Muhammad, Education, and Finitude

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Biographies of Prophet Muhammad extol his distinguished life, noting his achievements as a healer, diplomat, and general. Among these successes, it is especially as a teacher that Muhammad’s exemplarity shines through. However, Muhammad’s educational leadership arose not only out of his considerable capacities but also out of his limitations. Special attention is given to three aspects of Muhammad’s life—his orphanhood, his illiteracy, and his residential school, the Suffah. These experiences provide a historical perspective for the use of finitude as an educational resource.

The true infinite does not exclude the finite; it embraces the finite without effacing its finitude, and explains and justifies its being.

— Muhammad Iqbal (2013, 23)

Religious biographies of Muhammad (Sira) tend to be hagiographic. Islam’s Prophet is eulogized for his “sublime life” (Haykal 1976, 592–594), “genius” (Al-Aqqad 1942, cited in Ali, 2014, 98), and “distinguished, exalted personality” (Gülen 2010, xvii). He was “too full of truth to deceive and too full of wisdom to be self-deceived” (Lings 1983, 67). The Prophet’s capacity as a healer, husband, and diplomat are lauded. While accolades for the “paragon of the pious” (Al-Tahawi 2007, no. 32) are not uncontested (Ali 2014), Tariq Ramadan captures the devoted sentiment of many Muslims when he says, “Absolutely everything in his life was an instrument of renewal and transformation . . . ” (2007, 214). Among such superlatives, it is “especially as an educator” (Gade 2010, 260) that Muhammad’s exemplarity emerges. Works such as Prophet Muhammad the Teacher and His Teaching Methodologies (Ghuddah 2003), Muhammad the Noble Teacher/Great Educator (Untung 2005),¹ and Development of an Exemplary Educational System for Pakistan in the Light of the Teachings of the Holy

¹This is the translated title of an Indonesian-language text, cited by Gade (2010, 270–271).
Prophet (Niazi, 2002) describe him as an olympian pedagogue. Citing a hadith these biographies catalog his range of teaching methods including joking, repetition, silence, and telling stories.

Extolling Muhammad’s virtues as an educator is an expression of Islamic piety. “The perfection of his noble personality is a methodology in itself—teaching all other teachers to be like him and follow his sublime way . . . He is a teacher to every teacher and educator (Ghuddah 2003, 160).” One contemporary hadith scholar refers to Muhammad as “a master teacher” (Haleem 2002, 124), and the title track of pop-star Sami Yusuf’s hit album Al-Mu’allim lauds him as “the Teacher of teachers” and the “Teacher of all mankind” (Ghuddah 2003, 160). Muhammad himself said he was “sent as a teacher” (Ibn Majah, no. 229). By way of comparison (and aware that such parallels are fraught with inadequacies), while the image of Jesus as a wise teacher receives fluctuating emphasis among different Christian theologies, Muhammad’s identity as an educator is undisputed within Islam. This piety has a practical consequence: the ummah honors Muhammad’s educational excellence by existing as a learning community. According to an oft-cited hadith, the Messenger said, “Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim” (Ibn Majah, no. 224). This is summed up nicely by Abu Darda: “The learned are the heirs of the Prophets . . . ” (Al-Nawawi, no. 13). What an inimitable teacher!

While admiring Muhammad’s effectiveness, this article approaches his identity as a teacher from a different angle. Perhaps Muhammad’s achievements as an educator were just as much a result of his limitations as his abilities. He could only “teach everything” once he had “learn[ed] and suffer[ed] everything” (Gülen 2010, 6). Poverty preceded prophecy. Desertion predated wisdom. Limitation, suffering, poverty, vulnerability are means of becoming cognizant of one’s finitude. It is been observed that finitude is an anxiety for theological minds (e.g., Kitcher 2014, 109, 138), and it is true that the relative is sometimes expressed as the loathed subset in a dichotomy with the Permanent (e.g., natural/supernatural, secular/sacred, body/soul). My presupposition is that the actual and

2Likewise, Gülen exclaims: “If all pedagogues gathered and merged their acquired knowledge about education, they could not be as effective as a Prophet” (2010, 188).

3The notion of Christ as a “great educator” is indicative of H. Richard Niebuhr’s (1951) “Christ of Culture”—one of five types and a sticking point with the other types.

