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“New Strategies in Religious Education: The Case of Pursuing
Meaning and Method for Engagement with Modernity”

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Abstract

Models for Islamic education have sought ways to reconcile modern secular education with traditional Islamic studies. Central to these concerns is the reconciliation of the two fields of Islamic knowledge: revealed sciences (*fard ‘ayn*) and acquired sciences (*fard kifayah*). This paper argues that a method of religious education known as *Integral Learning* can help to reconcile various fields of knowledge by concentrating on the moral-spiritual guidance of persons and development of civic virtues for society. *Integral Learning* is a process that looks at life through its world and common concerns and questions, and tries to make sense of them in light of Islamic teachings. Strategies for *Integral Learning* draw from historical and contemporary epistemologies, especially those of the classical period of philosophical study and religious-legal developments. In this process, four key areas are highlighted: reflecting on human experience; studying and sharing of sacred texts; exploring the meaning and practice of religious practice, and acting to foster social justice. *Integral Learning* aims to form a community of learners who can collectively come to a fuller realization of the status that God has bestowed on Muslims as *khalifat Allah*.

As members of faith communities and as global citizens we are life-long learners. Our traditions recognize the need for nurturing intelligence, ethical integrity, and effective

thought and action. Critical to this formation is reading the signs of our times and thinking critically about these realities. If we believe that religions are a “mercy to humankind,” then we must create faith formation programs that teach ways to respond to the most pressing needs of our times. The preamble of the Earth Charter reminds us these needs:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

In order to address these needs, we must develop pedagogies that help us engage in a deep dialogue with our human experiences and sacred traditions. Throughout history, Muslim communities have strived to discover effective ways to communicate traditional Islamic studies. Central to these concerns is the reconciliation of the two fields of Islamic knowledge: revealed sciences and acquired sciences.

This paper will argue that a method of religious education known as “Integral Learning” may be a process that contributes to unifying various fields of knowledge because it emphasizes the importance of the hermeneutical method as a means of inquiry and discernment for action. I will explore this topic by first looking at some current education projects in the Muslim community. Then in light of the Islamic tradition of learning and faith formation, both past and present, I will attempt to illustrate how the *Integral Learning* methodology can be useful in addressing the religious education needs of the Muslim community. Finally, I will offer some suggestions for further development.

PART I: The Reality

In 2006 scholars and educators from around the United States gathered to discuss Islamic Education in the United States. They focused on a variety of issues and raised some

critical concerns.¹ The conference reports identified ways these programs attempted to integrate various fields of study with moral-spiritual training. The central concern was to resist the compartmentalization of cognitive, spiritual, and emotional developments of persons.

Several reports described local situations and projects such as Islamic schools, home schools, and religious training institutes. Some programs promoted the vision of the Muslim school as a civil society actor. These initiatives create networks of social relations and structures, both within and outside the classroom, so that students might cultivate “social trust, leadership skills, and community values,” so vital to civic engagement.² Forming parent associations, volunteer-service groups, and engaging in interfaith projects established a type of “social capital” in the larger community, and the Muslim became a vibrant partner to other religious and civic groups in the society.³

Specifically addressing religious education, Nadia Inji Khan reported on the challenges communities face in the training youth to be future leaders and teachers of religion from among the youth. These programs draw from traditional models of religious instruction, focusing on studies of Qur’an, Quranic memorization and recitation, and other key elements of religious literacy. The methodologies vary and mostly emerge from both the ascetical practices and historical approaches in Islam. The survey noted that though these efforts strive to preserve and transmit religious knowledge they are weak in integrating these studies with other fields of learning. She proposes that a “full-fledged American seminary” could help offer good religious instruction, while also teaching skills for effective communication and collaboration with the larger society.⁴

¹ Yvonne Haddad with Farid Senzai and Jane I. Smith editors, *Educating the Muslims of America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) . This volume contains the papers and presentations of the April 6, 2006 Islamic Education Conference hosted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

² Louis Cristillo, “The Case for the Muslim School as a Civil Society Actor,” *Education the Muslims of America*, Haddad, Smith, and Senzai, 79.

³ Ibid, 7.

⁴ Nadia Inji Khan, ““Guide Us to the Straight Way””: A Look at the Makers of “Religious Literate” Young Muslim Americans,” *Educating the Muslims of America*, Haddad, Smith, and Senzai, 146-47.

