**Understanding the controversy about democracy in Muslim-majority societies: an educational perspective**

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This study examines the debate over the meaning and place of democracy in Arab and Muslim-majority societies as interpreted by Islamist-Salafi versus liberal/progressive perspectives. We explore the epistemological and political tenets of both ideologies and emphasise the possible educational implications of liberal/progressive Islam in the transitional societies of the Middle East. We propose the teaching of Islam through phenomenological and cultural studies pedagogies so that students exercise their capacities of inclusive and equal citizenship, religious reasoning, reflective identities and the pursuit of the common good.

**Keywords:** Islamist-Salafi ideology, progressive Islam, Islamic education, democracy.

# Introduction

The last decades have seen an intensified debate about the place of religion in politics and the relationship between Islam and democracy in Arab-Muslim societies (An-Naim 2009; Bahlul 2004; Diamond Plattner, and Brumberg 2003; Malinova 2012; Parray 2011; Saeed 2006; Tibi 2012). This has become more evident in the light of the ongoing uprisings in Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East and the rise of political Islam in these nations (Tibi 2012). Conservative (Salafi) versus liberal attitudes about democracy in the Muslim world can be envisaged as a continuum. The Salafi attitude[[1]](#footnote-1) is informed by ideologies such as Wahabbism[[2]](#footnote-2), Salafism[[3]](#footnote-3), fundamentalism[[4]](#footnote-4) and Islamism (Kurzman 1998) and Salafis 'advocate the establishment of an Islamic state, an authoritarian and ideological entity whose central concepts are *al-hakimiyya* (the sovereignty of God) and the *sharia* (the law of God) (Khan 2006, 160). Contrary to this, progressive and liberal Muslims argue about the possibility of adapting Islam to the ideals and values of democratic governance. In the next two sections, we will clarify the controversy about democracy as it is viewed or theorised from both Islamist-Salafi and liberal Islam, and in the last section we propose an educational reform for Muslim societies in the Middle East so they meet the demands of democracy and equal citizenship.

**The Islamist-Salafi ideology and democracy**

A review of the literature on Islamic studies reveals that it is Islamist and Salafi groups who raise the major critique against democracy (Al-Faqih 2001). However, we should not think of Salafism as a monolithic construct but rather as a movement which encompasses different interpretations of the meaning of democracy[[5]](#footnote-5), the relationship between religion and the state, the concepts of 'representation' and '*shura'*[[6]](#footnote-6) the application of *sharia* and power-sharing (Ayoob 2008; Adam 1983; Ali 1996; Belkeziz 2009; Khan 2006; Ramadan 2017; Steinberg & Hartung 2010; Wittes 2008).

Historically, Islamist-Salafi movements in the Middle East have developed an ambivalent attitude with ups and downs in their relationship with the rulers of Arab countries. These movements have adopted a pragmatic method of political participation, which enables them to survive as well as minimize oppression, proscription and prosecution against them by secular governments (Al-Faqih 2001; Khan 2006; Tibi 2012). The social uprisings in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya evoked a heated debate about the meaning of democracy in Arab nations and the desired relationship between Islam, the state and society. Islamists and non-Islamist citizens and leaders are now being pushed to share their insights about these topics and perhaps even revise their doctrinal and theological visions in order to meet the popular demand for democracy and social justice.

It is worth noting that scholars of religion and theologians who condemn the implication of democracy in Muslim-majority societies use an Islamic framework in their discussion of the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. For instance, radical and fundamental Islamists reject democracy, arguing that it is a Western construct which should not be enforced on Muslim-majority societies (Tibi 2004, 2012). An Islamic state, for Salafi Muslims, is the alternative to liberal democracy, democracy representing agendas that are alien to Muslim societies such as Westernisation, secularisation, and de-Islamisation (Tibi 2004). Opponents of democracy in Muslim societies believe that democracy reflects unacceptable values such as individualism, secularism, materialism, liberalism and cultural imperialism (Ali 1996). These values, they argue, are incompatible with Islamic ideals and lifestyle[[7]](#footnote-7) (El-Affendi 2006). Imposing democracy on Muslim societies is perceived as a method for extending Western cultural hegemony and its neo-colonial and imperial agendas in the Middle East[[8]](#footnote-8) (Hashemi 2004; Saada 2014a).

