



Investigating the Educational Needs of Iranian Students in Islamic Theology: A Step Towards Effective Religious Education

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Abstract

Islamic Thought 1 and 2 are among courses offered in Iran by the Islamic education departments of universities for undergraduate students and their topics cover the field of Islamic theology. The aim of the present study is to revise and prioritize the most important educational topics of these courses for undergraduate students of the University of Isfahan in general and also by gender and field of study, based on needs and interests of students. This is a survey research that was carried out on 376 students of the University of Isfahan. To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient was used and this coefficient for the research 56-item questionnaire was 0.96. The research findings showed that students feel more need for the topics of God's wisdom, God's justice and God's purpose for the creation of the world and humans. There are different priorities for girls and boys as well as those of students of different disciplines in the topics of these courses. There is also a significant relationship between students' gender and field of study in some topics. The results showed that in order to make these courses attractive and effective, it is necessary to pay attention to the gender and field of study of the students when formulating the lesson plan and preparing the educational content. Practical suggestions are also provided.

Keywords: *Religious Education; Educational Needs; Islamic Theology; Iran*

Introduction

Universities and higher education centers of any society represent the highest level of thinking and science of that society and manifest the principles of worldview and belief and value system of that society and are effective in directing various intellectual, religious, cultural and political movements of the society by educating thinkers, scientists and future managers. The Iranian society, which regarded the Islamic worldview as a base for its various aspects of its life after adopting a divine approach with the Islamic Revolution, wants to have higher education in accordance with Islamic principles and values in

order to promote and generalize those principles and criteria in the Islamic society by training thinkers and managers accordingly (Document of Islamicization of Universities 2013:7). In this regard, offering Islamic education courses after the Cultural Revolution was one of the basic measures of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, which aimed to acquaint the younger generation with religious ideas, ethics, Islamic history and contemporary history in the undergraduate curriculum. All undergraduate students, except students of theology and Islamic studies and its majors, are required to take Islamic education courses.

Islamic education courses in Iran are now offered according to the method approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in 2004 (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:3-4). In this method, Islamic education courses are classified and presented in five groups, which include: the theoretical foundations of Islam, Islamic ethics, Islamic revolution, Islamic history and civilization and familiarity with Islamic sources. The content of some of these courses relates to the theology field. Theology in academia is a systematic explanation of God as well as God's relations with the world. Theology usually focuses on beliefs (Markham 2006:193)¹. In the group of theoretical foundations of Islam, the content and topic of Islamic Thought 1 (origin and resurrection) and Islamic Thought 2 (prophecy and Imamate) are about Islamic theology (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:24).

The purpose of the Islamic Thought 1 is stated as follows: "Explaining the need for Muslim students to address religion and religious categories, deepen and expand information and strengthen students' theism and faith in the field of theology and resurrection" (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:27). The topics of the Islamic Thought 1 are specified and approved as follows: Man and faith (human spiritual needs; the role of religious faith in human life; intellect and faith); the concept of God (different interpretations of God; God in the Abrahamic religions); God-seeking (intuition; intellect); monotheism and polytheism (intrinsic monotheism; attributive monotheism; verbal monotheism; worship monotheism); attributes of God (divine justice; wisdom; power; the issue of evil; predestination and free will); resurrection and immortality (death; purgatory; resurrection) (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:27-28).

The purpose of the Islamic Thought 2 is also stated as follows: "Expanding students' awareness regarding religion, prophecy, Islam, Imamate and Wilayah" (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:30). The topics of this course include: Background of religion and prophecy (definition of religion and its background in history, Judaism and Christianity; familiarity with Torah and Gospel and compare them with Qur'an); purposes, dimensions and realm of religion (necessity of revelation and prophethood; infallibility of prophets; the role of religion in worldly life; the common essence of religion and the secret of the multiplicity of religions and laws; the relationship between science and religion); knowledge of Islam (Qur'an and Sunnah; intellect; finality of prophethood; method of understanding religion); Imamate and Wilayah (meaning of Imamate and Wilayah; dimensions and affairs of Imamate; infallibility of Imams; reasons for appointing Imams; Mahdism); authority and Wilayah during the absence of the divinely inspired imam (Wilayah of the Islamic jurists and political leadership during the absence of the divinely inspired imam) (New Titles and Topics of Islamic Education Courses 2005:30-32).