In these proceedings, Susan Douglas described her efforts to integrate school curriculum concerning religion in general, and Islam in particular, with general liberal arts education.⁵ Through the work of the *Center for Islamic Education*, she has created curricula to promote Islamic knowledge, practice, and values by enhancing reading ability and critical thinking within a number of content areas.⁶ The integrative model that she and her colleagues have produced established important educational standards for state and local programs. These efforts have improved the quality of curriculum by challenging the “compartmentalization” approach of religious learning and general education. What is needed now, she claims, is ongoing collaboration to develop integrative curricula and the training of teachers for integrative instruction, so that there is a unifying effort to improve education across “public school, academic and private religious and secular education arenas”⁷

The final report by Farid Senzai reiterated some the concerns raised by these essays.⁸ Believing that the Muslim community has much to contribute “positively” to religious pluralism, he identifies key challenges facing the community. Some of these are: to find various types of support for educational initiatives in Muslim community locally and nationally; to encourage strategic planning for the development of public and private education; to create and promote integrative curriculum and methodologies; and finally to offer comprehensive professional training for all those involved in meeting the educational needs of the Muslim community.⁹

In my own experience as an educator in the United States and Asia, I have seen first hand the struggle Muslim communities face when attempting to meet these challenges, especially in regards religious learning. Some groups focus on traditional approaches of memorization believing that this practice leads to understanding and conviction.¹⁰ Others recognize that modern times demands a new synthesis of the fields of Islamic knowledge and training teachers and students in dynamic pedagogies, similar to the projects of the

5 Susan L. Douglas, “Religion, Islam, and the World in School Curricula” in *Educating the Muslims of America*, 86

6 Ibid, 105

7 Ibid, 106.

8 Farid Senzai, “The Outlook for Islamic Education in America,” in *Educating Muslims in America*, 253

9 Ibid, 256-264

10 Memorization is an important learning technique especially when complemented with other skills and studies.

Council for Islamic Education. More recently, I have come to appreciate the generative thinking of the *Tarbiyah Project*. I think that its vision for Islamic education can contribute significantly to renewing faith formation in local and nation religious centers.

The *Tarbiyah Project* focuses on ways to incorporate spiritual learning into the framework of contemporary education.¹¹ The foundational premise of the program is that education is a process of “drawing out” the qualities of our intrinsic human nature (*fitrah*). The word *tarbiyah*, from the Qur’anic verses that speak of the ways God (*Rabb*) stirs to life and nurtures all life forms to flourish “in every kind of beautiful growth” (Q. 22:5, 26:18, 17:24). Al-Asfahani (d. 402 A. H./1011 C.E.) defined *tarbiyah* as “to cause something to develop from stage to stage until it reaches its completion.”¹² This project calls for a renewed holistic vision of Islamic education based on a unified process “Tawhid as Knowledge Construction” and the integrated model of leaning entitled ***ILM: Integrated Islam, Learning for Life, Mastery and Measurement***.¹³ I will share more about this project below.

The educational projects of the Muslim community in both the richness that they offer and the concerns that they address, remind all of us that we need to commit ourselves to ongoing formation of educational theory and practice. Perhaps an integrated/holisitic vision for education, and especially faith formation, can empower us to be attentive, intelligent, judicious, and responsible persons before God and others. The *Integral Learning* model might be such a goal.

PART II: The Heritage: Meaning and Method

Integral Learning as a method for faith formation fosters maturity in the faith of communities and individual members. It is a theory and praxis focused on ways Muslims can acquire a more profound living knowledge of God and of God’s plan of for all humankind.

¹¹ Tarbiyah Institute for Learning &Development. Project description written by Dawud Tauhidi. <http://www.tarbiyah.org>. Retrieved August 12, 2009. All references issued with permission of the author.

¹² Ibid, 6. See footnote #8 in the text for an informative debate on the terms Islamic scholars use for the education process. See also the comments of **Error! Main Document Only.**Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas in Islamic Book Foundation’s Overview of education. Located at <http://www.thebook.org> (retrieved August 12, 2009).

¹³ Ibid, 54.

The principles of this approach go back to the time of the Prophet and the first message of Islam to “read/proclaim” (*iqraa*-96:1-5). Some aspects of this pedagogy are also similar to current projects in Islamic education like the *Tarbiyah Project*.

