

***Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought: A Compendium of Parallel English-Arabic Texts***, selected and introduced by Bradley J. Cook, with assistance from Fathi H. Malkawi (Islamic Translation Series), (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2011), xlvii + 305 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8425-2763-7, \$49.95 (hb)

The importance of this book rests not only in its collection of key classical texts on Islamic education, but equally significant is the introduction by Cook to the book. Here, Cook made a risky but yet worthy attempt to summarize the long and nuanced histories of Islamic education in mere 26 pages. This attempt is worthy due to his conviction that the study of modern Western intellectual foundation is not possible without understanding the Muslim educational enterprise during its classical period. The phenomenal development of these Muslim traditions provided the basic foundations of the Western intellectual tradition. “Islam”, Cook asserts, “not only bridged early Greco-Hellenistic intellectualism to medieval European scholasticism but also contributed to and improved the corpus of knowledge in medicine, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, music, architecture, cartography, and geometry. Islamic society can also be credited for conserving and transmitting large bodies of knowledge from Arabic into Latin and promulgating them throughout Europe.” For this reason, the attempt is indeed worthy and important.

However, this same attempt is risky because it runs the risk of over-simplifying or truncating a complex and convoluted corpus of knowledge in its long, diverse, and plural histories. Suffice to note that during the period of eighth and thirteenth centuries alone, which is the period under study, the Muslim world was extended geographically from Spain (Andalus), North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and as far as the Southeast Asia. Politically and culturally, the Muslims were not any close to being homogenous. Although the origins of the authors of the selected texts may reflect the different geographical sites of the Muslim world, their active years remained in the Central lands of Islam. Both al-Zarnūjī (Turkistan) and Ibn Miskawayh (al-Rayy) originated from the Central Asia, but their active learning and teachings were mainly in the Central lands of Islam. Little has been done, for instance, to study Islam and Muslims in the

Southeast Asia in its early centuries of Islam. Aceh Darussalam, at the Northern tip of Sumatra, was not only considered as the golden mines and thriving ports (the Indians called it the Island of Gold), it was also known as the Verandah of Mecca, the meeting points for scholars and scholarly works on Islam. The point I wish to emphasize here is the need to acknowledge and appreciate that Islamic histories are not one singular history.

Another general note need to be made here is the sources of this knowledge about Islamic education. The eight selected texts are generally and primarily instructional, pedagogical, and administrative in nature, with the exception of *Risāla* of Ikhwān al-ṣafā', and in some ways Ibn Miskawayh's *The Refinement of Character*. In order to understand the philosophical foundations of Islamic educational thought, one has to unearth and discover these from various other sources whose titles may not bear the word "education" or "learning." Al-Ghazālī's discussion on the nature of knowledge (epistemology) in his Chapter on Knowledge in his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* is essential in understanding Islamic educational thought. His *Ma'ārij al-quds fī madārij ma'rifat al-nafs* or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-nafs* are yet some of these important sources to understand the psychology key to understanding Islamic educational thought. Owing to the focus on pedagogical and instructional aspects of education, al-Ghazālī's *O Son! (Ayyuhā l-walad)* was selected, in spite of its attribution to al-Ghazālī is arguable as highlighted by David Reisman.

On the sources, quite apart from the traditional epistles or historical treatises one is accustomed to, one must not also ignore historical sources that record education in practice. Here I mean, to learn about the educational thoughts not only conceptually from the philosophical, instructional, and pedagogical sources, but also from educational practices. One could draw this rich information from biographical sources (*tarājim* and *ṭabaqāt*). In addition to these sources, the *ijāzas* (certificates) granted to students could also provide insights to the educational thoughts and practices of classical Islam. While some studies have been done on these sources, much is still to be desired in this area.

Notwithstanding the above brief notes, these epistles are indeed foundational and essential, particularly in discussing the instructional and pedagogical aspect of Islamic education. They also shed some light on some administrative matters and best practices in education.

These administrative matters and best practices include the weekly and yearly holidays, discipline, such as administration of corporal punishments, and matters pertaining to teachers' salaries as discussed by Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Qābisī. Arranged in a chronological order, these epistles present a certain evolution to some of the instructional practices and advices. Many of these practices are subjected to cultural values and conventions, such as in determining the holidays and breaks. On this matter, al-Qābisī mentioned "similarly, the feast-days off is also [based] on customary and conventional practices." (Translation here is mine that varies from the Michael Fishbein's as provided in the book.)

The aforementioned credits overwrite some editorial errors that the book contains. These errors include transliteration mistakes, mismatch of some of the parallel paragraphs to the Arabic texts, as well as reference to the epistles and paragraphs made by Cook in his introduction. To sum, the book has done great service in understanding classical Islamic educational practices, particularly for the English speaking readers.

**Mohammad Hannan Hassan**

*MUIS Academy Singapore /  
Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, Singapore*