Given the importance of the position of theology and beliefs in increasing practical adherence to Islamic rules and ethics, and given that Islamic Thought 1 and 2 discusses Islamic beliefs, these courses have an important place among Islamic education courses. Beliefs form the basis of every value system and every worldview and influence the formation of human behavior. In other words, in order to form and strengthen the value and behavioral system of Islam, its ideological foundations, which are the roots of

¹. "At least within the academic world, theology is largely confined to an attempt to arrive at a systematic" account of God and of God's relations with the world. Theology tends to focus on "what is believed"."

this great and blessed tree, must be strengthened in the hearts, in order to achieve the desired results and bring prosperity in this world and the hereafter (Misbah Yazdi 2010:5).

In order for curricula to meet the changing needs of society, they need to be revised over time (Fathi Vajargah et al. 2013:5). One of the necessary prerequisites for revising as well as the ensuring effectiveness and attractiveness of these courses is educational needs assessment, prioritizing students' concerns and mental questions, identifying the most important topics of interest to them and emphasizing them. In general, educational content should be tailored to the needs. If students feel the need for educational content, they will be motivated to learn (Maleki 2004:109). Educational needs assessment (ENA)-based training increases productivity, customer satisfaction and cost savings (Khodayari et al. 2014:14). Therefore, considering the importance of religious education, the comprehensiveness of Islamic education courses for all students and the need to ensure the attractiveness and effectiveness of these courses, it is necessary to study and prioritize students' concerns and needs in the topics of Islamic theology.

The aim of the present study is to review and prioritize the most important educational topics of Islamic theology for undergraduate students of the University of Isfahan in general and also by gender and field of study. The present study also seeks to answer the question of whether the gender and field of study is related to the required topic and their interest in Islamic theology or not.

Research Background

Numerous studies have been conducted on religious education and its various dimensions. For example, Blinkova & Vermeer critically analyze Russia's most common religious text in religious education (Blinkova & Vermeer 2017). In an article, Rodríguez García analyzes the importance of Islamic religious education in Spain as a tool in preventing and combating extreme radicalization (Rodríguez García 2018). An article investigates the legislation and legislative regulations governing China's diversified and dynamic religious education, which includes professional religious studies, religious education embedded in ethnic education, missionary religious education, religious education included in general education, and education on religious policies and regulations (Nai et al. 2019). In one study, a critical analysis of the current practice of Russian religious education is presented and compared with religious education in Sweden, Denmark and Britain (Blinkova & Vermeer 2016). In his article, Sai investigates the topic of teaching Qur'an in two primary Muslim schools in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland based on observations and semi-structured interviews with three teachers (Sai 2018). Mulya & Aditomo state in their article that discourse analysis can be a viable alternative methodology for generating new knowledge in religious tolerance education (Mulya & Aditomo 2018). An article investigates the reasons behind the failure of Islamic theology and imam-training programs at Dutch universities and concludes that future attempts for Islamic theology programs at Dutch universities will need to establish better connections with the grassroots of the Dutch Muslim communities (Sözeri et al. 2019). In his article, Broberg analyzes the use of teaching materials in religious education in Sweden and believes that out of the relevant background variables, it was primarily school form, age, gender and religiosity that seemed to influence teachers' choices of material. He concludes that familiarity with a certain form of material through personal experiences is a likely explanation for many of the correlations found (Broberg 2020). Research presents a new theoretical and pedagogical framework based on the theories of critical religious education (CRE), variation theory (VT) and the learning study model with the purpose of improving teaching and learning in Islamic religious education (IRE) and concludes that the use of CRE, VT and learning study in teaching Islam contributes to students' learning outcomes by means of helping teacher consider students' diverse perspectives on religious phenomena when planning and implementing the curricular content, increasing students' awareness of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of their faith as well as allowing them to make informed judgments about religious phenomena (Ucan & Wright 2019).