In the Prophet’s time, to profess faith meant that Muslims turned from a life of ignorance and barbarism to live wholeheartedly according to the message of Qur’an and to cultivate openness to self-transformation. As new “scientific” and “philosophic” knowledge emerged, Muslim thinkers and religious leaders sought ways to reconcile these truths with Muslim faith-knowledge. Many held firmly to the constellation of findings without sacrificing their steadfast beliefs. As the Muslim community grew, the members realized that in various settings the “Call to Faith” was consistently a summons to moral action. Humans possess an innate character for happiness with God that includes bearing responsibility for the good in the community and greater society. These communities understood that growth in religious knowledge, meaningful worship, and the cultivation of virtue were essential to a Muslim’s profession of faith.

In his survey on the evolution of Islamic ethics from, Yasien Mohammad describes how key ethical principles emerged from the Qur’an. *Hilm*, which is actually a dominant virtue in the Qur’an and an attribute of God, was a quality Muslims sought to imitate in order to correct the vengeful spirit indicative of tribal life in the peninsula. The call to faith also meant striving to overcome ignorance and to reform one’s life. Hadith teachings, as well as the ‘*adab*’ literature, addressed the way Muslims should meet the demands of their relationship to God (‘*abd*’) by cultivating magnanimity of the soul. Believers were to cultivate virtues of goodness (*khayr*)/righteousness (*birr*) and justice/responsibility (*adl/qist*).¹⁴

The ethics of the early ascetics further emphasized the importance of self-transformation. Key to this self-discovery was a focus on deepening trust in God and practices that cultivate virtues of humility and selflessness.¹⁵ In addition, studies of *Kalam* (speculative theology) focused on debates about the relationship between human freedom and responsibility as well as reason and revelation. Rationalist schools maintained that the human intellect could know good and evil without the aid of revelation. However, teachers

14 Ibid, 93

15 Ibid, 102

such as al-Juwayni (478/1085) described processes of how good action depends on human openness to divine initiatives.¹⁶

Philosophers and religious thinkers contributed to these debates through their metaphysical, ethical, and political explorations of ideas. Their studies, especially those discussions concerning the nature of being and cosmology, contributed much to the development of knowledge. Scholars such as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, sought to place their discoveries at the service of the Muslim community, though each had a unique, and sometimes controversial, relationship to the growing Muslim empire. In particular, they aided the community's understanding of human learning by making eloquent and critical explanations about logic and the unicity of truth, human and divine. Al-Ghazali's teachings offered an important critique as well as synthesis of these studies.

Describing perfect happiness for human beings as partaking in the vision of God in the heaven, al-Ghazali teaches that reaching this goal requires that Muslims become attentive to God's presence in their lives through engaging in "science of behavior."¹⁷ Al-Ghazali's *Ihya ulum al-Din* is a comprehensive instruction for engaging in this "science/practice" (*mu'amalah*). He explains that human acts are measured responses in pursuit of a good through the proper use of reason (*'aql*), right intention (*niya*), and a type of free self-assertion (*shaja'a* [courage]) that moderate the rational, irascible, and appetitive powers of the soul¹⁸ Three elements are fundamental to this understanding of moral-spiritual development: right knowledge, tutored emotion, and meaningful action/practices.

Knowledge of God and the divine precepts [gleaned from revelation, creation, law (*Shari'a*) and the teachings of Islam], in concert with human faculties to understand this

16 Ibid, 105.

17 "The love of God is the highest of all topics, and is the final aim to which we have been tending hitherto. We speak of spiritual dangers as they hinder the love of God in man's heart, and we speak of various good qualities as being necessary preliminaries to it. Human perfection resides in this, that the love of God should conquer a man's heart and possess it wholly . . ." *Alchemy of Happiness*, 117.