Adherents of Salafism as it is represented by the writings of Abu`l Ala al-Maududi (1903-1979), Sayyid Qutb (1904-1966) and Taqi al-Din Al-Nabhani (1909-1977) believe that 'Islam represents a comprehensive system of values which are embedded in the political, social and economic lives of Muslim societies' (Dilshod 2010, 30). They advocate the establishment of an Islamic socio-political order with Islamic values and institutions. Saeed (2006, 144) clarifies that 'for a state to be legitimate, it has to derive its authority or legitimacy from God, that is, from revealed religion, rather than from the people'. Salafists then view the state as a means for achieving a higher value—the worshiping of God and the implementation of Islamic law.

Furthermore, members of Salafi movements agree that religious texts (the Quran and the *Sunna* and the contribution of the great religion scholars) have ultimate authority in deciding issues regarding the operation of the state and the Islamic *ummah*[[9]](#footnote-9) (Al-Faqih 2001). In fact, they prioritise scripture over reality and the religious text over human agency and life conditions (Saada and Gross 2016). By the same token, some Salafi scholars support a return to the *khilafah*[[10]](#footnote-10) (caliphate) system, arguing that the Islamic world, unlike Europe, did not experience the tyranny of the priesthood or the confinement of religion to the private sphere (Zallum 1995); that the *khilafah* is obligatory[[11]](#footnote-11) according to the *sharia* (Rida 1922); and that it is 'for safeguarding the religion and the politics of the world' (al-Mawardi n.d, 5). In justifying their claims, they cite the following verse of the Quran (4:59):

Believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those invested with authority among you; and then if you were to dispute among yourselves about anything refer it to Allah and the Messenger if you indeed believe in Allah and the Last Day; that is better and more commendable in the end.

Accordingly, 'the caliph or the imam, or the commander of the faithful (*amir al muminin*) is the deputy representative (*naib*) of the prophet who was the proxy of Allah' (Belkeziz 2009, 80). The modern idea of an Islamic state was originally invented by Hasan al-Banna in the 1930s, who claimed that Islam is both a *din* (religion) and a *dawlah* (state). Later, this slogan was translated into the more conservative thesis of al-Hakimiyah[[12]](#footnote-12) by the Pakistani preacher Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi and the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb. These scholars contend that an Islamic state fulfils God’s will as it appears in the Quranic (12:67):'verily rule (*al-hukm*) is but unto Allah' and 'whoever does not rule according to what Allah has send down, then these are unbelievers' (5:45). In other words, authority over human beings is a divine right which cannot be achieved unless Muslims establish an Islamic state which implements divine law (Islamic *sharia*). The *sharia* is comprehended as complete social, ethical and epistemological system which encompasses the '*usul* (sources) of belief, and the *usul* of rule and the *usul* of morals, and *usul* of ethical behaviour and the *usul* of knowledge (*marifah*) as well' (Qutb 1983, 135-136).

Proponents of Islamist-Salafi ideology believe that only qualified[[13]](#footnote-13) religion scholars have the right to interpret the divine law and that the Islamic leader occupies both executive and legislative positions. They reject freedom of thought, arguing that this may lead to infidelity or religiously-forbidden acts. Liberties are confined to the dictates of the *sharia*. This encompasses, for instance, the rejection of the idea of equal citizenship for all people, and claims that Muslim citizens should be privileged in terms of rights compared to non-Muslims; that women are not qualified for executive, legislative or judicial positions[[14]](#footnote-14) and that the vote of well- educated persons (in both religious and non-religious subjects) should carry more weight in the sphere of political participation (Al-Faqih 2001).

