; Sahin, 2013; Shah, 2015). Theoretically at least, it can be argued that Islamic education is about enabling the flourishing of the human being's autonomy until she, as an active agent, chooses to be Muslim; therefore, as with any educational process, the possibility of an outcome that is not intended is inevitable. That is, she could choose to exercise her agency to reject Islam. This is a given within the Islamic worldview of human accountability in the *ākhirah* (hereafter), for choices

made in this life. As al-Ghazali says: “O Son! Live your life as you see fit, for you will surely die. Desire what you want, for you will surely depart. Do what you want, for you will surely pay for it. Gather up what you want, for you will surely leave it behind” (2010, p. 94). Nevertheless, to what extent is there room for criticality in relation to the authority of the teacher in Islamic education? There is no doubt that, as the possessor of sacred knowledge, the teacher holds an eminent place in Islam. However, in classical Islamic education, students choose their teachers and thus have the right to select based on judgments of quality, character, intellect, etc.; demonstrating that it is the student’s opinion that establishes the authority of any given teacher. Moreover, classical Muslim scholarship has commented in varying ways about the agency of the student in the activity of learning (Guenther, 2006, 2016). This suggests the possibility of a kind of deep, critical, dialogic inquiry that can be conducted at every level of education and with pupils of all ages. Nevertheless, classical scholarship did not attend to questions of autonomy in education in the same way that this paper is doing. Addressing notions of autonomy, with all its secular-liberal framings, from within an Islamic paradigm, naturally raises questions of authenticity.

Autonomy as Selfhood

I now move to this question of authenticity. Wherein lies the reality of that autonomy that makes submission to authority authentic, if it is not within our selves? By identifying an Islamic concept of selfhood, where the act of being Muslim is an ongoing choice, this question moves beyond apologetics and begins to address the problem of autonomy more authentically. In Memon and Zaman (2016), various scholars discuss the educational possibilities of a Muslim self. Gunther (2016) explores a range of classical scholar’s writings in relation to education and human growth and development. Winter (Winter, 2016) begins to draw out the importance of the classical spiritual/mystical reading of human learning in regenerating an authentic and holistic approach to the development of *‘aql* (intellect). Burrell (2016) asserts that it is through the practice of learning that the self is transformed in its relationship to the divine; whilst Trevathan (2016), an ex-head teacher, queries whether a striving for authenticity (*ikhhlās*) of the self can be perceived as a regaining of spiritual education in Islamic faith-schools.

Davids and Waghid (2016) focus on the ethical dimensions of the Muslim self, relating this to autonomy, to community, and to education, through application of liberal discourse to Islamic ethical discourses. In an important contribution to the field, they draw heavily on the Quran and Islamic scholarship to present a rigorous argument, 'that an ethical Muslim education is underscored by the practice of autonomous, critical and deliberative engagement that can engender reflective judgement, compassionate recognition and a responsible ethical (Muslim) community'² (2016). There are however, two important aspects of Davids and Waghid's work that do not align with my attempt at theorising Muslim selfhood. Firstly, they draw on a neo-Kantian view to rationalise Muslim ethical behaviour. As stated previously, Alexander has shown that a Kantian basis for approaching faith-education in secular-liberal societies is problematic (2015). Secondly, Davids and Waghid seek to identify the liberal term, autonomy, with the Islamic concept of *ijtihād*. *Ijtihād* is a specific scholarly/legal term, usually associated with jurisprudence and translated as independent legal reasoning; there is also a dimension of due diligence encapsulated in the term. There is no doubt that this term does point towards a God-given natural freedom in humankind, Kamali for example, discusses *ijtihād* in relation to Islamic concepts of freedom (Kamali, 2002). However, it is a stretch to conceptualise *ijtihād* as personal autonomy, as it is considered a legal process, as opposed to a state of being and agency.

Yet, a conceptualisation of personal autonomy from within an Islamic paradigm may help to address the challenges facing Muslim educators who are working in faith schools in minority contexts. It will also contribute to the growing literature in the English language on updating Islamic philosophies of education, generating theory and impacting practice. Below, I present an Islamic theory of personhood as *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* as a way forward to meet these aims.