18 "Character is a term for the condition and inner aspect of the soul. Just as one's external appearance can never be beautiful when the eyes are beautiful but not the nose, the mouth and the cheek—or all [the features] must be beautiful if one's outward aspect is to be beautiful also—so too there exists things four in number, which must all be beautiful if one is to be possessed of a beautiful character, which will obtain when these four things are settled, balanced, and in correct proportion to each other. These are the rational faculty, irascible faculty, the appetitive faculty and the faculty, which effects a just equilibrium between these three. Ghazali, *Ihya III, Book 2 On Disciplining the Soul*. trans. by T.J. Winter, Islamic text Society (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 19.

knowledge, helps persons to be open to divine initiatives. Love for God, God's bestowal of this gift and our response, transform human desires. Seeking nearness to God can curb human desires for material comforts. Ascetical disciplines and spiritual practices, especially dedication to religious duties and recitation of *dhikr*, help believers realize that only God can fulfill the yearnings of the human heart. The third element of behavior is the fruit of right knowledge and balanced desire; rightly guided actions/practices are the concrete steps of self-transformation or the inward struggle of one's soul (*jihad al-akbar*) which bear fruit in society through generating positive relations and just actions.¹⁹ Formation in faith means cultivating effective thought and action (*islam*), religious intelligence (*iman*), and ethical integrity (*ihسان*).

Islam, or *Shari'a*, is concerned with differentiating right activity from wrong activity and explaining how to do things correctly.

Iman adds a dimension of understanding. It allows people to see that the meaning of the activity transcends the domain of everyday life and reaches into the divine reality. It lets them understand that everything in the universe is governed by *tawhid*, yet human freedom of choice upset the balance. . .

Ihsan adds to *islam* and *iman* a focus on intentionality. It directs human beings to reorient their desiring and their choosing on the awareness of God's presence in all things.²⁰

At the center of engaging faithfully in these three domains was the effort to develop greater attentiveness to God [God-consciousness—(*taqwa*)]. God-consciousness is real content as well as a process helping persons form good [beautiful]character (*busn al-khuluq*). God-consciousness helps us to strike harmonies between the right goal (perfect/supernatural

19[The] end of all disciplines and the aim of all exertions is that a person reaches the Unity of God: that he see it naught else, that he read it and naught else, that he be obedient to it and naught else. In his inner being no other urge remains. When it is thus, a good character has been achieved. Ibid, 53.

20Murata and Chittick, *Vision of Islam*, (St. Paul, MN: Paragon Press, 1994), 288.

happiness with God) and everyday experiences. It is also striking that in Al-Ghazali's writings his outlines are not simply lists of related topics but the steps of a formation process.²¹ The process instructs believers how to recognize divine initiatives, deepen their God-consciousness, and therefore remain vigilant in the cultivation of virtues necessary for ongoing cognitive development, emotional and spiritual growth, leading to authentic faith and practice.

Al-Ghazali maintains that this growth increases the believer's ability to bond with one another in community, learning how to be effective communicators and collaborators in the cause of righteousness. As Laleh Bakhtar notes, according to Al-Ghazali the goal of spiritual training is that "believers should conceivably be master communicators on all three levels—with self, with others and with the Source. [For] how we communicate determines the quality of our lives."²²

This brief overview of the development of religious ethics in Islam illustrates that from earliest times there was a concern for the formation of the whole person, especially in developing a capacity to judge well so that he/she becomes good/righteous and just/responsible agent in the community. Throughout the following generations, educational initiatives sought to achieve this goal by attempting to organically relate various fields of knowledge. The aim of the various and comprehensive endeavors was to "to promote in man the creative impulse to rule himself and the universe as a true servant of Allah . ." ²³ These epistemologies encouraged a type of dialectic with which Muslims grasped an integrative vision of religious learning.

However, there were periods of stagnation often falsely blamed on the *madrasa* system. This system, as well as others, was a victim of the general decline of intellectual creativity and a comprehensive commitment to education. Schools and training programs

21 Here I am speaking specifically about: *Ihya ulum al din: Mizan et amal; Kimia-yi sa'adat*.

22 Laleh Bakhtar in *Al-Ghazali On Disciplining Self*, (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2002), 16 Also note that in al-Ghazali's teachings he has drawn from Sufi itineraries concerning personal developments according to spiritual stages and states of growth, as well as the deepening levels of certainty (yaqin) when persons seek knowledge to cultivate virtue.