4While this Tradition, also cited by Al-Ghazâli (1962, x), is attributed to Muhammad, it may be an insertion into the hadith by later scholars (see Waines 2003, 39).
ideal both possess sacred qualities and exist in, as Dewey might have it, “active relation” (1934, 34). When the absolute is treasured, the conditional can be received as a gift. To demonstrate how Muhammad embraced finitude as an educational gift three dimensions of his life will be explored: his illiteracy, his orphanhood, and his school, the Suffah. These experiences provide a historical perspective for reflecting on educational practice today.

THE LITERACY ADVOCATE

Literacy is in-built in many notions of knowledge. From children learning the “3 Rs” to scholars publishing papers, literacy is requisite to advancement in the academy. Many civil cultures also accentuate literacy. Armed with rhetoric about a knowledge-economy, Western politicians “conscript and ration the powers of literacy for their own competitive advantage” (Brandt 2001, 5). These forces coalesce in settings of religious education in which laments of “religious illiteracy” have become something of a catchcry: “Widespread illiteracy about religion promotes prejudice and bigotry . . . ” (Moore 2014, 379; also see Moore 2007; Prothero 2007). Literacy is functionally synonymous with ability.5 These concerns have merit: no teacher, politician, or cleric could justify their job if they promoted illiteracy!

Muhammad was a literacy advocate. Following the Battle of Badr—a formative moment in Muhammad’s leadership—he permitted prisoners of war to earn their freedom by teaching ten children from Medina to read and write. The prisoners received freedom as they freed the youth from illiteracy, signifying the importance of education to the Prophet. As one biographer observes: “Whether in peace or war, knowledge—learning, reading, and writing—provides people with essential skills and gives them dignity” (Ramadan 2007, 107). Another biographer argues that eradicating illiteracy is a religious duty that is like commanding good and forbidding evil (Ghuddah 2003, 13–16).

Literacy was an instrument leading to the advancement of Islamic culture. To Companions worried about forgetting the Sunnah

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5The American Academy of Religion’s definition of “religious literacy” begins with “Religious literacy entails the ability to . . . ” (cited by Moore 2014, 379–380). Likewise for Prothero, “Literacy refers to the ability to use a language . . . In this sense religious literacy refers to the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the building blocks of religious traditions . . . ” (2007, 22).
(and thus transmitting unreliable narrations), the Prophet said, “‘Help yourself with your right hand’ and he motioned with his hand as if writing” (At-Tirmidhi, no. 2666). Literacy played an important role in intercultural engagement. Zayd ibn Thabit, Muhammad’s young scribe, was ordered to “learn the writing of the Jews” in both Hebrew and Syriac so that Muhammad could correspond with them (Abi Dawud, no. 3638). Calligraphy and literature came to be highly valued by Muslims. As Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali, remarked, “Beautiful writing makes the truth clearer” (al-Munajjid 1995, 142).

**THE UNLETTERED PROPHET**

Against the backdrop of Muhammad’s educational prowess and literacy advocacy, it seems counterintuitive that many Muslims assert that the Prophet was illiterate. “Education never touched him; he was unlettered and unschooled” (¨Unal 2008, 1275). This conclusion can be traced to two Qur’anic passages. The first is The Clot (Q 96), the first surah revealed. There Muhammad is commanded to “read” or “recite.” But this may have been an impossibility inasmuch as, according to tradition, Muhammad repeatedly objected that he was unable to read (see Al-Bukhari, no. 3). His Educator (Arabic: Rabb) “taught by the pen” (Q 96.4), but Muhammad could not read its script. In a classic Persian poem Jibrail’s oral revelation is described as covert, unwritten: “Secrets, more than any books have shown, / By one who could not read, were seen and known . . . ” (Attar 2011, 22). 6

The second passage is found in Q 7.157, particularly the term al-Nabī al-Ummī. The term has a range of meaning, with English translations commonly using phrases such as “the unlettered prophet” (Esposito 2003, 225) or “the Prophet who neither reads nor writes” (Ünal 2008, 352). “Gentile” may also be an acceptable translation 7 as ummī can also mean “Arabian,” “Meccan,” “layman,” and “heathen” (Günther 2002, 1). “Unlettered” may also refer to being without scriptural revelation. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam gives a helpful exposition of al-Nabī al-Ummī:

6Interpreters decipher the issue of Muhammad’s not being able to “read” differently. For example, to the question of how illiterate Muhammad could be commanded to read, one commentator says he was meant to “read” the universe and humanity (Ünal 2008, 1239).