Shakhsiyah Islamiyah as Muslim Selfhood

It could be argued that developing autonomy is inherent to developing *shakhsiyah*. *Shakhsiyah* is an Arabic word that can be translated as personality, figure, character, persona/personage, individuality, spirit, and subjectivity. However, by adding the term *Islamiyah*, it could be construed to mean a strong, committed, personal/individual, but Islamic

² This quotation is from the back cover of the book.

character. Such a person will have the qualities of critical thinking; reflexivity; active and autonomous learning, which is purposeful and action-oriented (practicing and connecting what has been learnt); and a strong sense of morality and spirituality. He will seek out knowledge and avenues for personal growth through self-aware dialogical encounter. *Shakhsyah Islamiyah* also involves a deep commitment to the Islamic way of life and embodies the meaning of the word Muslim, which means to attain peace through submission to the will and law of Allah.

Although the term *shakhsyah* is widely used in the Arab and Muslim world, unlike *ijtihād*, it is not a traditional theological term. Rather, it came into prominence during the twentieth century when Muslim scholars began to talk about *shakhsyah Islamiyah* or Islamic personality/character. It is possible that this new usage reflects the apologetic atmosphere in the postcolonial Muslim world, where society was reacting to the intellectual and cultural discourses of ‘westernised’ modernity. The emphasis on the individual self that *shakhsyah* as a term provides, is not a natural aspect of the classical Islamic intellectual milieu. Islam is heavily communitarian in orientation and, like other non-western philosophies, does not actively distinguish the personal self from its communal existence. A traditional understanding of the submitted Muslim self recognises human frailty in front of the power of Allah. Allah is not only *al-Khāliq* (Creator) but also *al-Razzāq* (Sustainer). The Quran repeatedly exhorts human beings to question their self-sufficiency (Quran 80:5; 96:7); asking humanity to recognise their dependency on their environment, each other, and ultimately Allah. The Quran points to holism; that the individual is simply a small part of the whole. Holism is found across indigenous cultures, expressed in “different ways... but...concerned with the groundedness (or otherwise) of an individual as an entity related to and indivisible from the rest of the world” (Mika, 2015, p. 1136). Nevertheless, this holism does not diminish the Quranic address to the individual person, where the choice to accept Islam is a free and personal one (Quran 2:256); neither does it detract from the deeply rooted Islamic idea of personal responsibility and accountability that relies on a notion of human agency.

There are two reasons for appropriating the term *shakhsyah Islamiyah* into a twenty-first century Islamic educational theory. Firstly, the concept of *shakhsyah* as an individual child’s

personal character enables an emphasis on his unique characteristics. This is essential when translating the traditional Islamic concept of education as *tarbiyah*, a personalised form of education, into the modern mass-schooling context. Secondly, when educating Muslims in a minority context, within a dominantly secular-liberal society, there is an enhanced need for the individual *shakhṣ* to continuously choose to be Muslim. In an increasingly hostile socio-political context, the Muslim's faith will be constantly questioned and may require re-affirmation on a daily basis. Thus, the Islamic concept of no intermediary between self and Allah becomes ever more pronounced and important.

Shakhsiyah Islamiyah as a dialogical Muslim-self

The concept of *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* draws on both the element of agency inherent in Quranic discourse, and the holistic conceptualisation of the individual human being as part of a greater whole, by adopting an understanding of the Muslim *shakhṣ* as a dialogical self. By 'dialogical' here, I mean a self that is formed, grows and develops in relation to the other. Moreover, through bringing together the self-conscious personal/individual nature of the term *shakhsiyah*, with the worldview/state of being implied in the term *Islamiyah*, 'shakhsiyah Islamiyah' necessarily becomes a self in dialogue with its worldview. The Quran alludes to three dialogical relationships that the Muslim actively engages in, and that shape her being: relationship with self, with Allah and with the rest of creation, that is, other human beings, animals, natural environment and universe (Bakhtiar, 2008, p.xxxiii). These three relationships in turn are interrelated into a holistic experience, through which there is either personal growth, or decline into *khusr* (a state of loss) (Quran 103:1-3). There is a well-defined trajectory for this growth in the Quranic conceptualisations of the states of the dialogical self as it becomes more aware of itself through interaction in its three relationships, all of which are enveloped in the infinite Other that is Allah. This is illustrated in Figure 2

Figure 2 Three stages of self-development in Islam

The Quranic emphasis on each person's direct relationship to Allah, without intermediary, can be found in the dialogical enactment of the five daily prayers. According to a Prophetic saying, the core recitation in each prayer, *Surah al-Fātiḥah*, consists of a dialogue with Allah.