23 Moneer M. al-Otaibi and Hakim M. Rashid, "the Role of Schools in Islamic Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Volume 14 Winter (1997), 14-15
Volume 14 is dedicated to the topic of Islamic Education.

emphasized the correct “transmission” of the religious content, a type of creedal fundamentalism, and adapted practices to this end. Some projects used schools for the sole purposes of military training. At a critical *World Conference for Islamic Education* (1971), theorists, practitioners, and religious leaders voiced the need for a revival of classical and proven approaches stating that:

Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of Man through training of Man’s spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings, and bodily senses. Education should cater therefore for the growth of Man in all aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate all aspects toward goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community, and humanity at large.²⁴

As the authors of this article note, Muslim education understood from this perspective “poses an existential challenge with an ontological goal, when the state of comprehensive and total well-being completes the process of knowing.”²⁵ Concerns of contemporary Muslim educators emerge partially from these historical struggles. As educators have proposed, the needs of the community require a new synthesis of fields of learning and methods in order to meet the needs of educating Muslims in America. Bringing classical ideas about ethical formation into dialogue with pedagogies focused on holistic development and hermeneutical methods could augment religious education/faith formation programs. Those who learn to discover God’s truth from everyday experiences, not over or against them, become life-long learners striving to deepen the sincerity of their worship/practices and service/action. The *Integral Learning* method focuses on such a process for discovery, discernment, communication, and action.

Integral Learning

The process is the “content” of *Integral Learning* because it is a living out of the belief in *Tawhid*, God as the source and fulfillment of existence. Attentiveness to God’s presence in

24 John Sahadat, “Islamic Education: A Challenge to Conscience, *The American Journal of Muslim Social Sciences*, Vol 14 No. 14, Winter (1997), 24

human and environmental realities, helps believers experience the dynamism of sacred religious traditions and learn how to actively respond to these realities. *Integral Learning* aims to form a community of learners who can come together to fuller realization of the stewardship of creation God has bestowed on Muslims. *Integral Learning* is a process that emerges from a goal-oriented focus. Too often educational endeavors focus on programs only. However, when administrators, teachers, and their communities develop learning outcomes or goals, these promises can help produce appropriate and effective educational programs.

The teleological approach allows educators to pledge themselves to developing religious education with integrity, while recognizing the multifaceted and pragmatic aspects of the process. There is no splintering into compartmentalized programs because each aspect of learning, across subjects and among topics, remains connected to one's religious experience with God. Knowledge is not simply about content and memorization, though one must learn the tenets of faith and worship and the principles of how to cultivate virtue. The goal is to deepen God-Consciousness and learn how to be self-reflective, socially connected, and accountable to God, one's deepest self, and to the other. The vision of the *Tarbiyah* educational plan states this well:

Muslims claim for themselves the responsibility to serve as caretakers of creation and provide inspired leadership to the world. This reflects the Islamic principles of *'amanah* (stewardship) and *istikalf* (leadership). However in order to fulfill this responsibility, Muslims need a system of education that is capable of producing young people who can identify, analyze, understand, and then work cooperatively to solve the problems that face their community and humanity at large.²⁶

An effective educational project links each lesson plan with this overarching goal/promise. There is no separation between the vision, plan, learning process, and the content. Moreover, this type of education involves the formation of the whole person and involves the entire community.

25 Ibid, 25

26 *The Tarbiyah Project; An Overview*, 12

The *Integral Learning* process facilitates this type of education specifically in the province of faith formation/religious education. As such, it shares key elements described of the *Tarbiyah* project. For example, the *Tarbiyah* project's vision emerges from the *Qur'anic* model i.e., "learning begins with the real world through 'being there experiences' (*ayat*) and then cycles and ends back into the world."²⁷ The project's seven components and a 7-part process emerges from classical religious and philosophical teachings. These integrated content "strands," correspond to the three learning domains: *islam* (doing), *iman* (knowing) and *ihsan* (being), and link with the universal framework, noted above. The strands are various types of literacy: spiritual, moral, intellectual, physical, interpersonal, cultural, and social.²⁸

The *Tarbiyah* project then describes curriculum outcomes for each of these "strands" and parallels the content plan with a seven-part process forming "a single, unified learning system."²⁹ To learn, as this plan shows, persons need to begin with a sense of curiosity (awe and wonder) and cultivate a good character through exploration and exchange, so that these discoveries bear fruit, i.e., we learn to care for one another and the whole of humanity.³⁰