Ebadi conducted a content pathology analysis on the aims and topics of the courses on the theoretical foundations of Islam and emphasized the need to revise the curriculum of these courses based on the characteristics of Islam from the perspective of Professor Motahhari. In his article, based on the views of Professor Motahhari, curriculum and psychology, he seeks to state that the goals of the approved content, has a knowledge-building approach and the attitudes and skills goals have been neglected (Ebadi 2017:173). In his research, Mobasheri states that student teachers at Farhangian University are not satisfied with the topics in the course of thematic interpretation of Qur'an. He shows a difference between male and female students in terms of their educational needs in thematic interpretation of Qur'an, as well as students in the fields of humanities and basic sciences (Mobasheri 2017:335,350). In one article, Nazarpour & Abedi examined the educational needs of students in the course of Islamic Thought One (Nazarpour & Abedi 2019). In another article, they conducted the same research on the course of Islamic Thought Two separately (Nazarpour & Abedi 2021). Fazlallahi investigated students' views on the Islamic ethics curriculum and concludes that there is no complete overlap between goals and needs in the Islamic ethics course. He reveals that students could not achieving the optimal goals of Islamic ethics. To increase the effectiveness of the Islamic ethics curriculum, he emphasizes planning based on realistic needs assessment (Fazlallahi 2016:131). Meshkat performed a content pathology analysis on Islamic textbooks and identified subsequent shortcomings and challenges. He suggests an attitude-building approach and introduces the requirements of this approach: careful selection of topics, presentation of topics in a continuous manner, finding ways to prevent the audience from falling into the associative atmosphere, and discovering a literary and writing style appropriate to the attitude-motivational approach (Meshkat 2016:31,46,47). Firouzi also performed the content pathology analysis of Islamic education courses and the position of professors. He emphasized the need to revise titles and topics of the courses. He emphasizes paying attention to the scientific and doctrinal needs of students as well as the employment of knowledgeable and skilled professors in the field of science and method (Firouzi 2015:151). In his doctoral dissertation titled "Explaining and identifying the problems and needs of students in the curriculum of Islamic education courses in Tehran universities, in order to provide a suitable model", Khoshi provided solutions for the curriculum. He offered solutions under the elements of the curriculum, including: objectives, content, teaching methods and the teacher role (Khoshi 2012:309). In their research, Ashrafi & Akhondi mentioned the non-practicality and non-response to the time-related needs as the inappropriate content of Islamic education courses (Ashrafi & Akhondi 2012:422).

A review of the research background shows that previous studies in the field of religious education and Islamic education courses, have emphasized the importance of Islamic education courses and the need to update the topics and teaching methods. But, there has been no study on the educational needs of students and their prioritization by gender and field of study in all topics related to Islamic theology (Although this issue has been studied separately in Islamic Thought one and two in two separate articles, no such research has been conducted on all topics related to Islamic theology). Therefore, considering the importance of Islamic theology and the questions that arise in the minds of students about the content of Islamic theology, the topics of the courses related to Islamic theology should be revised and undergo needs assessment so that planners and professors of religious education and Islamic education can better plan and teach this course considering the recent needs assessment.

Research Method

Considering the nature of the research, the method of data collection is survey and its instrument is a questionnaire. The study population includes all undergraduate students of the University of Isfahan. The sample size was estimated to be 400 people based on Cochran sampling method and a total of 376 questionnaires were collected by multi-stage cluster sampling method.

Since one of the objectives of the study was to investigate the priorities of each gender and field of study and to assess the relationship between the topics with gender and their college, the questionnaires

were distributed by gender and field of study. To determine the number of questionnaires of each gender and field of study, first the ratio of the number of students in each gender and students of each faculty to the total number of undergraduate students was calculated, and 400 questionnaires were distributed among them accordingly. Students of the faculties of literature and humanities, educational sciences and psychology, foreign languages, physical education and sports sciences, administrative sciences and economics and geographical sciences were included in the humanities group. Students of the faculties of sciences, chemistry, computer, civil engineering and technical and engineering were included in the group of sciences and engineering.

The items and measures of the questionnaire were selected by the researcher based on the topics of theology courses. Necessary corrections were made based on the opinions of professors and instructors.

Cronbach's Alpha correlation coefficient was used to ensure the reliability of the research instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the 56-item questionnaire is 0.96, which is excellent.

The collected data was analyzed and coded using SPSS ver. 16. The research results were also presented in the form of descriptive and inferential statistics. To investigate the significant relationship between topic with gender and field of study in the inferential section, phi coefficient and Cramér's V tests were used.

Results

The questionnaire was completed by 376 students of the University of Isfahan. A total of 31.4% of the respondents were boys and 68.6% were girls. The age range of the respondents was between 18 and 50 years. The majority of students were in 20 (27.4%), 19 (25.5%) and 21 years age groups (22.1%), respectively, and the minority of them were 45, 47 and 50 age groups (0.3%).

