

WHOLENESS  
*and*  
HOLINESS  
*in*  
EDUCATION  
*An Islamic Perspective*

ZAHRA AL ZEERA

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

WHOLENESS AND HOLINESS IN EDUCATION  
AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

*To the source of my inspiration*

To the twin souls of my parents, whose unwavering devotion to God,  
love for their children and humankind, wisdom, generosity,  
purity & gentleness planted & nurtured the wholeness  
and holiness of my religion in me. They allowed me to  
grow freely in search of the truth of the temporary  
world, & their absence has inspired me to  
search for the truth of eternal life.

This work is dedicated to their  
souls with my love  
& gratitude.



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# CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Author's Introduction</i>	xvii
I. REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	
1 The Spiritual and Intellectual Journey	1
2 Spirituality: Woman's Best-Kept Secret	9
II. REVIEW AND CRITIQUE	
3 Conventional and Alternative Paradigms	25
4 Critical Reflection on Existing Paradigms	43
III. ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE	
5 The Islamic Worldview: The One and the Many	53
6 The Islamic Paradigm	67
7 Islamic Epistemology: Gateway to Knowledge	75
IV. TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EDUCATION	
8 Transformative Research Methods: An Islamic Perspective	95
9 Transformative Learning	115
<i>Appendix</i>	129
<i>Notes</i>	151
<i>Bibliography</i>	159
<i>General Index</i>	174



## FOREWORD



In his Introduction to Malik Badri's *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*, recently published by IIIT, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī highlighted the problem of the dependency of the Muslim world on the West in all branches of modern knowledge and urged Muslim specialists to "take an independent line" and to "adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism instead of passive acceptance," especially in the human and social sciences, which by their very nature can never be as "neutral" or value-free as the "pure," "hard," natural sciences.

This is not the place to explore in any depth the vexed question as to how truly neutral or value-free even "pure" science really is, especially in its unremittingly reductionist mode of blinkered scientism, but it will suffice to say that it takes little intelligence and reflection to perceive that the apparatus of dogmatic scientism, though claiming to operate under the most rigorous conditions of objectivity, is nevertheless founded on a priori assumptions germane to the Western secular world-view of positivism which radically restricts the nature of reality only to that which is observable and measurable by quantitative means.

Implicit in this conceptual paradigm is, indeed, not only a set of crippling perceptual handicaps but also a set of culturally determined *values* whose logical consequence is the *devaluation* of man and the cosmos through the denial of God and of any unseen dimension or divine purpose in the creation of the universe. From an Islamic perspective, the denial of God does not elevate man, for it is of course

the underlying unity and interconnectedness of everything in existence which makes the microcosm of man a mirror of the macrocosm and which alone endows man with the possibility of becoming fully human by virtue of his divinely appointed role as *khalīfah*, or vicegerent.

This treatise, *Wholeness and Holiness in Education*, by Dr. Zahra Al Zeera, is a further contribution to the vital work of the 'Islamization of knowledge,' of which Dr. Badri's work is an outstanding example in the field of psychology. Indeed, she continues the tradition of reviving a truly holistic perspective, paradigm or world-view founded on *tawhīd*, the affirmation of God's Oneness, the ruling idea in Islam.

I say "reviving" this perspective, because the open-mindedness and multi-dimensionality of thought encouraged by a vision of the unity of all knowledge are part of the rich intellectual heritage of Islam. Authentic 'Islamization of knowledge' cannot be a parochial concern but must be an inclusive activity which avoids the limitation and fixity of a mono-perspective by acknowledging and valuing different levels of description, by synthesizing and integrating traditional and contemporary knowledge, or perennial and acquired knowledge, by going beyond facile dichotomies representing competing models of reality, and by reconciling opposites and resolving contradictions within an over-arching Islamic paradigm. This unity, after all, is by definition what the doctrine of *tawhīd* implies in the domain of knowledge.

But of course it does not mean that the Islamic perspective is conducive to the "anything goes" relativism of a constructivist paradigm which fails to acknowledge any absolute or objective reality. As the author herself demonstrates in her discussion of phenomenology as a valid research method within the Islamic paradigm, Abū al Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, in his classical study of the religion and culture of India, was using sophisticated "constructivist" methods of inquiry a thousand years ago, including interviews through which Hindus spoke for themselves to reveal their own "stories" and construct their own realities; participant observation; analysis of documents in the original language, and comparison of Hindu thought with Greek, Sufi

and Christian concepts so as to attempt to discover the human thread connecting all ancient cultures. Let it not be forgotten either that al-Bīrūnī was also seeking to gain new knowledge from Hindu culture in the same way as Greek thought was absorbed and utilised by other Muslim scholars.

However, as the author points out, what makes such a study crucially distinct from a merely relativist study is not the methodology - for this triangulation of methods is as compatible with the Islamic paradigm as it is with the constructivist approach - it is rather the framework within which the multiplicity of knowledge is interpreted. The power of Islamic science is that it conceives of knowledge not *horizontally* (which, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has observed, results in knowledge of God and the angels being ranked on the same level as knowledge of molluscs), but *hierarchically*, making possible the realization that multiplicity is only the manifestation of a single reality, the ultimate truth.

Through this paradigm we can grasp the underlying unity of science and religion, physics and metaphysics, knowledge and values, and all other domains of knowledge and activity which have often been pitted against each other as a battery of irreconcilable dichotomies - the human and the divine, the phenomenal and the metaphenomenal, the mutable and the eternal, the material and the sacred, the personal and the social, the rational and the intuitive, the exoteric and the esoteric, the theoretical and the practical, the idealistic and the realistic, the active and the passive, and so on.

Dr. Al Zeera identifies “dialectical thinking” as the means of transcending the limitations of dichotomization. This advanced style of thought places the human being in an “interworld,” an isthmus, meeting-place or *barzakh*, at the intersection of interaction. It strives to unify opposites, affirming and incorporating logical polarities rather than seeking to avoid contradiction and paradox through one-sided adherence to a single perspective. Of great importance is her conclusion that dialectical thinking (and the intellectual connectedness which it promotes) should be one of the major planks of a holistic education, together with reflection and meditation (which enable learners to connect with their inner selves and therefore pro-

mote spiritual connectedness) and conversation and dialogue (which enable individuals to connect with others and the society in which they live).