The *Integral Learning* vision and method share many of the goals and process of the *Tarbiyah Project*. The *Integral Learning* program differs only to complement this model because it offers a way to integrate these goals and processes with specific faith formation initiatives. It also provides a concise and effective way to incorporate program goals into each lesson. The simple outline also helps teachers develop skills for using the process, adapting it to their local contexts, and designing curricula. *Integral Learning* focuses on the experience of participants so that they may come to a fuller understanding of themselves, while learning ways to dialogue, discover, understand, discern, and commit to social actions as mature faith-filled persons in their communities and contemporary society. Four movements are integral to this process: *Building Community*, *Sharing Stories (our human*

27 Ibid, 44

28 Ibid, 43.

29 Ibid, 59

30 Ibid. The 7-Part Process includes: Curiosity (awe and wonder); Character (purifying and preparation); Contemplating (exploring and reflecting); Concretion (expanding and extending); Collaborating (collaborating and sharing); Cultivating (applying personally); Caring (applying socially)

*experience, sacred traditions and revealed texts), Act Justly, and Praying Together.*³¹ These movements are not just steps in the process but goals and promises we make to God and one another.

Building Community

The *Integral Learning* process begins by recognizing that God calls all those involved in the process to a deeper relationship with God and one another. The faith community invites believers into the formative process by creating programs and pledging support. Teachers, students, and the entire community accept the challenge to greater maturity of faith.

Such collaborative approaches need good preparation in order to create a positive learning environment, physically and psychologically. In order to achieve this the facilitator/teacher must know the faith community and the program goals and objectives as described by the general instructional directory and overview-plan (See below). Well before the actual date of the session, there should be informal and formal gatherings in order to learn about the needs of the community and those who will participate in the session. Faith formation actually begins with such inquiries because they draw attention to the truth of God's continual presence and care. This information is an important resource for the creation of a hospitable setting and effective lesson plan.

Sharing Stories

The next part of the process involves exploring and reflecting on stories: personal experiences, faith community's experience, and those of the faith tradition, which include sacred texts, traditional teachings, and religious practices. According to the lesson plan, facilitators//teachers can include additional information gleaned from various fields of knowledge. The *Tarbiyah* process calls this step "contemplating" and in the *Integral Learning* model, this is the crucial and core activity. Thomas Merton in his study on education noted that, "seeing" and "hearing," as senses, observe concrete realities in order to connect to the deeper truths of these realities. The dynamic process reveals the "hidden wholeness" of Being (*Tawhid*) which each reality uniquely intimates. The goal of these

31 Anne Marie Mongoven, *The Prophetic Spirit of Catechesis*, (Mahwah, NJ; Paulist Press, 2000), 120-139. These pages give a detailed explanation of the process.

discussions is to realize God's call within our lived realities and to learn how the faith teachings and practices form us in ways capable of responding to this call.³²

Integral Learning as a process reminds us that to speak is not simply the capacity to “voice” but to question so to understand and reflect upon the experience in light of sacred tradition. Four questions frame the dialogue: What am I experiencing? What do sacred texts say about the experience? How does the Sacred Tradition, teachings and practices, help me understand these experiences? How does the faith community celebrate these experiences in its public and private worship and social action? Through this process of inquiry, the facilitator shares the sacred teachings, e.g., the message of the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and traditional practices.

Reflecting on these questions and sharing insights from our experiences and religious traditions is fundamental to the *Integral Learning* process because the “reading of the signs” and the dialogue helps us realize our true natures as human beings created by God, and also empowers us to use the gifts God gives us to full potential.³³ Paulo Freire's writings emphasize this importance of such an approach. Freire maintains that the inadequacies of education exist because the predominant method imitates a “banking” model. The “banking” model suggests that students come to the classroom seeking to withdraw a wisdom deposit from instructors. Learning, he claims is not a matter of transmitting information only, but of human development. Programs must teach critical thinking skills and creative application of knowledge for the advancement of society.³⁴ This is the vision, the goal, of *Integral Learning*, to share religious truth and a process for exploration and discovery, of lifelong learning and moral-spiritual formation.

Acting Justly

The test for faith communities is not simply to “keep the faith,” but to share faith thoughtfully and effectively. In this part of the process, participants reflect on the needs and concerns of the community and plan actions to meet them. The deep dialogue and learning of the previous steps reveals values and gifts that God bestows on the faith community so

32 Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton: Education of the Whole Person* (Religious Education Press, 1990), 2 Retrieved at <http://www.educationforjustice.org> (August 29, 2009). Here al-Ghazali's studies help us to understand the depth of this call to believers as learners.

