



ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract. *The article examines the formation and the development of Islamic education in Malaysia. It traces that education from its first appearance in the period of the Sultanate of Malacca (1414–1511) and the institution known as the pondok, through the return of the Malay students of al-Azhar from the nineteen-twenties onward and the transformation of the pondok into the madrasa, to the reforms carried out after independence, when the administration and the curricula of all schools giving an Islamic education were placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and a specialized division for Islamic education was successively created and reorganized. The article further sets out the contribution of Malaysian scholars to the worldwide development of Islamic education, in particular the work of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, founder-director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, his conception of education as the inculcation of adab, and the programme of the Islamization of knowledge supported by the International Islamic University Malaysia and by such scholars as Mohd Kamal Hassan, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi.*

Keywords: *Malaysia, Islamic education, pondok, madrasa, al-Azhar, Islamization of knowledge, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, ISTAC, IIUM, adab.*

INTRODUCTION

Information is available to the effect that Islamic education arose in Malaysia for the first time in the period of the Sultanate of Malacca (1414–1511). In the period of the Sultanate of Malacca Islamic education was called the pondok, a word that signifies a hut or shelter built of iron, of tin and of similar materials (Rosnani Hashim, 1996).

Although Malaysia is situated, from the geographical point of view, far from the other countries in which the religion of Islam has developed, its place in the development of the religious field is incomparable. Historically the mediaeval «Malaysia», situated at the junction of the eastern and the western trade routes, is a term that has been used by scholars in order to describe the whole of Nusantara, that is the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, which includes modern South-East Asia. The influence of the Indian, the Arab and the European civilizations upon these lands was besides a great one (Rosnani Hashim, 1996).

The trade that the local inhabitants of Malaysia conducted with the Muslims in the earliest periods became the cause of the gradual entry of the religion of Islam, and by



the thirteenth century Islam had spread throughout Malaya in its full form. From the sixteenth of September 1963 Malaysia has been recognized as the most pluralistic country among those states the greater part of whose population is Muslim. Independence was attained on the thirty-first of August 1957 as a result of the union of the Malay Peninsula, although in August 1965 Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia.

MAIN PART

From the nineteen-twenties Malay students began to study at the University of al-Azhar in Cairo. Upon returning to Malaya this new generation, which had completed its studies in the Middle East, made a perceptible contribution to the development of Islamic education. They adopted a system that combined instruction upon Islamic foundations with the pedagogy and the technologies that were under Western influence, and they transformed the common pondok into madrasas (Rosnani Hashim, 1996). Having perceived the deep attachment of the Malaysians to Islam, the English introduced Islamic education into the local Malay schools.

After Malaysia attained independence from Britain it carried out great reforms in the field of education. The administration and the curricula of all schools that give an Islamic education were placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia. In Malaysia constant efforts have been made in order to put an end to the disagreements that arise between the Islamic and the secular sciences (Rosnani Hashim, 1996).

In 1973 the Division of Religious Education (Bahagian Pelajaran Agama) was established within the Ministry of Education in order to coordinate Islamic education. In 1983 it was renamed the Division of Islamic Education (Bahagian Pendidikan Islam). In 1995 it was reorganized as the Division of Islamic and Moral Education (Bahagian Pendidikan Islam dan Moral). At the present day it has returned to being the Division of Islamic Education, and a number of tasks have been laid upon it, among which are the conduct of the policy of Islamic education and the elaboration of curricula, the development of the Arabic language, and the attraction of qualified teachers and the raising of their qualifications (Ministry of Education Malaysia, n.d.).

One of the scholars who have made a great contribution to the development of Islamic education upon a world scale is the celebrated Malaysian philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (born 1931). His works and his own views in the field of education have exerted a great influence upon the Islamic world. In 1987 al-Attas became the founder-director of the Abdul Hamid II International Institute of Islamic



Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), a research institute forming part of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). This research centre was established at the First World Conference on Muslim Education, held at Mecca in 1977 (First World Conference on Muslim Education, 1977). In the view of another Malaysian scholar of authority in the Islamic world, Mohd Kamal Hassan (born 1942), who directed the IIUM as its rector from 1999 to 2006, the results of that conference represented a great step taken towards the awakening of the whole Islamic community.

According to the body of his devoted students and admirers, al-Attas was the legitimate founder of the scheme of the Islamization of knowledge, and the opinion is expressed that the late Ismail Raji al-Faruqi of Philadelphia afterwards adopted that scheme and perfected it (al-Faruqi, 1982). Taken as a whole, the Islamization of knowledge attempted a regular and systematic synthesis of the Western humanities, social sciences and natural sciences with the very extensive body of knowledge contained within the Islamic tradition. In the period of its successive rectors the IIUM emerged upon the international scale as the principal supporter of the programme of the Islamization of knowledge. The Islamization of knowledge was likewise the principal watchword of AbdulHamid AbuSulayman (born 1936), the former rector of the IIUM from 1989 to 1999 (AbuSulayman, 1989); and it was besides the constant theme of the work of Professor Ismail al-Faruqi of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), which is situated in the United States of America (al-Faruqi, 1982).

As the fruit of his long researches Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas gave a new explanation of the concept of education. In his view, education means *adab*, and it must be instilled into the human being; and this theory of his became widely current (al-Attas, 1980:22). *Adab* here comprises in itself the processes of cultivating the mind and the heart in their essence, of acquiring good qualities for the mind and the heart, of performing right actions as against wrong ones, and of thereby preserving humanity from disgrace. The definition of the concept of education given by al-Attas spread widely in the Islamic world alongside other definitions. Al-Attas preferred *adab* in the understanding of education, holding that *adab* is a quality proper to the human being, and that the human being consists of the soul (*nafs*) and the intellect (*‘aql*), which are responsible for performing or for neglecting their actions as part of the personal covenant with God (al-Attas, 1991:17).

Tarbiya, on the contrary, he regarded as possessing more general characteristics, signifying respectively the process of teaching and learning, and bringing up, developing,



nurturing, nourishing, and, in relation to things in one's possession, rearing and cherishing (al-Attas, 1980:24).

CONCLUSION

Islamic education in Malaysia has passed through a long path of development, from the pondok of the period of the Sultanate of Malacca, through the madrasa shaped by the graduates of al-Azhar, to a system coordinated at the level of the state by a specialized division of the Ministry of Education. The distinguishing feature of this path is the constant effort to overcome the division between the religious and the secular sciences, an effort which found its fullest theoretical expression in the conception of education as adab and in the programme of the Islamization of knowledge. Inspired by the moral outlook of al-Attas, Malaysian scholars set about understanding the study of the Islamic sciences as an integral process, and the experience thus acquired retains its significance for every country in which religious and secular education are being brought into accord with one another.

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