The Quran also states, “And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So, let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided”. (Quran 2:186). The relationship with Allah is indelibly linked to the relationship with one’s own self according to al-Ghazālī who begins his famous compendium, ‘The Alchemy of Happiness’ with, “Know that the key to knowledge of God, may He be honoured and glorified, is knowledge of one’s own self.” (2008, p. 7). He continues by evidencing his argument with *hadīth* (Prophetic saying) and the Quranic verse, ‘We shall show them Our (*āyāt*) signs on the horizons and within themselves, so that it will become evident to them that it is the Truth.’ (Quran 41:53). Through this *āyah* (verse), al-Ghazali demonstrates the dual meaning of *āyah* (sign). In Islamic thought, the signs towards Allah are to be found both in reality, which includes the human self, and in revelation, which is considered the direct speech of God. The term for Quranic verses, *āyat*, also literally translates as ‘signs’. The Quranic worldview places human beings in a world of signs that provide a dialogical route to greater understanding of themselves, their surroundings and their Creator (Lings, 2006). Additionally, through this verse, al-Ghazālī demonstrates that these signs are to be found in the self, and thus points to the need for a dialogical understanding of the self. Al-Ghazālī’s thought has inspired contemporary Muslim intellectuals to consider the implication of the dialogical encounter for addressing the challenges faced by contemporary Muslims (Khan, 2013; Moosa, 2005). For al-Ghazālī, knowledge in all its forms is key to personal growth; knowledge is grasped and understood by the *‘aql* (intellect) and becomes embodied in the *qalb* (heart). For al-Ghazālī, education is holistic, transformative and lifelong; above all it requires agency and self-actualisation through spiritual and intellectual disciplines that lead to divine inspiration. The pinnacle of human agency and self-realisation is to choose to fully and actively submit to Allah, by overcoming the weaknesses in the *nafs* (self), thus coming to a dialogical realisation of the truth by encountering Allah and reaching a stage of tranquility *nafs-al-muṭma’innah*, a self satisfied and at peace with itself, and with its condition (Quran 89:27).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to ground the conceptualisation of *shakhsyah Islamiyah* as a

dialogical Muslim-self within a broad Islamic paradigm. The Islamic dimension of this conceptualisation is intensified when the idealised dialogical Muslim-self is juxtaposed with an idealised secular-liberal autonomous and dialogical self (Kazepides, 2012). The extensive discussion of secular-liberal ideas of personal autonomy in the first half of this paper serves to highlight the tensions that exist within and between these two paradigms; and necessarily within the acts of education and teaching, where authority and autonomy are in constant interplay. These tensions are well recognised in the field of dialogic education where researchers have actively examined how they play out in classrooms within a range of cultural contexts (Mercer et al., 2019).

My conceptualization of *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* has some parallels with contemporary dialogical-self theory, as derived from Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981), and advanced by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka. The latter propose that through

“the interface of different cultures, a self emerges with a complexity that reflects the contradictions, oppositions, encounters, and integrations that are part of the society at large and, at the same time, answers to these influences from its own agentic point of view.” (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 2).

I contend that *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* has the potential to be such a self and that it can therefore be fruitfully employed as an aim of Islamic education in Muslim educational contexts generally. Moreover, it will be of particularly valuable in Muslim minority and multicultural contexts, where Muslim children and young people are growing up between competing paradigms and between cultures. The dialogic dimension of *shakhsiyah Islamiyah* allows for nuance, complexity and awareness of context, it offers self-awareness, agency and genuine mutual respect, even where there is real and non-reconcilable disagreement. Furthermore, it offers an awareness of the aporia within Islam and a solution to tensions between Islam and secular-liberalism, particularly those around the personal autonomy of Muslim children and their parents' rights to educate them within a faith tradition. It offers an Islamic notion of autonomy/agency that is both faithful to the Islamic call to submission to Allah and meets the educational needs of young Muslims growing up in secular-liberal societies. It has the

capacity to facilitate a more critical and self-aware form of Islamic education that encourages criticality, self-reflection and awareness of the complexity of selfhood within a faith tradition. It offers an authentic theorisation of Muslim selfhood by drawing upon Islamic scriptural and scholarly resources, whilst recognising contemporary demands. Additionally, it informs wider debates about personal autonomy, selfhood and in particular dialogical-self theory. It has the capacity to work alongside dialogic educational approaches within Islamic educational settings to provide an authentic, yet critically self-aware education for young Muslims as illustrated in Ahmed, (2020).