7As Dawood (2003) suggests in the notes to his Qur’an translation.
The term *ummi* derives from the noun *umm*, which means “mother,” “source,” or “foundation,” as in the Quranic *umm al-kitab* (sourcebook, primordial book). *Ummi* may also mean “motherly,” “uneducated,” or “illiterate.” The most common meaning of *al-nabi al-ummi* is “the unlettered prophet,” which refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s inability to create a major literary work such as the *Quran*. Some commentators have traced the term to the noun *umma*, which refers to a primary community sharing a common religious orientation. In this sense, *al-nabi al-ummi* means “the prophet sent to an unscripted community,” or a community that has not yet received a scripture. (Esposito 2003, 225)

Today “illiterate” has a pejorative connotation referring not only to an inability to read but also to ignorance and incivility. This judgment is anachronistic when applied to 7th century CE Medina. With few Arabic texts available to study, literacy simply was not what it is today.8 Ironically, however, some anti-Muslim apologists argue that Muhammad was literate and that claims of his illiteracy are based on Muslim’s desire to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the Qur’an rather than on solid textual evidence. Inversely, Muslims conceive a positive dimension of Muhammad’s illiteracy: Qur’anic revelation could not have been influenced by previous scientific, religious, or cultural knowledge Muhammad may have learned from Greeks, Jews, or Christians. Ünal’s gloss on 7.157 is explicit: because the Prophet did not read or write, he “therefore remained preserved from any traces of the existing written culture and is freed from any intellecction and spiritual pollution” (2008, 352). For Muslims, Muhammad’s illiteracy is proof of a divine pedagogy at work.

**THE ORPHANED PROPHET**

Illiteracy was not the only way Muhammad was limited. He was orphaned at a young age—his father, Abdullah, died before his birth; his mother, Aminah, died when he was six; his grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, died when he was eight; and he was initially rejected by the available wet nurses. The uncle who eventually offered him protection was neither the eldest nor the richest among his brothers. In a culture where “group feeling” (Ibn Khaldun’s *ásabiyah*) was determined by allegiance to kin and clan, this precarious position was traumatic.9 But

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8I am indebted to Mehmet Ozalp on this point.

according to The Morning Hours, one of the early Meccan surahs, these disadvantages taught Muhammad the consoling power of the All-Compassionate.

Your Lord has not abandoned you . . .
Did he not find you orphaned and give you shelter? (Q 93.3, 6)

Muhammad’s helplessness is often overshadowed by biographical accounts that vividly emphasize his blessedness. Ibn Ishaq’s well-regarded Sira (the earliest such biography, collected “within a century of the prophet’s death”\(^{10}\)) recalls that Muhammad’s wet nurse, Halima, was without milk. On agreeing to care for the infant, however, her breasts were filled with enough milk for both young Muhammad and her own son, her camels and sheep were also filled with milk, and her donkey underwent a transformation from an exhausted pack animal to the hardest charging horse in the desert (Ishaq 1964, 19). Ishaq calls the lad a “blessed soul” (1964, 19) who “grew like a prosperous plant on account of the grace for which He had predestined him” (1964, 21). When he traveled, clouds sheltered him from sun. When he played, angels opened his chest and removed a black clot. When he sat, he inadvertently sat under the very tree where only prophets had sat. He was a champion archer, had piercing eyesight, and a Christian monk confirmed that the birthmark on his back was “the seal of prophethood” (Lings 1983, 30–31). What an inimitable childhood!

Despite the wonders, Muhammad was inescapably an orphan. When Bahira the monk offered hospitality to his tribe’s caravan, emphasizing that the invitation extended to “every one of you, young and old, bondman and freeman,” the young ragamuffin was left behind (Lings 1983, 29–30). Only after Bahira’s questioning was Muhammad invited to join the group. The unlettered urchin was experientially learning the lessons of The Morning Hours (Q 93.3, 6). Commenting on these ayat, Tariq Ramadan notes that the experience of being an orphan in a desert environment—being deserted in most bona fide sense of the term—was an initiation causing Muhammad to understand the “vulnerability and humility” required of a prophet:

Although he did not yet know it, Muhammad was going through the first trials ordained for him by the One, Who had chosen him as a messenger

\(^{10}\)Editor’s note (Ishaq 1964, 12).
THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MUHAMMAD’S ILLITERACY AND ORPHANHOOD

Islam’s understanding of the nature of the Qur’an makes the Prophet’s illiteracy an important theological aspect of the doctrine of revelation. Because the Message was received auricularly, Muhammad’s not being able to read presents no logical stumbling block. In fact, being “unlettered” may well be perceived as preferable to being “lettered” inasmuch as he would have been less likely to contribute to the composition of an ayah. Indeed, while human agency was certainly evident in the life of the Muhammad (including in his pedagogical methods), it is theologicaally inadequate to solely focus on ways that he overcame any lack of capacity. There is a real sense in which he did not need to overcome his limitation—any educational incapacities were overcome for him by revelation itself.