33 Ibid

that we might serve each other as God has ordained. The chosen actions could be based on new ideas or they may be a deepening of religious practices or other duties that support the community.

Religious thinkers have described this type of discernment as a hermeneutical circle or on a larger scale, a pastoral spiral. The hermeneutical circle or pastoral spiral is a cyclic process that begins with human experiences. As the participants continue to listen, question, and share they realize that they must address community concerns. Whether it is a plan for new action or a fulfillment of religious duty, the most important aspect of the plan is the sincere intention to be of service to God and others. In the pastoral spiral model, the plan also includes a timeline for implementing the actions and to evaluate them. As the participants complete the evaluation, new experiences/ realities emerge, generating another process of discernment and action (See Appendix 1).

Praying Together

Throughout the process, participants have created a hospitable and prayerful environment. They have pledged themselves to listen and speak with compassion: speaking from the heart and listening with the heart. Call and Response; Speaking and Listening; Contemplation (Study) and Action are actions forming us into the persons God desires. These actions help us become more attentive to divine initiatives in our personal lives. They are, Al-Ghazali says, cultivating the “good seed, for happiness of religion and of the world to grow.”³⁵

In this sense, the spirit of prayer has permeated the entire process. However, the session concludes with a special prayer service that relates to the learning experience. The prayer can include various forms, using words and gestures, recitation of sacred texts and other elements. The prayer celebrates the many ways God has been present to the participants through their sharing and decision-making. This formal time of prayer solidifies the participants resolve to act humbly and positively as they fulfill religious and social duties.

Summary

34 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970)

35 Al-Ghazali *On Disciplining the Soul*, translated by Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam, (Chicago: Kazi Publications,

The educators/theologians of the *Integral Learning* process for Christian faith formation called their curriculum “Living Waters.” They chose this title because it symbolizes God’s providential presence creating and sustaining life. We are born in water, we are made of water (60% at least), and none of us can survive without water. Water, as it refreshes us, reconnects us to the source of life, God. In the same way, the *Integral Learning* process taps into the dynamic presence, the flowing waters of God with us and in our faith community. We encounter God, present to us, calling us to be attentive to our experiences and sacred traditions, to read the signs of the times, and to work for justice, as a participant in God’s plan for all creation. In the religion session, the sharing, learning, discernment, praying, and planning for action seeks to promote greater moral-spiritual “health” and steadfast flourishing, individually and communally. We then share this life with others through our religious duties and works of social justice, which build up and sustain the common good.

An example of this “living water” for modern times might be developing a faith formation session using the Earth Charter. Looking at the Earth Charter, we realize the critical state of the globe and may perhaps be fearful to us. Yet, the best way to understand and address this perilous situation is to look at it through the lenses of our own experience and of our sacred traditions. The *Integral Learning process* can help us engage in these critical inquiries, dialogues, and discernments. The sharing of our stories guides us as we ask: What am I/we experiencing? What does our sacred tradition say about these experiences? When we reflect and dialogue about these realities in concert with our sacred tradition, we might discover that God is not distant to our suffering. In fact, we may recognize that God is calling each of us to a particular action that addresses concerns of contemporary society. The *Integral Learning* process fosters a maturity of faith capable of embracing life’s mysteries, along with its difficulties. We grow in religious intelligence, ethical integrity, and learn how to commit to meaningful thought and action. As the *Tarbiyah* project states, education means transformation and the fruit we bear is known by our “serving God, through service to the world.”³⁶

PART III: Planning for the Future

2002), 53.

³⁶ The *Tarbiyah Project*, 63.

Looking at the educational concerns of the Muslim community in light of the rich heritage of religious and ethical teachings, both historically and in contemporary projects, the *Integral Learning* process can offer positive insights for the development of successful faith formation. Based on my experiences with Christian and Muslim educational projects and the *Integral Learning* process, I offer three suggestions.