With regard to semester, most of the respondents were in fourth semester (39.1%), second semester (33.2%) and sixth semester (17%). The lowest number of students were in twelve (0.3%), seven (1.3%) and five (1.6%). A total of 60.3% and 39.7% of the respondents were studying in humanities-related fields of study and sciences and engineering-related fields of study, respectively.

According to the results, the first seven priorities of the students include: God's wisdom, God's justice, God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind, death, resurrection, proving the existence and oneness of God, respectively. The first seven priorities of female students include: God's wisdom, God's justice, God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind, the age of advent of Mahdi (pbuh), resurrection, Mahdism and the Imam Mahdi (pbuh) and proving the God existence. The first seven priorities of male students include: death, God's justice, God's wisdom, God's oneness, God's absolute power, proving the God existence, and God's purpose in creating the world and mankind.

The first seven priorities of students at Humanities faculties include: God's wisdom, God's justice, God's oneness, God's purpose in creating the world and mankind, proving the God existence, death, and the relationship between faith and intellect. The first seven priorities of students in the field of sciences and engineering include: God's justice, God's wisdom, resurrection, God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind, death, the relationship between faith and intellect, divine fate and destiny, and human free will.

The first seven priorities of students in the subjects of Islamic theology, by gender and field of study and along with the average score (out of 5) of each subject are listed in the following tables.

Table 1: The first seven priorities of students in the topics of Islamic theology, by the gender.

Total students	Female students	Male students
God's wisdom (4.12)	God's wisdom (4.18)	Death (4.08)
God's justice (4.10)	God's justice (4.14)	God's justice (4.02)
God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind (3.98)	God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind (4.05)	God's wisdom (3.99)
Death (3.96)	the age of advent of Mahdi (pbuh)(4.01)	God's oneness (3.88)
Resurrection (3.93)	Resurrection (3.99)	Absolute Power of God (3.87)
Proving the God's existence (3.93)	Mahdism and the Imam Mahdi (pbuh) (3.98)	Proving the God's existence (3.86)
God's oneness (3.93)	Proving the God's existence (3.96)	God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind (3.82)

Table 2: The first seven priorities of students in the topics of Islamic theology, by the field of study.

Humanities faculties	Sciences and engineering faculties
God's wisdom (4.29)	God's justice (3.99)
God's justice (4.12)	God's wisdom (3.98)
God's Oneness (4.08)	Resurrection (3.97)
God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind (4.05)	God's purpose for the creation of the world and mankind (3.94)
Proving the God's existence (4.04)	Death (3.89)
Death (4.03)	The relationship between faith and intellect (3.83)
The relationship between faith and intellect (4.00)	divine fate and destiny, and human free will (3.83)

Investigating inter-variable relationships

In this section, the inter-variable relationships are investigated. Phi coefficient and Cramér's V tests were used, to investigate the relationship and significance of each topic with gender and field of study. A Significance level < 0.05 in this test will indicate its significance. There was no significant relationship between some topics with students' gender and field of study; but results showed a significant relationship between some topics. The following table shows significant relationship between topics with gender, along with their level of significance:

Table 3: significant relationship between topics of Islamic theology with gender.

Topic	Significance level with Gender	The gender with more interest in the topic
Ways to strengthen faith	0.008	Female
God's purpose in creating the world and mankind	0.038	Female
The problem of evil	0.026	Female
Non-response to prayers and supplications	0.015	Female
Quality of reckoning on the day of the resurrection	0.032	Female
The position and philosophy of intercession	0.020	Female
Heaven and its blessings	0.014	Female

Hell and its torments	0.000	Female
The eternal torment of Hell and the justice and God's mercy	0.005	Female
Human growth and perfection in purgatory and resurrection	0.003	Female
The holy books of other religions	0.039	Female
The relationship between science and religion	0.003	Female
Proving the legitimacy and divinity of Islam	0.016	Female
Miracle of Qur'an	0.005	Female
Formation and teachings of Islamic sects and denominations	0.005	Female
The necessity of Imamate	0.022	Female
The infallibility of Imam	0.000	Female
Imam's knowledge and his martyrdom	0.006	Female
Proving Imamate of Imams	0.001	Female
Mahdism and Imam Mahdi (pbuh)	0.000	Female
Signs before the advent of Mahdi(pbuh)	0.000	Female
The age of advent of Mahdi(pbuh)	0.000	Female

According to the results of this table, female students were more interested in these topics and expressed greater need than male students.