Being orphaned and illiterate was a kind of embodied theological lesson. Muhammad’s limitations are not just an accident of history—a constitutive point is being made about the givenness of religious knowledge. The Book is a gift, a hand-me-down from on high. “With the death of his father,” Gülen says, “God deprived him of all human support and directed him to the realization that there is no deity but God, Who has no partners” (2010, 5). This lesson had a practical outcome: Muhammad was able to experientially empathize with unschooled people. The Qur’an describes God sending “to the unlettered ones, a Messenger of their own” (62.2)—a finite Prophet.

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11 Throughout his biography of Muhammad, Tariq Ramadan (2007) extensively uses the word Educator as a translation of Rabb—for example, God was “the Messenger’s Educator” (26).

12 For hearing as an epistemological foundation for knowledge in Islam, see Touati (2010).

13 For example, The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an says, “The Qur’an’s theological status as divine word negates the very idea of it having a historical context at all, for it implies that the text is of eternal and unchanging validity. Muslim tradition even asserts that it had been revealed on several other occasions, to earlier communities via their prophets. This being so, the historical context in which a particular passage was revealed to Muhammad can be understood only as an accident, and has no real bearing on the meaning of a passage at all, which is immutable and intrinsic” (Donner 2006, 23).
for finite people. When Muhammad later articulated an ethic of care for widows, the poor, and orphans, he did so based on personal knowledge. Holding up his forefinger and middle finger and showing the small gap between them he said, “I and the one who looks after an orphan will be like this in Paradise” (Al-Bukhari, no. 5304). In fêting the destiny of orphans’ carers, his own legacy is blessed.

The Qur’an links Muhammad’s illiteracy with the miraculous nature of the revelation: “Never have you read a book before this, nor have you ever transcribed one with your right hand. Had you done either, the unbelievers might have doubted” (Q 29.48; also see Q 25.4–6). In the very transmission of the Qur’an, Allah was already teaching the Qur’an. “He has taught the Qur’an . . . He has taught him speech” (Q 55.2, 4). Indeed, the ayat are rhythmically patterned so as to be pedagogically effective: “Behold how many facets We give to these messages so that they might understand the truth . . . ” (Q 6.65; also see Q 39.23 and Ünal 2008, xxii). This differentiation between a sovereign Teacher and a dependent student is paralleled in the Qur’an’s depiction of the Creator teaching Prophet Adam the names of all beings (Q 2.31–33; also see 55.1–4), as contrasted with the biblical account where “whatever” Adam called the animals became their names (Gen 2.19–20).

In sum: revelation was not shaped by Muhammad’s human learning. Revealed knowledge was an entirely uncaused gift of Allah—a gift, not an acquisition. “God has sent down on you the Book and the Wisdom and taught you what you did not know” (Q 4.113), or as Ghuddah translates this, what “you were unable to learn” (2003, 17). These pedagogical gifts, revealed and recited in isolated arid expanses, were not forgotten by Muhammad in later years.

EDUCATION OF THE VULNERABLE AT THE SUFFAH

Muhammad’s mosque at Medina (which he was responsible for designing) featured an annex devoted to the housing and education of the destitute as well as youth who were seeking focused study with the Prophet. This courtyard was known as the Suffah. The Arabic word suffa can mean “bench” (the similar sounding English word “sofa” is of Arabic origin), and this covered platform provided shelter and a resting place for approximately 400 resident-students known as “Companions
of the Bench” \textit{(ahl al-suffa)}.\footnote{Four hundred is the total number of students; not all were studying at the same time.} The dwellers at the Suffah, who have since taken on legendary status, consisted in large part of young men who were unmarried, poor, and orphaned (Watt 1960–2007). Their misery is reported in hadith traditions narrated by Abū Hurairah, one of the young people studying there:

I saw seventy of the people of the Suffah and none of them had a cloak. \hfill (Al-Nawawi, nos. 469, 506)

The people of As-Suffah were the guests of the people of Islam, they had nothing of people nor wealth to rely upon. \hfill (At-Tirmidhi, no. 2477)

Muhammad’s deep personal bond with these poor Companions was once demonstrated when he denied providing a servant for his daughter and son-in-law (themselves suffering physical hardship) in order that he could prioritize the needs of the residents. He replied to her, “I will not give to you and let the People of the Bench be tormented with hunger” (Lings 1983, 168; also see Atay 2007, 462; Ramadan 2007, 118). I will return to this episode later.