Significantly, the author refers to the work of Riegel, who identifies the ability to accept contradictions, constructive confrontations and asynchronies as the highest stage of cognitive development, and to the work of Fowler, who associates dialectical thinking with the development of faith. It goes without saying that the dialectical process is not one either of compromise or loose relativism, but one of creative tension which ultimately transforms contradictions into complementarities, releasing the open-minded thinker from ingrained habits and conditioned patterns of thought, established affiliations, fear of change and instability, and reluctance to approach anything which may be threatening to one's sense of "self."

The connection Dr. Al Zeera makes between this transformative state and the theory of dissipative structures developed by the Nobel-prize winning physical chemist, Ilya Prigogine, is instructive, for, according to Prigogine, physical systems have the capacity to go through periods of instability and then self-organization, resulting in more complex systems. Thus, "instability," in its positive sense of freedom from one-sided, crystallized thinking, is the key to greater coherence and complexity. On a more mystical level, the ultimate "resting place" of the one who has attained to God-consciousness (*taqwa*), the station of permanent "abiding" in God, is paradoxically a state of total openness and surrender, a place of "no-place" in which the limited self is extinguished. This can be equated with the sixth and final stage of Fowler's map of faith development, the stage attained only through grace, in which there is a complete sacrifice of stability.

It is this unitive vision of knowledge which is at the heart of Dr. Al Zeera's treatise. By showing that the dominant positivist paradigm, with its insistence on dispassionate "objectivity," and the alternative constructivist or interpretive paradigm with its subjective, multiple realities, are in fact both limited to the mundane level and equally in denial of any transcendent reality, she clears the way for

the systematic exposition of a truly holistic Islamic paradigm and the “transformative” research tools and educational methods which it generates. While we have to wait until well into the second half of the treatise for the unveiling of methods for holistic education, this reflects the broader conceptual purpose and carefully constructed design of the treatise, which, thesis-like, painstakingly builds up the case upon which its holistic educational applications are founded.

It would be mistaken, however, to conclude that the author’s critique of existing paradigms and her espousal of a super-ordinate Islamic paradigm are intellectual exercises divorced from her personal experience, for it is one of her axioms that the mind and the soul of the researcher or scholar should not be artificially separated in the interest of a spurious “objectivity” or “professionalism”. Moving away from the positivist paradigm and its fragmentation of the oneness of our experience demands, in her words, that we “follow the golden thread of [our] own spiritual experience” (without this ever becoming a narcissistic preoccupation divorced from society), and she enacts her own belief in the validity and importance of personal experiences and narrative inquiry as research tools by candidly charting her own spiritual and intellectual journey. In so doing she shows how her discovery and espousal of the reconciling power of “dialectical thinking” was not simply the outcome of an “objective” research design but the resolution of a major personal conflict between the demands of the narrowly focused intellectual activity expected of a researcher and her own spiritual aspiration and need for wholeness which could not be encompassed by the limited paradigms on offer.

The thrust of the author’s critique of positivism is in accordance with Dr. Badri’s own refutation of reductionist approaches to psychology which would strip human beings of any conscious feelings or intentions, complex cognitive processes, soul or spiritual essence, and equate the thinking mind simply with the mechanisms of brain chemistry.

Such a critique is unsurprising from anyone, Muslim or non-Muslim, with the ability to reflect on the “signs within themselves” and in the created world. Of particular interest and significance,

however, is her realization of the limitations of constructivism, despite its scope for naturalistic and humanistic methods of inquiry which have the *appearance* of a holistic approach because they recognise the validity of subjective human experiences. Although this approach is certainly less fragmented than a positivist outlook, and can therefore serve, as she says, as a “back door into spirituality,” it is still unremittingly “this-relative and this-worldly” and fragments reality into the multiple, contextualized realities of “what is seen, felt and perceived by people” without any reference to a “given,” transcendent, comprehensive, all-encompassing, unifying reality. Similarly, the “single reality” of positivism is most certainly not the One Reality of *tawhīd*, even though it is driven by the “objective” search for immutable laws and mechanisms.

Education is a field which is particularly vulnerable to changing ideologies, but it is far too important to be a battleground between competing paradigms. Many “visionary” educators in the secular West are now advocating a radical paradigm shift away from what they consider to be an obsolete machine-age “performance” model of education with its emphasis on teacher-centered transmission of content through rigidly specified objectives and prescribed outcomes, and the accompanying over-emphasis on the acquisition of analytical reasoning skills. They favour a systemic model which demands synthetic, interactive thinking and creative problem-solving skills able to yield understanding and explanation rather than mere accumulation of information - a learner-centered culture promoting self-directed and lifelong learning skills, social responsibility and ethical values.

These competing models in many ways mirror the fundamental dichotomy between positivist and constructivist worldviews explored in this treatise, and just as the author exposes the limitations of both of them, so we must always bear in mind that whatever models govern the development of secular curricula, even those models which appear to be moving towards a holistic vision, these programs are limited human constructions wholly concerned with the horizontal dimension of education and cannot be the basis for a truly holistic Islamic curriculum in which the vertical dimension is

the primary axis of development. The horizontal and vertical dimensions are the “temporal” and “perennial” domains of knowledge recognised by both Ibn Sina and al-Ghazālī in their theories of knowledge, and it is of course perennial knowledge which the Muslim strives to attain and which temporal knowledge in all its forms merely serves.

Only a curriculum in harmony with the teachings of the Holy Qur’an and intended to integrate man’s understanding of God, the universe and his own nature can be spacious enough to accommodate and reconcile competing paradigms. The Islamic perspective, always seeking unity, harmony and balance, does not conceive, for example, of analytic and synthetic modes of thought as conflicting styles, the former to be superseded by the latter in the revolutionary school of tomorrow, but as complementary capacities, each with its appropriate domain. If the left side of the brain is overused, the corrective is not to go overboard for “right-brained” thinking but to seek a balance between the two sides. Similarly, we need not become disillusioned with *science* because of the myopic vision of *scientism*. The author refers to the important statement of al-Ghazālī that laborious study of the sciences dealing with fact and demonstration is indispensable if the soul is to avoid imaginative delusions masquerading as spiritual enlightenment.