Yet, contemporary Islamist-Salafi leaders are more moderate[[15]](#footnote-15) in terms of accepting the principles of democracy; they seek to indigenise democracy and make it adaptable to Muslim societies. Moderate Islamist theorists such as Al-Ghanushi (1992), Al –Qaradawi (1997) and Amarah (1988) support democracy’s system of representation. Moreover, they advocate conducting *ijtihad*[[16]](#footnote-16) in order to adapt Islamic law to modern life and the common good, suspending Islamic law in accordance to peoples’ circumstances and their needs and allowing for the existence of non-Islamic parties in the Islamic state (Bahlul 2007).

*Shura* is another popular and debatable term used by moderate Islamists (Khan, 2001). *Shura* is defined as а 'decision making process—consultative decision making—that is considered either obligatory or desirable by Islamic scholars' (El-Affendi 2006). Contemporary Islamist theorists such as Al-Ghanushi (1992) and Al –Qaradawi (1997) view the *shura* as a fundamental principle in Islam; they maintain that Muslims must conduct *ijtihad* on how to implement the *shura* and perhaps other Islamic teachings such as *al-bayah* (the pledge of allegiance), *al-ijma* (consensus), *al-amr bi-lmaruf wa al-nahiy an al-munkar* (commanding what is just and forbidding what is unjust within a given democratic system).

What is common for both moderate-Salafists and radical-Salafists is, in short, the necessity of establishing an Islamic state; that *sharia* is the source of the state’s laws; that Islamic teachings are applicable for all times and places and that women and non-Muslims should not lead the Islamic state (Bahlul 2007). In other words, they view piety as a prior condition for just leadership and believe that virtue is the foundation for social and political institutions, that 'political power is indispensable to the establishment of an Islamic society' (Roy 1996, 61) and that Islamic law should be the aspiring supreme value in Muslim societies. In short, they believe in religionising politics to achieve an Islamic and righteous society and in the Islamisation of democracy and its political philosophy. In contrast to this perspective, progressive and liberal Muslims consider equal and representative citizenship as a guarantee for good governance. We explain this point further in the following section.

**The liberal/progressive critique of the Islamist- Salafi ideology**

Liberal and progressive Muslims oppose Islamic Salafism but, unlike secularists, believe that Islam has a significant role to play in the contemporary world[[17]](#footnote-18) (Duderija 2017; Kurzman 1998). They are referred to as reformists who perceive Islam in terms of openness and dynamism. For instance, 'they recognise that the decline of Islamic civilization preceded colonialism. They are aware that Western powers did not cause the decay of free and creative thinking in the Muslim world, which came about because of internal dynamics… and they condemn the growing intolerance, sectarianism, and authoritarianism in Muslim societies' (Khan 2003, 418). The backwardness of the Islamist-Salafi ideology, they argue, 'prevented the Islamic world from enjoying the fruits of modernity: economic progress, democracy, legal rights, and so on' (Kurzman 1998, 6). Liberal Muslims allow the use of modern epistemologies to examine the validity of orthodox views and their internal logic.

Bassam Tibi (2012), a leading scholar representing the voices of liberal Muslims, argues that nothing in the Quran indicates that Muslims must unify state and religion or establish a *sharia* state. The word *sharia* is mentioned only once in the Quran and refers to morality, not law. He explains 'neither *dawla* (state) nor *nizam*[[18]](#footnote-19)—both of which are pivotal in the *sharia* reasoning of the Islamists—occurs in the Quran' (122). What is important, he argues, is not to accept democracy as instrumental procedure[[19]](#footnote-20) but to develop a political culture which ensures the basic rights of expression, power sharing, equality and religious and political tolerance.

By the same token, Ali Abd al-Raziq (1978) and Parray (2010) argue that there is no textual evidence from the Quran or the Sunna supporting the institution of *khilafah* and this term in the Quran (2:30 and 6:165) 'refers to the broad responsibilities of humans to be the stewards of God’s creation' (Leaman and Ali 2008, 25). Al-Jabri (1996) confirms that the *sharia* in itself does not limit the ruling period of caliphs or define their professional duties. Furthermore, a critical reading of Islamic history illuminates how the institution of *khilafah* was manipulated to legitimise and rationalise the governance of unjust Sultans (Belkeziz 2009; Khlifah 2014). Also, the killing of three of the 'rightly guided caliphs'[[20]](#footnote-21) and the use of Islam to justify and maintain the autocratic regimes of the Umayyad and Abbasside caliphs are all examples of the failure of *khilafah* (Khlifah 2014). Abd al-Raziq (1978), Tibi (2012) and al-Sayyid (1997) conclude that the government in Islam has a civil and political character and that political planning is not a divine right but a matter of rational and communal decisions.