The Suffah was not only a dwelling place. It was a school. Its welfare component was matched by an educational component. From the hadith we learn that both “writing and the Qur’an” were taught at the Suffah (Abi Dawud, no. 3416). One of the Companions of the Bench, Abu Darda, went so far as to exclaim: “I would rather learn one point than spend my night in continual prayer. . . . Be a learned, or a learner, or an auditor but never anything else . . . ” \hfill (cited by Al-Ghazālī 1962, 12). The following educational activities taking place in the fabled Suffah have been identified:

This was a regular residential school where reading, writing, Muslim law, memorizing of the \textit{al-Qurān}, and methods of reciting the \textit{al-Qurān} correctly were taught under the direct supervision of Muhammad. Besides these, swimming, shooting of arrows, elementary mathematics, rudiments of medicine, astronomy, genealogy, and phonetics were taught. Hence this was a first institution consisting of a teacher, learners, mentors, a classroom, and a student house. \hfill (Mogra 2010, 323)

The symbiosis of the students’ economic vulnerability and educational availability was no coincidence. Muhammad famously said “my poverty is my pride” and it has been observed that the Qur’an and the
hadith “support austerity” in Islamic education (Ahmed 1995, 427). A forlorn life in the desert enabled Muhammad to develop an appropriate learning environment for these orphans. One article on the Suffah notes: “Since they neither had a family to feed for [sic] nor any other worldly worries to look after, such as camel flocks or beautiful date gardens, their sole business was either to sit next to the knee of the Prophet to gather the treasures he was distributing day by day or keep themselves busy with praying or spiritual cleansing” (Atay 2007, 462).

The Suffah had no tranquil curriculum. As this hadith demonstrates, Muhammad taught the Companions of the Bench that religious education requires sacrifice:

When we were in the Suffah, the Messenger of Allah asked: Which of you would like to go out every morning to Buthan or Al-'Aqiq and bring two large humped and fat she-camels without being guilty of sin and severing ties of relationship? They (the people) said: Messenger of Allah, we would all like that. He said: If any one of you goes out in the morning to the mosque and learns two verses of the Book of Allah, the Exalted, it is better for him than two she-camels, and three verses are better for him than three she-camels, and so on . . . (Abi Dawud, no. 1456)

This was not to valorize poverty for poverty’s sake. A Suffah education enabled the destitute to better their condition, and many advanced to influential roles in the spread of the young religion, through their work as teachers, governors, and missionaries (da‘ī). This process is reflected in the Qur’an’s statement, “Put orphans to the test until they reach a marriageable age. If you find them capable of sound judgment, hand over to them their property . . . ” (Q 4.6). Indeed, it is sometimes speculated that the Qur’an’s reference to “the poor who hav[e] dedicated themselves to God’s cause” (Q. 2.273) may be a reference to the people of the Bench.

In providing a raised bench for study, Muhammad made an ironic contrast with the raised couches occupied by royalty (as opposed to Bedouins who sat on the ground). Early Meccan revelations had shown that “the pure of heart will rejoice on raised couches” (83.22–23). The Qur’an depicts one of the pleasures of paradise as “couches raised

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15The Suffah had an influence on the propagation and expansion of Islam: “One of the key elements for da‘wah in Medina was the seminal school established next to the mosque where the Prophet taught hundreds of students the Qur’an and imbued in them the Islamic character. They would be sent to tribes as teachers, religious leaders, and da‘i” (Ozalp 2015, 198). A more cynical (and undocumented) reading of the Suffah is that it was a boot camp for “secret police” (Gabriel 2007).
high, and goblets placed ready, and cushions arrayed, and rich carpets spread out” (Q 88.13–16). This would have been pastorally encouraging for the Companions of the Bench whose scarce food, clothing, and shelter must have seemed far removed from the blessings of the “lofty Garden” (Q 88.10). They could be reassured that by engaging in learning they were being lifted from the dust of religious ignorance and raised to the couch of religious knowledge. This reassurance was strengthened by a story from the Prophet’s own life. Ibn Ishaq reports that, as a lad, Muhammad would sit with his grandfather on a special couch near the Kaba. Although the Abd al-Muttalib’s own sons would not sit on the couch and discouraged the boy from sitting there, a special place was allotted for the orphan. The older man said, “Let my son alone! By Allah, he will become something great” (Ishaq 1964, 21; also see Lings 1983, 27–28). Indeed, the orphan reclining on the couch would later prove his greatness in providing a couch for the couchless.