Topics that have a significant relationship with the field of study, along with their level of significance are listed in the table below:

Table 4: significant relationship between topics of Islamic theology with the field of study

Topic	Significance level with the field of study	Field with more interest in the subject
Ways to strengthen faith	0.021	Humanities
Different ideas about the concept of God	0.028	Humanities
The possibility of knowing God	0.007	Humanities
The Absolute Power of God	0.031	Humanities
Non-response to prayers and supplications	0.043	Humanities
Death	0.047	Humanities
Return (Raj'ah)	0.039	Humanities
Resurrection	0.010	Humanities
The quality of being gathered in the Hereafter	0.037	Humanities
Heaven and its blessings	0.043	Humanities
Human growth and perfection in purgatory and resurrection	0.017	Humanities
The holy books of other religions	0.024	Humanities
The necessity of religion and religiosity	0.047	Humanities

Proving the legitimacy and divinity of Islam	0.002	Humanities
Finality of prophethood	0.007	Humanities
The method of inferring Islamic teachings	0.033	Humanities
Formation and teachings of Islamic sects and denominations	0.001	Humanities
Proving Imamate of Imams	0.018	Humanities
Mahdism and Imam Mahdi (pbuh)	0.006	Humanities
Signs before the advent of Mahdi(pbuh)	0.007	Humanities

According to the results of the above table, students at humanities faculties were more interested in these topics and felt more dire need than other students.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that the first three interests of students include divine wisdom, divine justice and the philosophy of creation. The discussion of justice and the philosophy of creation are also a subset of divine wisdom. Accordingly, it seems that the main concern of students is divine actions and their why and philosophy. To explain this issue, it can be stated that students pay attention to their environment and its events and think about them. They also believe in God and consider all events in the universe as divine actions. The curiosity and the atmosphere of rationality that governs the university, which is juxtaposed these cases, raises questions about the wisdom and philosophy of divine actions.

With regard to justice, students seem to define justice as equality, and when they see differences and inequalities (especially when students from different families and with different circumstances come together on campus), the question of divine justice is more pronounced. Students feel more dire need to the subject of death after the philosophy of divine actions.

The priority and sense of need of girls is the same as the general course of students. However, from the perspective of boys, death is regarded as the first priority, followed by justice and divine wisdom.

Investigation of priorities of each field of study shows that almost the same general course prevails; But, it is significant in some cases; the fact that proving the God existence is one of the priorities in fields of study at faculties of humanities!

According to inferential statistics, some topics are significantly related to the students' gender. Girls felt more in need of and interest in all topics that were significantly related with gender. Girls are more concerned about spirituality and connection with God than boys. In this regard, they want to know why not all their prayers and wishes are fulfilled. Girls are also more interested in the philosophy of creation. The girls also felt more in need of the topic of evil. This may be due to their sensitive spirit in the face of adversity. Girls are also more interested in the afterlife stages, including the quality of reckoning and rewards and punishments, and the possibility of growth and perfection in the afterlife; Whereas, as stated, the first priority of boys is death itself.

Some of the topics that students need are related to their field of study. This relationship suggests that the field of study and the educational content of the field are effective in the type of students' belief

questions. Also, the knowledge, character and personality of the professors in these colleges can be effective in the students' interest and their need for these topics. In these subjects, the students in humanities faculties have a greater sense of need and interest than other students.

This research also had some limitations, including the fact that only the University of Isfahan has been studied and the results can not necessarily be generalized to all universities. Also, some students may not have answered some of the questions correctly when completing the questionnaires due to conservatism. However, while completing the questionnaire, it was emphasized that their opinions will be kept confidential.

Recommendations

1. Theology professors should pay attention to the priorities of students, male and female students and students of different fields of study when preparing lesson plans and budgeting topics and lesson topics.
2. According to the differences in the educational needs of students, theology classes should be divided in terms of gender and field of study.
3. The content of the theology course should be prepared based on the type of audience (gender and field of study) and their needs.
4. When appointing and introducing theology professors to different faculties, their knowledge, mastery and interest should also be considered.
5. When holding meetings, workshops and free-thinking chairs, the general priorities and needs of students and the priorities of girls and boys should be considered.

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