This is not to say that major correctives are not sometimes required, and in many respects Dr. Al Zeera is surely right in appealing for the recognition and valuation of feminine intuition and spirituality in a world dominated by masculine rationality, although we must be careful not to fall into the trap of equating the masculine and the feminine entirely with the male and female gender, for they have far greater explanatory power as complementary principles, as *yang* and *yin*, within the individual. In a very real sense, the fundamental dichotomies explored in this treatise can be subsumed under the vast subject of gender relations, a subject which needs urgent discussion in the Muslim world.

The vision of unity conveyed by the author is all the more impressive for the sincerity and sense of deep personal engagement she brings to bear upon material which has clearly played a major

part in her own personal transformation. The challenge now is for Muslim educationalists to pursue the detailed implications of the broad educational principles and methods she derives from the holistic Islamic paradigm.

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

To write about Islamic epistemology, the Islamic paradigm and Islamic education is an almost impossible task. The journey through this book for me was like trying to cross the ocean in a small boat with very few skills and little knowledge of sailing. On setting out, one is mesmerized by the beauty and majesty of the ocean, the gigantic waves breaking aggressively on the shores, and the gentle breeze touching the soul and creating a mysterious feeling of love and ecstasy. At that point, we seekers and followers of the path are torn between what we see as a potential for learning while unveiling the mystery of theology, philosophy, and mysticism and making it accessible to myself, my students, and all seekers of knowledge. I was, however, well aware of my limitations and the overwhelming scope of Islamic knowledge. But when I was driven to the ocean of Islamic knowledge by some unknown force, a quiet inner voice and an aggressive intellectual passion that demanded to know, I did not have much choice. The decision to write this book was extremely challenging, but the seeds were planted in 1989 in my doctoral thesis, when I was ten years younger and more open to challenges and risks. I had to go through the ebb and flow of the dialectic of the adventurous spirit of risk-taking and the wisdom of years. The result was this book.

I sailed: with me were the excitement of venturing on a challenging journey, an intellectual passion, a little knowledge, and an unwavering faith in God that He would lead me to the right path to see a glimpse of the Truth. My compass on those rough seas and during the stormy nights was my unquestionable trust in God. My intention was to seek knowledge and share it with others, as we teachers are obligated to do according to the Sacred Book of Islam. So I comforted myself and said that if I was doing my duty and following an inner voice as well, God was certainly going to guide me.

Besides trust, faith, and hard work, thinking dialectically kept the balance between demands of the mind and those of the soul. Dialectical thinking is the backbone of this book. So it will be explained in detail in Chapter 9 owing to its importance as a way of thinking to understand wholeness in life and, God willing, produce holistic knowledge. The reader, therefore, is advised to read the section on dialectical thinking with an open and fresh mind, leaving aside preconceived notions of the dialectics and its association with Marx's dialectical realism and Hegel's dialectical idealism. The concept of dialectics is used in this context because the word 'dialectics' has the ability to encompass opposing ideas so as to integrate and create a synthesis and an original idea. Without dialectical thinking, I believe, one could hardly make sense of the contradictions embedded in wholeness. Islamic sciences are so diverse, vast, and complex that opening one door leads to other doors and one can easily feel – happily though – that she or he is lost from the very beginning. It is the wholeness and the unique characteristics of Islamic knowledge that intermingle and interrelate all knowledge. There are no barriers between different fields. All start with the name of God and all end with the name of God. All aim at realizing the Truth by understanding the microcosm and the macrocosm. Realization of the Absolute Truth is at the center and the core, no matter what the subject or the field – natural and physical sciences, social sciences, cosmology, or geography – and that is what makes Islamic science unique. The method of dialectical thinking is important because it leads to a realization of oneness and unity in the universe and the self. The dialogue or the conflict between contradictory ideas leads eventually to one original idea that is the synthesis of the opposing ideas.

The chapters that follow seek to present certain aspects of Islamic epistemology from an *educational point of view* rather than a philosophical or theoretical perspective. The emphasis, however, is on methods used for the production of knowledge that are suitable for Islamic societies and Islamic culture. The choice of research methods and strategies becomes a question relating to the issue of what counts as valid social science, to be answered with reference to the criteria of what counts as valid scientific knowledge. Are all research methods and their related paradigms equally valid? Do they all have a role to

play in social and personal research? How are we to understand the relations between them? Questions such as these are of major concern in this book. Transformation through research methods and learning strategies are therefore also major concerns in the following chapters.

In addition to issues related to knowledge production, this book is concerned with methods of knowledge acquisition and transformation from teaching and learning. Wholeness, unity, harmony, and balance are important concepts not only in the development of Islamic programs and educational systems, but also in all situations, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the self to the universe. Polarization and contradictions are inherent in all life. Negative and positive forces interrelate continually to maintain living beings and to contribute to their evolution, growth, and development. Awareness of the principles of wholeness, unity, multiplicity, and the relationship between them helps one develop understanding, openness, tolerance, and integrity. This awareness helps people to operate on a wider base of knowledge by which they can see above and beyond the information provided by the senses. It also helps individuals to experience and realize unity through the very multiplicity of the self, nature, and the universe. In this way, individuals can learn that God created contradictions not to be fought against, but as the means to discover and understand the subtle intelligence of the One and the many at various levels and different dimensions. People can then realize the forces of growth and evolution and work with these forces instead of against them.