FINITUDE AS AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

Notwithstanding possible hagiographic pepper, the Prophet’s biography is liveable. Islamic theology asserts that the Prophet’s life expresses practical instruction for all people, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, the possibility of emulating the Prophet is a sine qua non of Islamic thought. More to the point here, Muhammad encouraged such mimesis in the context of teaching religion. To a group of young travelers who stayed with him for some three weeks, he remarked, “Return to your families and teach them (religious knowledge) and order them (to do good deeds) and offer your prayers in the way you saw me offering my prayers . . . ” (Al-Bukhari, no. 6008).

Incidentally, in the famous āyat al-kursī (often called the “throne verse”), divine knowledge is symbolized by a seat of authority (see Hamza, Rizvi, and Mayer 2008, ch. 2).

Although prophets had previously been sent to every human culture (Q 10.47), the Last Prophet (Q 57.28) brought a universal, primordial, undefiled message (Q 7.158; 34.28) that was intended for all humanity. Commenting on the “universal message” of Muhammad, Tariq Ramadan notes: “The Muslim faithful, believers of any faith, and all who study Muhammad’s life regardless of personal religious belief can derive teachings from this, thus reaching toward the essence of the message and the light of faith” (2007, 214). According to Anna Gade, “The ‘biographical process’ in Indonesia has also moved another step beyond Haykal in that religious readers do not just study the model of the Prophet Muhammad through religious biography; rather, they seek actively to internalize and to follow it” (2010, 258).
Can the Sunnah be a mirror for religious educators? To explore this possibility, I start with Tariq Ramadan’s proposition that “we need the educational equivalent of ‘liberation theology’ . . . ” (2010, 143). Although Ramadan does not extensively develop his connotative proposal, using liberation theology as a metaphor facilitates reflection on practical implications that Muhammad’s orphanhood, illiteracy, and Suffah may have for the teaching of religion. In particular, by embracing finitude as an educational resource Muhammad modelled the educational equivalent of liberation theology in two ways: (1) by giving preferential option to the student qua student and (2) by educating liberation.

**A Preferential Option for the Student qua Student**

Finitude is a formidable teacher. Through the experiences of being illiterate, abandoned, endangered, and exposed, Muhammad learned in ways that he would not have learned had his education occurred in a “safe space” where data was on tap and tuition was at hand.\(^{18}\) He came to learn that dependence is not the same as weakness and that self-sufficiency may work against solidarity. The Suffah grew out of Muhammad’s personal experiences as an unlettered orphan: Muhammad’s own vulnerability preceded his education of the vulnerable. His teaching relationship was strengthened by his identification with his students. He prayed that God would “cause me to live poor and cause me to die poor, and gather me among the poor (on the Day of Resurrection)” (Ibn Majah, no. 4126). To adapt a Freirean phrase, Muhammad only achieved authenticity as a revolutionary leader by himself experiencing oppression and being “reborn through and with the oppressed” (Freire 1970, 131–132).

Comradery in finitude remains relevant today: teachers are able to identify with their vulnerable students by exploring their own weaknesses and inadequacies. Imagine a liberated classroom where a teacher—secure in her own maturing finitude—conveys experiences of personal frailty as a way of fostering awareness of the transience of human accomplishment. Not self-piteous exposés of regrets, but self-aware reflection on the phenomenon of being a limited ego in

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\(^{18}\)For a critical examination of the concept of “safe space” in educational settings see Barrett (2010), who argues: “The commonplace, and uncritical, acceptance of safety as a bedrock of quality education is curious, given not only the lack of empirical data to support the effectiveness of the safe classroom in enhancing learning outcomes but also the absence of a precise definition of what exactly safety entails.”
an expansive universe. Such imagining will not come easily. Western higher education is oriented around dominance and ascendancy. From the tiering of schools (from mediocre to elite) and the insistence on grading on a bell curve, to funding preferences for “high quality research outputs” and the pressure to withdraw “non-scholarly” (often avant-garde) work from research data collection, the literate bias of contemporary higher education is palpable. Inadequacy is unnerving for the increasingly quantification-driven education sector—a disconcerting flaw to be photo-shopped out. In an attainment culture, inadequacy is often part of the null curriculum (Eisner 1994), making rare the opportunity to harness what Freire calls the “power that springs from . . . weakness . . . ” (1970, 44). In educational settings where material and professional gains in competitive marketplaces are markers of success, this absence is not surprising. Elitism and the literate bias are less explicable in educational settings were moral and ethical sensibilities (e.g., solidarity with marginalized communities) are named as core values. Egalitarian values, stated so prominently in religious school’s mission statements, have pedagogical implications—one learns to engage with others’ finitude by growing in awareness of one’s own finitude.