First, we need more experimentation. Drawing principles from the *Tarbiyah* educational project and the *Integral Learning* process, we need to encourage local groups to develop their own faith formation programs. Too often communities rely solely on “generic” textbooks and other materials rather than setting goals and objectives based on their community’s vision for faith formation. Recently, I had the opportunity to participate in the religious education planning of the Islamic Center of Northern California. Those responsible for the religious education program were both experienced leaders of the community and university students committed to sharing their faith with younger members. Having studied various faith formation materials, the planning group found them helpful in providing an overview of various religious content areas, but weak in offering a unified focus. They then decided to draw up a profile of their community and set outcomes/goals for the religious training of the various age groups. As the plan developed, they realized that they needed to train teachers in a process that could link the formation needs of the community with religious teachings. They asked me to share the *Integral Learning* process to see if it might contain elements they could adapt for their program.

The result of the sharing was positive. The teachers were excited about the way the process could meet the specific needs of each grade level. They also thought that the dialectic engagement, starting from the participant’s experience, was a way to keep religion lessons connected to the “everyday” lives of the students. As Muslim educators noted, too often weekend religious education programs or service projects are “addendums” to general education and daily life. They also realized how the *Integral Learning* process could facilitate students’ appreciation of the connections between faith teachings and studies in sciences and arts in order to foster moral-spiritual growth and promote social justice actions. They had many ideas for future experimentation. However, the teachers also realized that the process called for extensive preparation. In addition, they saw the need for a general educational

resource, a type of “directory” that could provide age-appropriate Islamic themes/topics to guide their curriculum choices and lesson preparation.

This brings me to my second recommendation, the religion directory. The zeal with which the young people of the Islamic Center of Northern California shared their faith was admirable. They were enthusiastic and courageous, yet they did not have classical religious training. They raised questions about ways the Muslim community, specifically the religious scholars and leaders could provide authoritative resources to these projects. A “religious (catechetical) directory” might be such a resources. The directory’s primary purpose is to offer a vision concerning the task of faith formation by identifying the mission, goals, and objectives of faith formation. From this vision, it then describes themes and components central to the process of sharing the life of faith with all members of the community. Each Muslim community would then set its goals and objectives for faith formation based on this overview. In many ways, the *Tarbiyah* project, as it identified its unifying vision, and from this its program for education, is a type of directory. The religious scholars could prepare such a document looking specifically into the task of faith formation, identifying an overview, perhaps based on the domains of *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan* for example, and then link this vision to specific components of religious knowledge, faith practices and social duties, with spiritual-moral training.

The task of producing a religion directory will not be easy because the process needs to involve various members of the community who bring important resources to the task. As the in the Catholic-Christian community’s endeavor, the work will also take a great deal of time as well as openness, patience, and humility on the part of religious leaders, theologians, and educators.³⁷ It should be a document written by the Muslim community based on its pastoral plan, i.e., the vision of the community’s task to educate and to form the next generation of Muslims as well as for ongoing formation of families and adults. If done well it becomes the primary guide for developing religious education materials, training teachers, and most importantly identifies the way the faith tradition of Islam is a living faith in the world, responding to God’s call to be *khalifat Allah*.

37 Mongoven 30. The document is “Sharing the Light of Faith: General Catechetical Directory. I also have a book describing in detail the history and task of developing faith formation directories based on pastoral plans. The book was

My third and final recommendation emerges from the challenge of producing a “religion directory.” Paulo Freire reminds us that a pedagogy of hope moves beyond the naive: “hope alone can transform the world.” Authentic hope, he claims, is based on “truth as an ethical quality of the struggle.”³⁸ Educators have an important role in creating this hope because they teach skills to recognize, understand, and address needs and concerns of humanity. Those involved in these initiatives, regardless of the disciplines or faith traditions have much to share with one another. Perhaps we could create new forums for religious educators/faith formation personnel to work together. Such collaboration would be a very energetic and fruitful interfaith dialogue. These exchanges could provide shared opportunities for ongoing development: planning, materials, and teacher training. In this way, our religious traditions might work together as agents of transformation, i.e., responding together and comprehensively to the pressing problems of modern society. As communities of learners, we would “declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations”³⁹ and in this way we become bearers of a reconciling hope for the world.

published in Bangla, by the Jessore Catechetical Training Society. English translation available by request.

38 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reviving the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum Press, 1995), 1
Retrieved at <http://www.educationforjustice.org> (August 31, 2009)

39 Tarbiyah Project, 63