Part I comprises two chapters. The first chapter deals with personal experiences and includes a brief reference to my intellectual and spiritual journey. The second chapter presents spirituality from a woman's perspective. It is this part that contributes, I hope, to the paradigm shift in contemporary Islamic literature. By that, I mean the inclusion of personal experiences as the base for discovering and revealing stories or events in the past and the way in which those events have participated in knowledge acquisition and knowledge reconstruction. Reflection on personal experiences allows one to realize the hidden meanings of events which otherwise go unnoticed. By reflecting, we are able to reconstruct our experiences in the light of the current situation and the new knowledge that we have acquired. Starting with ourselves, I

believe, is crucial for both students and scholars. If the aim is to contribute to the creation of Islamic knowledge, as most contemporary Muslim scholars advocate, then an examination of the inner soul is essential. In personal experiences are hidden stories of the soul, stories that touch the core; we know that they are not only important but sacred too. We treasure those experiences because we know they are real, and only we know that. 'Islamic knowledge' is used in this book to mean knowledge that is based on an Islamic paradigm and emerges from Islamic epistemology and Islamic methodology. So both graduate students and scholars are able to create and produce knowledge that is appropriate for Islamic communities and addresses their concerns and problems. Production of Islamic knowledge is a major issue in this book; reflection on personal experience provides researchers with an immediate, real, and original course of knowledge which has been neglected and downplayed by positivists for so long.

This book is rooted in my personal experiences. I trusted theories of personal experiences from Plato to Dewey and trusted the wisdom of my professor, M. Connelly, who encouraged me to tell my stories, as he likes to refer to personal experiences, and to reflect on them. I started the journey reluctantly, believing this undertaking to be personal and not academic nor professional. I felt uncomfortable at first, stumbling in the darkness of the subconscious. Gradually, I began to see a glimmer of light here and there. Then suddenly I was on an open plain with a blue sky flooded with sunshine. In a moment of realization, I saw the tapestry of my life in front of me. I saw the golden thread of spirituality and love woven in that tapestry from one end to the other. I realized the conflict between the intellectual and spiritual sides of my being, and I perceived the conflict between the East and West inside me and in my society. After struggling through the conflict, I reached a stage of reconciliation in myself and hoped that it would happen in society too. From dialogue, conversation with the 'other,' we can reach a peaceful stage of reconciliation.

This book is the outcome of a tedious search, hard work, and reflection that started in 1989. Without such reflection, I should have continued my positivist thinking; and advanced in measurement, evaluation, and statistics. Yet, feeling empty inside and alien to myself and

my culture, I started reading Islamic classics and encyclopedic works of great Muslim scholars in 1989 after the realization of spirituality in my life, or what I call the golden thread. Ever since, I have been writing on the notions of the Islamic paradigm and tried to interweave it into my teaching and my theories of learning and teaching. Education became more meaningful to me and my students at the University when it was pursued from an Islamic, holistic perspective. On being introduced to the Islamic paradigm and Islamic epistemology in courses on evaluation and research methods, my students began analyzing and understanding theories of psychology, sociology, and education from that perspective. Their exposure to Islamic epistemology affected their entire university life. They were set on journeys of self-exploration and reflection.

Although part I of this book might seem rather unusual or even unacceptable to some scholars belonging to conventional schools of thought, because of the inclusion of my personal experiences in a scholarly work, to me it is this part that contributes to the advancement of an alternative paradigm that is a major theme of this book. One way of regaining our wholeness and holiness in education is by connecting to our inner selves through our intimate experiences. Retelling those experiences, however, allows us to reconstruct them and evaluate them in a different light. Reconstruction of experiences, I believe, facilitates transformation that should be the aim of education. Therefore, the readers of this book should remember that this is a different type of scholarly work that aims at integrating the personal and the professional, the intellectual and the spiritual, the inner and the outer so as to fulfill the thesis of wholeness and holiness in education.

My aim in writing this book is to encourage Muslim students in North America and Europe to reflect on their personal experiences, to find the golden thread in their lives, to acknowledge it and utilize it in their personal and professional lives. I want to encourage becoming whole, and acknowledging the Sacred that is inside everyone, and making it part of daily living. The moment of realizing the Sacred and acknowledging it will be a turning point in their lives, and inevitably their study will take an Islamic turn. No matter what they are studying – science, technology, sociology, psychology, or astronomy – when

they start analyzing theories in those fields from an Islamic perspective, the spiritual and the sacred permeate naturally and profoundly.

Chapter 2 is a reflection on spirituality from a woman's perspective. Some readers might wonder: Why woman's spirituality in particular and not spirituality in general? The answer is simple. A quick review of what has been written on Islamic spirituality will show that men do most of the writing and that reflects the male perspective on spirituality. Being an academic woman who has a certain perspective on spirituality and on knowledge rooted in spirituality, I include this chapter to present my views and to encourage women who have different or similar views to acknowledge them and share them with others. Giving a voice to woman's spirituality as a major component of an Islamic theory of knowledge is, I believe, crucial for developing the concept of wholeness and holiness in life and education. The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of woman's spirituality in general and its effect on creating an Islamic knowledge that is whole and caters for the mind and the soul. Some readers may wonder about the relevance of spirituality to theories of knowledge. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 to show the wholeness of Islamic epistemology and to explain that knowledge is both intellectual and spiritual. The core of this book is to develop an education based on Islamic epistemology that caters for both the intellectual and spiritual needs of human beings.

Islamic history is full of spiritual female luminaries that nurtured with their love and spirituality men and women who, in their turn, became great Sufi masters, scholars, and faithful believers, who defended Islam to the last drop of their blood. However, history does not focus on woman's spirituality, assuming it to be one of their natural qualities, especially the women of the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet of Islam). In published literature, in both the East and the West, the only woman that has attracted the wide attention of scholars is Rābi'ah al-ʿAdawiyya, the mystic Sufi whose selfless love of God is known all over the world. Despite the uniqueness of Rābi'ah's mystical journey, we ordinary women, professional and non-professional, have difficulty in understanding her mysticism and her mystical journey. We live in a different time and space, yet spirituality, the golden thread, runs through the tapestry of our lives from birth to death. I

am acknowledging and honoring this type of spirituality, and I call it practical spirituality: it is practiced by millions of Muslim women in the East and the West. Spirituality is woman's best-kept secret. It empowers her, enhances her, and hence provides her with different ways and means of knowing – in both knowledge acquisition and knowledge production, which are major themes in this book. Chapter 2 was inspired by three sources: Rābi'ah's mystical journey, al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge, and the Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang*.