According to Belkeziz (2009, 207):

the system of *al-Hakimiyah* along the lines of the bases demonstrated by al-Mawdudi inevitably produces a political-religious class (theocracy) that enjoys absolute power deriving from the "divine deputization" of it! An authority which is completely above reproach or being taken into critical account'.

This does not accord with the concept of checks and balances in modern democracies. Also, the idea of *al-hakimiyah* is new in Sunni Islamic heritage and it is not part of the *usul*[[21]](#footnote-22) (primary sources) of Islam (Amarah 1988). Al-Sayyid (1997) adds that Islamists misunderstand or misuse verses of the Quran regarding to the meaning of *hukm* (governance)—they interpret the meaning of *hukm* (judgement) to mean governance while ignoring the context of the verses which refer to adjudication and the resolution of disputes among people or where it implies *al-hikmah* (wisdom) and righteousness of opinion.

When *sharia* is interpreted exclusively by the *ulama* or religion scholars will likely lead to the dictatorship of the Muslim jurists. Khan (2006, 161) elaborates:

who gets to articulate what constitutes *sharia*? Islamic jurists? Who determines who is an Islamic jurist? Who determines which schools can provide the education that will produce jurists? Who determines when a specific democratically passed law is in violation of the *sharia*? Who determines the issues on which people will have freedom of thought and action and the issues on which the so-called sharia will be unquestionable? The answer to all of these questions is the same—the Muslim jurist

This domination of religion scholars will not necessarily allow a diversity of understanding of the foundational texts and therefore it is not a good mechanism for resolving the ongoing conflicts about the interpretations of these texts. Furthermore, the focus on the subjective qualities of the Muslim political candidates (such as virtue, faith and knowledge) in the Islamist-Salafi terminology means that 'institutional functions are only as good as the virtue of those who exercise them' (Roy 1994, 62). Accordingly, thinking of Islam as *sharia* or considering Islamic law as *a priori* to the state pays lip service to the ideals of consultation, accountability and democracy.

That Islamist parties participate in elections and renounce violence is not an indicator that these same parties accept the political culture of pluralism and disagreement (Tibi 2008). Tibi (2008, 123) clarifies that Salafists view disagreement as heresy and ideas of 'pluralism and tolerance of diversity [which are] essential elements of democracy, are rejected as divisive'. He adds that 'Islamist movements reject power sharing with secular parties or with non-Muslim minorities in the name of *sharia*' (123). Tibi (2008, 2004) concludes that the establishment of democratic political culture through education and certain religious reforms are the precondition for the founding of liberal democracy in predominantly Muslim societies.

Belkeziz (2009, 189) adds that the meaning of *al-shura* in contemporary Islamist discourse is constrained, and that it is possible for us to define it as the implementation of democracy on the basis of *sharia* or, in other words, Islamic law sets the boundaries for politics:

When it is the case that the *sharia* is sent down and there is no role of *ijtihad* other than commuting its rulings to new realities, then the marginalization of *shura* in the practice of political authority is a narrow marginal rule…rather it is only *pro forma*.

Khan (2006) explains this point further and argues that Islamist-Salafi thinkers support a superficial understanding of consultation—'for them consultative governance is not necessary for legitimacy, since legitimacy comes from the enforcement of the *sharia* regardless of the will of the people' (160). While democracy is defined as the rule of people, by people and for people, the *shura*, as it is interpreted in the Islamic Salafi discourse, is initiated by the Islamic state’s leader who has the right not to consult *Ahl al-hal wa al-aqd* (the representatives of the Muslim community) if it does not suit him and also the right to decide whom he may consult and when (El-Affendi 2006). In fact, there is still no agreement among Muslim religious scholars about the meaning and implications of *shura* (Khlifah 2014), the characteristics of the advisers (*Ahl al-hal wa al-aqd*) or how they must be selected (Flores 2010).