The power to learn from weakness works inductively: the more finitude is probed, the more infinitude may be discovered. This is not to deride the importance of superlative ideals (the argot of mission statements); rather, it is to affirm that such excellencies are learned from below. “Through our innate weakness and poverty,” Said Nursi wrote, “we bear witness to the Power, Knowledge, Will, as well as the other Attributes of Perfection of the One Who has mercy on our impotence and comes to our aid” (2010, 9).

No teacher is able to identify with the unique weakness and poverty of every student. However, finitude goes deeper than socioeconomics and culture. Finitude is an existential reality. No matter how much historical circumstance differentiates teachers from students, they share a common finitude. The Prophet and the People of the Bench stood shoulder to shoulder in their contingent lives and imminent deaths. Conditions of vulnerability exist for all persons, and thus are a most relevant foundation for education, especially inclusive and moral education. Otherness and difference (whether religious, physical, intellectual, etc.) can stimulate “a learning process of shared vulnerability” which, according to Bert Roebben, can enable moral

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19Some of this language is indebted to Muhammad Iqbal (2013).
action wherein “people are challenged to grow from a contract relationship, into partnership and friendship—into neighbours who stand guard to each other’s loneliness-in-being-another” (2012, 1176, 1185).

The most ineluctable vulnerability is death. Because “mechanisms of denial” often dim our alertness to our own mortality (Yalom 1980, 109), when teachers acknowledge the transience they share with students this can function pedagogically to raise awareness to the limitations of human knowledge, including religious knowledge. Confronting the brevity of life can teach us a great deal: “Death acts as a catalyst that can move one from one state of being to a higher one: from a state of wondering about how things are to a state of wonderment that they are . . . .” (Yalom 1980, 159–160).

With shared finitude as a certitude, educators can gain new vantage points on their students. This is an implication of Ramadan’s “educational equivalent of ‘liberation theology.’” Liberation theology teaches the preferential option for the poor; an educational equivalent is the preferential option for the student. Liberation theology teaches that God is the Liberator on the side of the enslaved; from an Islamic view, the educational equivalent is that God is the Educator on the side of students—students qua illiterates, student qua intellectual orphans, student qua finite human beings.

Reorienting curricula and pedagogy in the direction of finitude requires making tough choices. The preferential option is just that—an option. What policy changes would result if teachers of religion took the preferential option for the unlettered student? What if educators not only asked, “What knowledge is of most worth?” (Herbert Spencer’s classic question), but “Which students are most worth teaching?”

One potential change in context of formal education is that in the formation and provision of student bodies (from recruitment and admission to student services and post-graduation support), priority would be given to disadvantaged “academic orphans.” For many religiously affiliated schools, growth in enrollments is matter of financial necessity and institutional viability. However, the example of Muhammad suggests that entry into religious learning environments studies could also be premised on humanitarian need. The Suffah has been described as a place “reserved for those newcomers who had nowhere to live and no means of sustenance” (Lings 1983, 167). In my own teaching context, such provisions are sometimes not prioritized. Newcomers have found engagement in student life alienating, tilted
to those already in the know. A preferential option for the student, however, is tilted to the plebe, the stray, the unknown.

A preference for the unlettered student is a question of resources (themselves always finite). Muhammad had to face this question himself when his daughter requested help (as recounted earlier). She was overextended, suffering from blistered hands and a strained chest (see Lings 1983, 168). There was nothing intrinsically wrong with her request. However, given the limitation of reserves at hand, Muhammad had to discern how to use his assets. A preferential option for his students required frugality. He averred: “The food of one person is sufficient for two, the food of two is sufficient for four, and the food for four is sufficient for eight” (Ibn Majah, no. 3254; also Lings 1983, 167). Finitude can teach solidarity and companionship, catalysts of human liberation.