Part II contains two chapters. Chapter 3 is a review of literature on both the conventional and alternative paradigms, and it prepares the ground for the Islamic paradigm. For both paradigms, issues are discussed at three levels: ontological, epistemological, and methodological. The emphasis of the discussion is on the philosophical issues underpinning research methodology. Chapter 3 sheds some light on two major theoretical perspectives that have dominated the social sciences, that is, positivism and constructivism/interpretivism, the latter also called the naturalistic paradigm.

Chapter 3 is based mainly on ideas developed by Guba and Lincoln<sup>1</sup> on paradigms. Scientific inquirers tend to view the world, and consequently any phenomenon with which they deal, as discoverable, controllable, and fragmentable into discrete, independent atoms. By atomizing the problem, scientists investigate and control the variables under certain conditions, and manipulate specific ones so as to control some and randomize others. By doing so, constraints are imposed upon the antecedent conditions and outputs. Naturalistic inquirers make the opposite assumption of multiple realities that are interrelated and inseparable. Phenomena are considered to diverge, not to converge into a single truth as in a scientific inquiry.

Each paradigm is based on assumptions about the inquirer-participant relationship. The scientific paradigm assumes that no relationship exists between the investigator and the subject of inquiry. The inquirer believes it is possible to keep a reasonable distance from the phenomena. Constructivist/naturalistic inquirers, however, base their approach on their first assumption about interacting multiple realities, consider their own interaction among these realities, and view the interaction between researchers and subjects as extremely important.

The paradigms are founded on differing assumptions about the nature of truth. Scientific inquirers assume that the nature of reality is singular and that reality can be segmented and controlled. Consequently, inquirers force conditions for convergence and look for similarities. Obviously their concern is to generalize and develop universal rules to constitute theories, which are to be imposed on natural and social settings. Naturalistic scientists rely heavily, for collecting the data and understanding the situation, on the interaction between themselves and their participants, which is a basis for 'thick' and rich descriptions. Generalization is not usually the concern of the naturalistic inquirers because their focus is on differences, uniqueness, and idiosyncrasies, rather than on similarities. Naturalistic inquiry thus leads to the development of a specific, nonuniversal knowledge base which focuses on the understanding of particular cases.

Chapter 4 provides critical reflection on positivism and constructivism and the inappropriateness of both paradigms for the production of Islamic knowledge. All existing paradigms are fragmented and reductionist and have 'either/or' qualities. None of the paradigms, even alternative paradigms such as the naturalistic paradigm and critical theory, has the capacity for dealing with both contraries at the same time: absolute and relative, objective and subjective, fixed and temporal, and so on. My argument is based on the assumption that reality, from an Islamic point of view, is one; that reality consists of all the apparent opposites that, in fact, complement each other. Denying one side of reality, the subjective or objective, causes a split in one's consciousness and hence in our ability to perceive the whole and the one. One needs a balance between the intellectual and spiritual sides of one's being, leading to wholeness and holiness. I further explain the limitations of both paradigms with respect to encompassing metaphysical issues and concepts such as the world of the unseen, God, the Day of Judgment, and the hereafter. The Islamic paradigm is rooted in such metaphysical concepts.

Part III consists of three main chapters. Chapter 5 presents the Islamic worldview, which is religious, philosophical, and rational. It is a worldview of *tawhīd*, of monism, regarding God as the Absolute Reality and the Source of Being. *Tawhīd* is the essence of Islam, it is the

act of affirming God to be the One, Absolute, Eternal, and Transcendent Creator.

Since *tawḥīd* is the essence of Islam, it will be discussed in detail, for the concept runs through this book as a river runs through the valleys and plains and brings life to the lands nearby. The 'dialectics of *tawḥīd*' is the basis of this book, uniting ideas and giving life to them. The concept of the 'dialectics of *tawḥīd*' – its differing and apparently opposed manifestations – might cause unease for some because of the paradoxical meaning that it carries. *Tawḥīd* means oneness and unity, whereas dialectics means opposing ideas and conflict. However, for me it is another way of understanding the 'One and the many.' Dialectics is embedded in *tawḥīd* naturally, as will be explained later: simply it is the dialectical path that leads to *tawḥīd*.

The Islamic worldview is not purely a religious one. The uniqueness of Islam is in this profound and challenging belief in both the material and the religious worlds. Muslims should live this life and enjoy God's gifts in moderation, yet believe in the hereafter and consider this life as a purposeful journey that should be cultivated from knowledge and good deeds. The knowledge and good deeds are to take them higher on the ladder of humanity and perfection, to bring them closer to God and therefore to eternal life. This blend of the two extremes is what Islam is about: a combination of religious and material life.

Chapter 6 proposes the Islamic paradigm for Islamic universities and the production of Islamic knowledge: a holistic, comprehensive, and integrated paradigm that can encompass the wholeness of Islamic thought. One of the objectives of the book is to present and establish the underlying principles of an Islamic paradigm which will lay the cornerstone for Islamic theories. The proposed Islamic paradigm includes six principles that aim at developing

1. Islamic spiritual psychology and the unity of the self;
2. Islamic epistemology and the unity of knowledge;
3. Islamic ontology and metaphysics and the unity of the cosmic order;
4. Islamic eschatology and the unity of life;
5. Islamic sociology and the unity of the community.
6. Islamic methodology of *tawḥīd* and the ultimate unity.

The common theme in all the principles of the Islamic paradigm is the dialectics of *tawḥīd*. The Islamic paradigm as a holistic, integrated paradigm is divine, spiritual, religious, eternal, constant, absolute, and ideal. On the other hand, it is human, material, rational, temporary, mutable, and relative. These two opposites are intimately interwoven by *tawḥīd*.