Khan (2006) and An-Naim (2009) advocate democratising interpretations of Islamic teachings and the public negotiation of the meaning of *sharia* which is socially, politically and historically constructed. That is, there should be no monopoly over the interpretation of *sharia*; Islamic law has been interpreted by different schools of thought and therefore each citizen has an equal right and responsibility to share his or her input about the meaning and implications of *sharia* through public[[22]](#footnote-23) reasoning (An-Naim 2009). For liberal Muslims, the democratic political system sets the boundaries for religion and not the opposite.

The democratisation of religious interpretation is supported by many other scholars and progressive Muslims (Armajani 2004; Safi 2003). For instance, Soroush (2000, 1998) asserts that Muslims should make a distinction between religion as a faith and religious knowledge as a human interpretation of this faith. Religious truth is absolute but its meaning (human knowledge) is open to multiple interpretations according to Muslims’ circumstances and therefore it is a context-dependent and relative knowledge (Filali-Ansary 2003). Noor (2002, 25) explains:

throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thoughts and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means…the actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space.

Other liberal scholars highlight the significance of historicising and contextualising the understanding of the Quranic and Sunna teachings. Otherwise Muslims will remain stuck in the Islam of the seventh century Arabia and thus misinterpreting and misappropriating the Quranic verses (Armajani 2004). Moosa (2003) clarifies in Saada and Gross (2016, 11) that reasoning is socially constructed and that:

each verse or cluster of verses in the Quran attempts to fulfil a larger social, ethical, or religious function and this means that revelation is understood by a community of believers who read, listen, and recite the Quran based on their experiences and these experiences become the grounds for innovation, change, and adaptation

Rahman (1982) confirms that the Quran should not be viewed as legal text (as done by many Islamist-Salafis) but a book of theological and moral principles which encourages Muslims to achieve a just socio-economic order. It should be interpreted thematically by placing an emphasis on the essence of Islam which underlines values of egalitarianism, religious tolerance, freedom and justice (Panjwani 2012; Rahman 1982).

Abdulkarim Soroush (2000) makes a more sophisticated claim in his support of democracy in Muslim societies. He argues that freedom of thought and conscience are a prerequisite qualification for the practice of reasoning which leads to faith and truth. Soroush views 'reason as a defining characteristic of humanity and freedom as a necessary existential condition for that humanity to thrive' (Khan, 2006, 165). He believes that each Muslim must have freedom of thought so that they are able to use their minds to evaluate what is moral, reasonable and worthwhile. Soroush concludes that Islam is compatible with freedom and reasoning and these virtues are basic elements of democracy.

Liberal Muslims criticise the Islamist-Salafi ideology and their efforts to Islamise[[23]](#footnote-24) democracy because this maintains a top-down understanding of the *shura* and the *sharia* and denies, for example, the rights of women and non-Muslims to take part in governance or to define the common good (Bahlul 2007). Similarly, liberal Muslims reject the concepts of *khilafa* and *hakimiyah* because they rely on *taqlid* (tradition-following) rather than human agency or the creative interpretation of Islam (Bahlul 2012). *Taqlid* draws upon the authority of past scholars and does not lead to gender equality or equal citizenship regardless of religion, gender or ethnicity. Moreover, if the Quran (2:30, 5:105, 41:46, 4:79-80, 53: 36-42) says that God wants human beings to be His vicegerent on earth then He expects each individual (and not just the jurists or the clergy) to become responsible for his or her decisions. Thus, everyone should have the right to perform *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and not only jurists and not just Muslims (Khan 2006).