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Appendix: An Islamic worldview

There are many misconceptions about Islam and Islamic education. Therefore, it is useful at

this point to summarise a generally, although not wholly, agreed upon Islamic worldview, in order to give the reader a deeper understanding of foundational Islamic beliefs. It is hoped that this understanding may lead to some empathy with the double-consciousness experienced by British Muslims, and an appreciation of the need to generate a holism in Muslim identity. This summary of Islamic epistemology and ontology is from my own reading of Islamic texts supplemented by attending ḥalaqah and seminars. It is not intended to fully encompass all perspectives in the vast Islamic intellectual tradition. Rather, it provides an umbrella understanding of normative *Sunnī* Islamic teachings, particularly from a neo-Ghazalian tradition.

Islam begins by asserting *tawḥīd* (the holism, oneness or unity of Allah (God)), and extending this to unity of creation; unity of knowledge; unity, and therefore equality, of humanity; unity of those who have testified and submitted (Muslims); unity of *dīn* (Islamic way of life); and unity of every other concept and human endeavour within Islamic culture. Human nature, *fiṭrah*, is essentially good, in that human beings have a natural disposition to recognise; know and love Allah; and live by Islam, which is known as *dīn-ul-fiṭrah* and is the natural way of living. Human beings are *khalīfat-ul-arḍ* (stewards of God on earth); our natural role in the universe is to take responsibility for the rest of creation by fulfilling the will of Allah.

The literal meaning of Islam is peace through submission; living by Islamic teachings brings *sakīnah* (inner tranquillity) and *salām* (outward peace and harmony on earth). *Insān* (the human) is the best of creation as s/he has unique attributes of *irādah* (freewill) and *‘aql* (intellect), the latter being the capacity to acquire and use *‘ilm* (knowledge). It is through knowledge that a person comes to know his inner potential and attains pure submission to Allah in inner and outward actions. The Quran repeatedly exhorts humans to use their *‘aql* (intellect) and *tafakkur* (reflection) to come to know Allah through his *āyāt* (signs). In the Islamic paradigm, knowledge is located in the *qalb* (heart) as well as the mind.

The Quran makes seeking knowledge an obligation, asking the believers: ‘Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?’ (Quran, 39:9). Thus, knowledge is sought internally and externally. Human beings have been given senses and *‘aql* (intellect) to understand the material world. They have been given the Quran and *‘aql* (insight) to

understand the internal world. In Islamic ontology, from the *tawḥīd* perspective, there is a material world with a unified objective reality. All objective knowledge lies with Allah. 'For with Him³ are the keys to things beyond the reach of a created being's perception: none knows them but He. And He knows all that is on land and in the sea; and not a leaf falls but He knows it.' (Quran, 6:59) Human beings bring multiple perspectives and interpretive frameworks to our understandings of this world. The limited human mind/heart cannot attain totality of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is through seeking external and internal knowledge that we fulfil our purpose. The search for truth leads ultimately to Allah. It is through *tarbiyah* (personal development/education) that human beings realise their purpose and attain their true worth as the 'best of creation'. (Ahmed, 2012)

This development can be viewed as a dialogic journey.

'The monotheistic worldview sees the universal unity in existence, a unity of three separate relationships: (1) our relationship with others, nature and the universe; (2) our relationship with God; (3) our relationship with our 'self'. These relationships are not alien to one another; there are no boundaries between them. They move in the same direction.' (Bakhtiar, 2008, p. xxxiii).

Within this worldview, Islamic intellectual heritage is not monolithic; Islam is an incredibly rich and diverse tradition. Yet it does have a core unity that has traditionally been maintained through *ikhtilāf*, a juristic agreement of mutual respect for intra-religious difference, however, its literal translation can also mean divergence, variance, diversity and otherness (Murad, 1999). Thus, the individual's relationship with others is a core element of a major strand of Islamic thought. The key figure in this tradition is the twelfth century scholar Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111CE); which is picked up on by the twentieth century Malay Muslim scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (b. 1931), who has been described as neo-Ghazalian (Daiber, 2011).

³ Gender is not a characteristic of Allah, Who 'nothing is comparable to'. (Quran 114:4). However, Arabic is a gendered language and accepted practice is to use the male pronoun.