In brief, the Islamic paradigm is all-encompassing, developmental, purposeful, and integrated. It is based on the Qur'anic worldview and derives its principles from the Sacred Text. Thus all the principles of the Islamic paradigm lead to the realization of the unity of the divine principle. Spiritual psychology integrates body, mind, and soul as one unified whole. Because Islamic epistemology is holistic, it addresses the worldly and the scientific as well as the religious and spiritual aspects of knowledge. In addition, Islamic ontology and metaphysics address the wholeness of the cosmos and the natural order, and deal with nature and universal laws scientifically and spiritually. Moreover, Islamic eschatology deals with issues of the hereafter and the here-and-now. This draws students to think of both worlds, but to remember that this world is the means to be cultivated for the end, the hereafter. Furthermore, the Islamic methodology of *tawḥīd* helps Muslim students to understand the controversial issues of life and education. It also helps their dialectical and critical thinking, which is considered to be the highest stage of adult development. Finally, Islamic sociology deals with social and community issues, for it is considered to be the duty of every individual to participate in, develop, and improve societal life.

Part IV of the book presents transformative inquiry and consists of two chapters. After outlining the theoretical basis of the Islamic worldview – the Islamic paradigm and Islamic epistemology – this part addresses the goal of providing practical methods and strategies for university students to implement ideas presented in Part III, thus moving from theory to practice. Chapter 8, 'Transformative Research Methods,' proposes research methods of transformative inquiry. Several methods are recommended because they use open systems and dissipative structures to allow both the researcher and the phenomena under study to interact freely and grow through research. The

theory of dissipative structures explains 'irreversible process' in nature: the movement toward higher and higher orders of life. It is presented in this context because it explains the mystery of transformation and its ability to offer a scientific model of transformation at every level, making it relevant to everyday life. The theory of dissipative structures is explained in detail in Chapter 8 to show its relevance to transformation and production of Islamic knowledge. However, what makes any research method Islamic is not only the method but also the Islamic paradigm used to guide the research and interpret the data.

The combination of transformative methodology and the Islamic paradigm as a means of interpreting and analyzing the data makes these methods suitable for the production of Islamic knowledge. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, heuristics, and narrative inquiry are suggested as alternative research methods that can help students and researchers in studying major sensitive issues, both holistically and meaningfully. Phenomenology and hermeneutics can be used for sociological and cultural issues, but one needs a more holistic perspective, close to the phenomena and requiring participants to reveal their stories and construct meaning from their experiences. Thus heuristic and narrative approaches lend themselves more easily to personal and intimate experiences, and so stories of the soul and the heart can be explored. The intimate relationship between the researcher and the phenomena under study transforms all parties to higher and deeper levels. More importantly, during the transformation, researchers become aware of controversial and contradictory issues and gradually realize the wholeness and oneness of the macrocosm and the microcosm.

As chapter 8 deals with methodological issues from the perspective of research and knowledge production, so chapter 9 deals with methodological issues from a teaching/learning perspective and in terms of knowledge acquisition. For a student to be able to think holistically, she or he must be trained and equipped with methods that both develop the mind and discipline the soul. Most educational institutions in the East and the West diminish human beings to the mind only, and ignore the soul. By so doing, they create unbalanced human beings that have advanced intellectual abilities, yet spiritually are poor and weak.

Methods that are suggested here are dialectical thinking, reflection and meditation, conversation, and dialogue.

The first approach is dialectical and creative thinking that will help students to develop their intellectual abilities and thus establish intellectual connectedness. Simply put, it will establish the body-mind connection. In their educational experience, some students in Islamic countries feel a spiritual vacuum that needs to be addressed properly to fulfill the mission of wholeness. Students are disconnected from their inner selves. Second, prayers, reflection, and meditation will be dealt with as worshiping rituals and therapeutic methods for connecting students with their inner selves. Spiritual connectedness can be achieved by this so that she or he becomes a whole person. It must be mentioned that no clear-cut division exists between the various human faculties. The categorization here is to clarify the ideas of connectedness, experiences, and the inner self. The third approach in the process of unifying students with their inner selves and their surroundings is to promote understanding of others by hermeneutic methods, as by conversation. In this way, communication and dialogue are established among individuals in society, between parents and children, between teachers and students, and so on. This will help students to unify the polarization in society and encourage communication. In this process, the whole person is connected with a unified society.

# I

## REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES



## CHAPTER ONE

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# The Spiritual and Intellectual Journey

To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's life. It is no less than a denial of the soul.

OSCAR WILDE

The decision to include my experiences as part of this book was not an easy one; neither was the process of going through the pain of reconstructing many years of varied experiences. However, because the ideas for this book originated in my personal, educational and professional life, it is essential for me to include these experiences to show the roots of the intellectual and spiritual development of my work. The seeds for this book lie in my doctoral thesis.<sup>1</sup> Reflection on these experiences also shows how the study can be considered a link between the past and the future and between the individual and the society.

Although personal experiences are 'personal,' when we as human beings reflect on them and share them with others, we realize to what extent our personal experiences are intermingled and interconnected with the 'other' and with the experiences of society. We start to see the common ground that we share with others, and the similarity of our experiences. By sharing our personal experiences we also realize the uniqueness of each individual's experiences. Reflection on my personal experiences helped me first realize, and then develop, my dialectical thinking, which in turn helped me in going back and forth between my intellectual and spiritual experiences, between the East and the West, and between the experiences of society and the community and my personal stories. When reflecting on and narrating my personal stories, I learned how to construct and reconstruct past experiences in the light of new knowledge. I realized that we human beings make meaning out of our experiences, and that is such an essential part of being

human. We live through many experiences, but if we do not reflect on them and reconstruct their meaning (and we usually do not), they bypass our consciousness and are stored in the subconscious until an event triggers them and brings them back to life. So reflection on personal experiences has always helped me to understand and value the stories on my journey as important and worthwhile in my spiritual and intellectual development. Polanyi says,

As human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a center lying within us and speak it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.<sup>2</sup>

If we do not value our experiences that are deep within ourselves, we will always feel estranged and alien to ourselves. And as Oscar Wilde rightly said, denial of our experiences will be like the denial of the soul. We as spiritual beings know what denial of the soul means. We know the pain of separation that is caused by denial of the soul. I realized the importance of reflection on personal experiences and have included them in my writings and my research since I was a doctoral student at the University of Toronto. As I was doing my studies there, I realized that I was denying my soul and my spiritual experiences and separating them from my intellectual experiences and my professional life, as if I had two separate lives. I will elaborate on this issue later in this chapter to share with the reader the confusion and pain caused by such denial.