**Educational reform and the quest for Islamic democracy**

We agree with other scholars (An-Naim 1990; Faour and Muasher 2011; Hashemi 2004) that democratisation in Muslim and Middle Eastern societies entails a reconsideration of the status quo and its political, theological and educational structures. Both secular nationalism (or quasi-secular autocracies) and Islamism[[24]](#footnote-25) have failed as political ideologies in establishing democratic states in these societies or dealing with urgent problems such as corruption, poverty, despotism, human rights violations and unemployment (Bishara 2012; Khan 2006; Ramadan 2017; Tibi 1995). We argue that Muslims in the post-uprising era will eventually seek a 'third way' through which they compromise both democratic and Islamic worldviews. The third way assumes that both Islam and democracy should not be conceived as monolithic and inflexible constructs (Rosenberg, 2013). It is a way of finding a common ground for Islamic ethics and the democratic way of living. The question then is how teachers in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq may deal with the disputed meaning of democracy and the urgent request for political freedom, equal citizenship and social justice (Bishara, 2012).

We are inclined to accept the arguments by liberal Muslims as a starting point for advancing democracy and democratisation in Muslim-majority societies. In fact, progressive and liberal Muslims believe in a dynamic, contextualised and present-oriented understanding of the revealed text (the Quran) and this, we argue, minimises the possibility of producing a romantic, past-oriented, and essentialised conception of Islamic identity. We agree with liberal and progressive scholars that democracy can be achieved through reforms at the political and religious levels. Khan (2006, 156) depicts the contours of one possible reform:

* Link political legitimacy not to the application of a legal code that is prior to politics, but to the binding character of *shura* (consultation).
* Reject the idea of a fixed *sharia* in favour of keeping *sharia* open and dependent on negotiated understanding.
* Explain how talk of divine sovereignty works to free rulers from accountability to the ruled.
* Treat Islam as a fountain of values that guide conduct rather than a system of ready-made solutions to problems.
* Past legal opinions must not subvert contemporary political reflections. We will be free only when we can freely determine for ourselves what the *sharia* is.

We add that political and theological reforms towards democracy in the Middle East must be followed by educational reform as well. Educational reform aims to establish and ensure the political culture required for stable and sustainable democracy. Epistemologically, a reform entails the abandoning of the dogmatic approach of religious education which dominates Islamic education in Arab countries (Ramadan 2017; Sahin 2013) and serves the non-democratic regimes by emphasising virtues of obedience and conformity (Doumato & Starrett 2007; Waghid 2014). Education into democracy cannot be promoted by teacher-centred pedagogies of rote-learning, a rigid understanding of the scripture (Sahin 2016), text-based memorisation (Faour and Muasher 2011) and *taqlid* (imitation-based learning). Alternatively, learning about and from Islam will enhance students' capacities for critical and reflective thinking, moral reasoning and tolerance of the religious and non-religious worldviews (Saada 2015; Tan, 2008, 2014; Waghid 2014).

Tan (2014) suggests reviving Islamic rationalism as it is exercised in works by pre-modern scholars and philosophers such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-98 CE), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1035 CE) and al-Farabi (872-950 CE) and the Mu`tazili theologians (Tan 2014; Wilkinson 2015). Islamic rationalism encouraged Muslims to conduct 'a meaningful application of the Islamic teachings to one’s life [assuming] that a person possesses the intellectual capacity and freedom to interpret and assess existing and new beliefs' (Tan 2014, 331). Selcuk (2012) criticises the uncritical acceptance of the Islamic cultural heritage and argues that 'theology must be suitable to improve individual intellect and appropriate for the democratisation process of society' (224). Saada and Gross (2016) propose an interrogation of the democratic ideals of Islam and how values of pluralism, freedom of expression and tolerance exist across the Quran and Islamic history. Waghid (2014) suggests a pedagogy of disruption which challenges structures of oppression and discourses of authoritarianism in Arab societies through emphasising learner-centred education and a 'willingness to listen to unsettling ideas and unsettling individuals' (Waghid 2014, 289). Further, Saada (2014b, 2015) underscores the significance of letting students reflect upon ethical and spiritual issues from within and from without their religious traditions.