The Education of Liberation

That it is now commonplace to understand education as a political activity leading to greater human freedom is an encouraging development. Education’s role in fostering democratic sensibilities and empowering marginalized people has become, not just the view of visionary theorists like Dewey and Freire, but a basic presupposition of the sort of education we dub “liberal.” However, from the Sunnah of Muhammad we learn that a liberating education must go further—it must teach the limits of freedom. According to Ramadan, the educational equivalent of liberation theology involves “an education of liberation . . . ” (2007, 143).

The education of liberation entails a critique of the “cult of consumerism,” which Ramadan sees as corrupting quality education. In this cult, students are clients, teachers are providers, knowledge is a commodity, information is an end in itself, and performance is objectively measurable. Freire called this heresy the “strictly materialistic concept of existence” where “everything”—indeed, “the world”—is objectified (1970, 58). Liberation from this malfeasance requires a recollection that truth is not an object but a gift. Quests for meaning, whether they are religious or philosophical, will fail if their accompanying pedagogies see knowledge as a quantifiable, possessable product. As the Qur’an warns: “Do not sell My revelations for a paltry price . . . ” (2.41).

Being finite—existentially and inescapably unlettered—we are enslaved if we believe our education has been an acquirable product.
Finite human beings lose their liberty when they overestimate the extent of their liberation. Liberal education needs an education of liberation.

In practical terms, the education of liberation may suggest rethinking the centrality of so-called “adult education” methodologies. In my own experience, religious educators place great stock in andragogy, trusting the knowledge and experience students have already attained. This approach has its rightful place, but the andragogic’s “move from dependency toward increasing self-directiveness” (Knowles 1977, 207) may also overshadow the resources of finitude. The example of the Suffah suggests that ways students are bereft may be more religiously significant than ways students are competent. A pedagogy that acknowledges human limitation will be a pedagogy that fosters “the feeling of absolute dependence” (à la Schleiermacher 1928).

Such lessons are personal: as a teacher of religion, I need an education of liberation. Enmeshed in an academic career—essays on God assigned, lectures on revelation given, students of divinity advised, thoughts on religion published—I sometimes fend off finitude. The more education liberates me, the more I disregard my dependency. This may be a spiritual failing, but it is also a flaw of our educational culture. The ethos of teaching religion can sometimes unconsciously transform a seeker of wisdom into a divinity capitalist. Fortunately, the Qur’an provides a reality check for would-be theological salespersons.

The education of liberation is rooted in contrasts between knowledge and acquisitiveness revealed to Muhammad at the dawn of his prophetic career. In the Alms surah (Q 107), absence of generosity toward orphans is shown to be an expression of being deceived. The Worldly Gain surah (Q 102), an injunction against greed and competition, warns that self-indulgence leads to ignorance. The Slanderer (Q 104) presents materialism as a denial mechanism. Informed by Bedouin values of hospitality and generosity, these surahs teach that covetousness blinds. Spiritual knowledge is not bits of data whose value can be tallied by a calculator, but an existential reality judged by “the Blazing Flame” (Q 102.6). The person mesmerized by

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20To be clear, my hesitance about andragogy’s self-directedness is not an attempt to revive a “jug to mug” model of unidirectional instruction. My point is that human finitude and dependence are significant experiences from which we can religiously learn.
intellectual gains is tomfool. To forget God is to slander God. Cupidity is a form of stupidity.²¹

Condemning greed is not unique. But seeing greed as an expression of ignorance and delusion reflects a characteristically Islamic idea: at their existential core, humans are symbolically unlettered and the spiritual life begins with listening and learning. A failure in virtues is also a failure of intellect. Truth should open both fists and minds. The educationally liberated know that knowledge does not cause greed, unawareness does.

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John Dewey famously ended his “Pedagogic Creed” by declaring, “I believe the teacher always is the prophet of the true God” (1897, 95). While Dewey’s inimitable teacher is the prophet, Islam’s inimitable Prophet is the Teacher. Although Muhammad taught the people of his own era, his Sunnah continues to educate today. From an unlettered orphan we learn to more deeply appreciate human finitude. Even facing finitude’s climax, Allah’s pedagogy continues to liberate: “God restores the dead to life and shows you His signs, that you may grow in understanding” (Q 2.73).

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²¹Sells, whose comments on these early revelations are insightful, says, “The early Meccan Suras . . . repeat the idea that human beings attempt to ignore their mortality through incessant acquisition” (2007, 115).
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