Research and thinking are always based on personal concerns. Even when the issues that preoccupy us, as researchers, are mainly social, political, spiritual, or affect humanity in general, there are always highly personal reasons why these more universal issues mean so much to us. Since 1988 I have kept asking myself why I am preoccupied by Islamic epistemology and Islamic education. I never had a particular interest in Islamic issues. I had always been a practicing Muslim, and I was brought up in a conservative Muslim home by loving and caring open-minded parents. So religion was not an issue for me. I accepted it and practiced it as part of my daily life.

Only in 1988, when I started reflecting on my personal experiences, did I realize that I was becoming preoccupied with Islamic issues and Islamic education because my Islamic religious identity was challenged at the University. Only then did I understand the importance of my religion to me. I also saw that I had been taking my religion for granted. When it was challenged, I became protective and defensive. Although Islam did not need my protection and defense, I was protecting my Islamic identity and my spirituality, the sacred knowledge kept in my soul and stored quietly in my consciousness.

From narrating my stories to myself and reflecting on them, I became aware of the importance of narrative inquiry as a research method that enables us as writers and researchers to shed some light on our personal experiences. By doing so, we reconstruct our experiences and create meanings that help us understand, value, and appreciate those experiences or reject them consciously and try to deal with them at the conscious level. What is certainly true is that we trust certain methods of research and reflection because they make sense to us, because they shed light on issues that are personally important to us, possibly even because they lend themselves naturally to researching and reconstructing personal experiences. For reflection on personal experiences, I relied on narrative inquiry as a simple yet profound method of analysis.

I believe some readers will have reservations about or even objection to including the personal experiences of an unknown author in a scholarly book. The reservation, I believe, is rooted in the traditional school of thinking that separates the personal from the professional and the subjective from the objective. It might be worth reminding readers that the major theme of this book is to promote an alternative holistic paradigm for developing holistic education, an education that addresses the personal as an essential part of the professional as one whole entity. The issues of subjectivity and objectivity are discussed in detail in later chapters. As Morgan states:

There is a contribution of knowledge if the researcher can identify generic process or patterns through which human beings construct and make sense of their realities...The evidence generated by interpretive

research is much more likely to be of an evocative rather than comprehensive kind, to be sustained, rejected, or refined through future studies. The conclusions of one study merely provide a starting point in a continuing cycle of inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Believing in the power of revealing personal experiences as a means for reconstructing one's knowledge, I am applying what I am preaching about and starting with myself as the first step in applying an alternative paradigm and moving away from the conventional positivist paradigm.

I am well aware that I am not al-Ghazālī, Muhammad Iqbal, Heidegger, or any great thinker when including my personal experiences in a scholarly book. However, I am an ordinary scholar who has been troubled by fragmented teaching methods and research methodology in both schools and universities and has tried to discover the causes for such disenchantment. I also believe that the majority in any academic or professional world are ordinary hard-working people who are trying to make sense of the reality around them. So ordinary people can relate to one another's experiences and benefit from them.

When I had the intellectual and spiritual conflict in 1988, I did not know that reflecting on past experiences and retelling my childhood stories might help in understanding the roots of the conflict that are deeply buried in my childhood. In childhood the foundations are laid for the disposition of the mind. Why do we humans think in the way we do? It is not all due to adult experience and university training. Our early childhood biography surely has something to do with it. Stories prove that much more is hidden in our lives than we first realize. We have to be taught to take our own experiences seriously. I am convinced that hidden in our lives are springs that, if tapped at the right time, can quench the thirst to discover the source for our struggle, pain, and conflict.

A direct contact with our own life stories is for us a way to self-knowledge and, beyond that, an entry to wisdom. Thus, any event is contingent on a narrative, and any single narrative is contingent on a wider narrative context. This wider narrative context comes from one's history, traditions, religion, and the society or community of people with whom we share our narrative. To look at narrative outside

a wider narrative context or outside the shared history of society is both misleading and pointless. As Muslims, our personal and separate stories, if shared and shaped by the larger Islamic narrative context, can provide the new generation with a wealth of personal experiences to which they can relate. This encourages them to reflect on their personal experiences and place them in the larger Islamic context. The Muslims' historical memory of colonization is not fixed, nor is my personal memory of episodes related to colonization and the damage done to the structure of the Islamic Ummah and Islamic society in the past and the present.

Histography is a form of social memory and held to be irrelevant to personal memory by modern psychology. Yet, arguably, modern psychology has damaged the human mind and soul by applying irresponsible, inhumane theories and inquiry methods. The meaning of any story is rooted in history and a social group, not just in the personal mind. Stories always take on their meaning in relationship to other stories, some of which are rooted in the collective memory of the community. "Narrative collections are part of the knowledge that glues any culture together. Collections of stories to which we have access and with which we agree, establish our faith in the social system in which we believe."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, by rooting my ideas of Islamic epistemology in my personal experiences, I am aiming at contributing to the Muslim collective memory by reflection on personal experiences. I am also aiming to anchor my intellectual and spiritual experiences in my Islamic upbringing to mirror the unity of knowledge and oneness of experience. Spirituality has always been an essential part of my life since childhood but I never thought about it or labeled it as such, so I never considered myself a spiritual person. There was harmony between mind, body and soul. That harmony was severely disrupted by several factors, one of which was the deep feeling of separation between mind and soul that I experienced in my doctoral program at the University.

By reflecting on personal experiences, I also want to encourage students and scholars to follow the golden thread of their spiritual experience and to bring to life the wholeness and holiness of their Islamic identity, or lack of identity for that matter. Muslim students

can contribute actively in constructing and reconstructing Islamic knowledge not only by choosing topics related to the Islamic Ummah but also, more importantly, by using research methods that are rooted in the Islamic paradigm and by interpreting their studies from an Islamic perspective and within an Islamic paradigm.

#### FRAGMENTATION AND WHOLENESS

When I first decided to include a chapter on my personal experiences in this book, I divided the chapter into two sections: (1) the intellectual journey; and (2) the spiritual journey. As I was trying to separate the events and experiences to categorize them, I felt somehow disturbed inside, and could not determine the source of that feeling. I felt frustrated because of the difficulty of separating the experiences. Suddenly, I realized that the discomfort created by this continuing tension was because of my attempts to separate my mind from my soul. I had been struggling against this conflict since 1988. Fragmentation of self and knowledge is a major theme of this book that I am trying to explain; my goal is to avoid it in the education system and in my personal and professional life. Yet, I myself kept falling into the trap of separation, categorization and fragmentation.

My scientific training of categorizing, analyzing, and objectifying kept invading my writing and my reflections. I realized that there was no separation between my soul and my mind. My spiritual and intellectual journeys were one, and the intermingling of these two had made me who I was. I never considered myself a religious or spiritual person. I was an ordinary Muslim woman who lived her life to some extent according to the Islamic laws. However, when I started reflecting on my personal experiences, I realized to what extent all my childhood and adulthood were engulfed in religiosity and spirituality. As my sisters, brothers and I were sent to school to develop and discipline our young minds, our souls were disciplined and protected from worldly pollution by our parents. So both my mind and soul were growing in harmony. God was introduced into my life in childhood. Every event and every celebration was based on religious concepts, whether it was a happy celebration of life like the two Eids, Ramadan, marriage, and birth, or sad occasions like sickness, calamities, or

death. Everything was a religious activity, and everything was analyzed and understood from a religious perspective. God was always at the center of our activities and hence the center of our beings. We were always taught, not in so many words, though, that God was the center and the core, that we came from God, and that we should go back to him. My spiritual life was developed and nurtured by my parents and reinforced by society. Religion and spirituality are not only a personal matter, as both the West and the East (the communist bloc) have tried to convince themselves and others. Although communicating with God, meditating and praying are personal matters, they are also social matters. If the community in which we live is so far away from religiosity and spirituality, then spiritual development will either diminish and disappear or will be challenged and developed even more. Being religious and spiritual means being virtuous and ethical and following God's guidance to fulfill our mission in this temporary passage to eternity. Leading an ethical life, no doubt, will reflect on the individual, and on society, too.

By reflecting on my personal experience, I realized that my Islamic worldview and belief system had been growing within me since childhood. A worldview does not come out of a vacuum. It grows like a tree, and if it is nurtured with love, care, and knowledge, it grows and gives healthy fruit. Love is an essential component for spiritual development. Some unfortunate children have been introduced to Islamic religion with fear and terror, which has made them resent religion, God, and the spiritual side of their beings. They may deny their soul, forget it, bury it in the depths of their unconsciousness, and increase their own alienation from themselves and from reality.

#### WEAVING THE BELIEF SYSTEM INTO ONE'S BEING

By reclaiming my childhood from reflection on my experiences, I could trace the roots of my belief system (worldview) and how it was created. I came to realize then what had created such a strong Islamic worldview inside me: a belief system that was whole. What is certainly true is that at a young age one cannot realize the depth of those experiences and how effortless they were then, as if they had been handwoven into our being since childhood, thread by thread. I was living

my life peacefully, without having to worry about defending or protecting my Islamic identity. My parents carried that responsibility.

My Islamic identity, however, was challenged at the University of Toronto. I could not have experienced this reality if I had not gone through a spiritual and intellectual crisis as I was doing my doctoral degree. I realized later that the endless hours that I spent in the libraries, looking for and reading all kinds of books, were in fact not so much a search for references, but for my Islamic and holistic identity. I understood that I was trying to legitimize my whole being: mind, soul, and body. In the search for my identity, I was forced to answer difficult questions. At one point, I felt that I had to choose between my two sides, the spiritual or the intellectual. The choice was a brutal one, which could result in the separation of the mind and the soul. I realized at that point that the situation was out of my control and beyond my ability to solve. I took refuge in God and begged for His help. By continual reflection, contemplation, and constant prayers to God Almighty to clarify things for me, I survived that intellectual and spiritual crisis and realized that oneness and unity in self and knowledge was what I should be seeking for the rest of my life. Only then did I have a sense of wholeness again.

The seeds of this book were planted in 1988, when I was going through a hard and challenging time of the separation and reunion of my soul and mind. The importance of this lies not only in the fact that what is personal is real and intense and it shakes our whole internal being, but also in the universality of our experiences as students from an Islamic background and their effect on our perception of vital issues that threaten our identity as Muslims. I should like to invite all graduate students to reflect on their experiences, to focus on the tensions that are created in their lives, to treasure those tensions and embrace them instead of resenting them, to be able to go beyond the stress and the tensions, and redirect the inner tensions to a mission or a goal that they are striving to achieve. I am well aware that people achieve their goals by following different routes, and this is only one route that led me to many profound horizons of knowledge and love.

CRITICALLY EXAMINING THE WESTERN, SECULAR APPROACH to formal education the author contests the value of an education system focusing solely on the intellectual and physical aspects of human development. The methodological aim and structure of this approach are compared to those of Islam which Dr. Al Zeera notes gives credence to the importance of spiritual and religious factors, as well as scholarly ones, with the overall objective of forming a whole and holy human being who, instead of resisting the paradoxes of life, uses their interrelatedness as a means of personal and societal development. One interesting factor examined within the broader framework of the study is the area of female spirituality, an element, which the author argues, is vastly under-represented in prevalent Islamic literature.

This study is a holistic view of knowledge and a sociological discussion adopting an unconventional approach of using the author's own personal experiences as the basis for debate and analysis. We are invited to enter the world of understanding and observation to experience for ourselves an unusual approach to dialectical thinking.

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