Democratisation in the transitional societies of the Middle East entails advancing a delicate balance between education for inherited and collective (Islamic) identity and the demands for personal autonomy and pluralism. It is a dilemma of teaching for unity and diversity. Education for independent and argumentative thinking, respect of difference and otherness, equal citizenship and the pursuit of the common good are the main features of democratic political culture. These components have the potential of releasing Muslim citizens from the regime of truth as it is produced and maintained by a legacy of authoritarian states and patriarchal societies. We are talking about the mobilisation of education for recovering Arab and Muslim citizens’ human agency, so they learn how to think, seek and produce knowledge, question, and innovate rather than be subjects of the state who are taught what to think and how to behave (Faour & Muasher 2011).

This education, traditional-Salafi and illiberal Muslims will argue, is the antithesis of education for Islamic identity and perhaps of Islam itself. Yet, the continuing turmoil in Muslim societies of the Middle East teaches us that there are multiple collective identities who 'fight' for respect, recognition and political engagement (Alhabeeb 2015). Opting for democracy by the crowd in the 'Arab Spring' (Bishārah 2012) necessitates the establishment of a democratic culture on the basis of tolerance, reasoned and reasonable public deliberation. This culture legitimises both liberal and illiberal perceptions of religion, identity and citizenship and the willingness of ethnic and religious groups to compromise their cultural values in order to meet the demands of rational deliberation and dialogical decision-making. Democracy in its substantive meaning, trumps cultural differences[[25]](#footnote-26) (Siegel 2010).

In education, and because of the increasing violence between different socioreligious groups in the transitional societies of the Middle East, we support an idea of conflict-avoidance and a phenomenological approach (Barnes 2001; Jackson 1997) of religious (Islamic) education in Muslim societies. This means teaching students to understand the subjective experience of other religions or traditions from inside so that they make sense of other people’s worlds and their religiosity. It focuses on the common themes of the major religions in society so that students build up a sense of shared citizenship and informed empathy (Al Sadi and Basit 2013; Nord and Haynes, 1998) and a tolerance of worldviews different from their own. Not learning about the religious others (believers of other religions and/or adherents of different Islamic traditions) and their rights to believe what they will only serves to augment religious illiteracy (Moore 2010) in Muslim societies and this is a recipe for antagonism, hate crimes, violence and extremism (Sahin 2016).

Teachers, besides teaching for intercultural and inter-faith understanding, may decide to adopt the cultural studies approach in teaching Islam (Moore 2010). This approach 'includes the consideration of social power and the ways that race, class, and gender (among other factors) provide important categories of analysis when investigating different religious expressions and their cultural/political influences (Moore 2010, 100). The cultural studies pedagogy enables students to evaluate Islamic tradition from inside and to question the validity and reasonability of different religious claims and communities of interpretation. According to Wright (2006, 334):

true religious and cultural pluralism would encourage the various groups to comment on and to criticise each other and where necessary to attempt to change by persuasion each other’s values when they seem harmful or mistaken. Pluralism of this kind moves beyond wishy-washy acceptance.

Students, for instance, may investigate through historical and comparative analysis the disputed attitudes about democracy, the status of woman in Islam and the treatment of non-Muslims in different Islamic periods and to decide for themselves what makes more sense for the life in pluralistic and democratic society.

**Conclusion**

Education for critical religious and civic reasoning through phenomenological and cultural studies methods is a springboard for instilling the required skills and virtues in order to prepare the next generation of democratic citizens and self-reflective believers. These citizens can live peacefully in a democratic culture of dissent and disagreement. The cultural studies pedagogy enables Muslim students to become active exponents and critical 'consumers' of religious knowledge, to reflect upon and to revise their faith if necessary and to be critical of the possible political manipulation of Islamic knowledge and language. Phenomenological pedagogy supports the civic purposes of religious education by highlighting the necessity of inter-religious dialogue and mutual recognition in Muslim societies. It endorses a peace-building agenda in Islamic education by encouraging students to recognise the religious and non-religious 'other as distinctive from oneself and the pursuit of the common good within a shared culture' (Boisvert 2015, 390). When students develop these dispositions, they will most probably tolerate and be able to examine both Islamic and non-Islamic ideologies in their societies. Teachers, of course, will have the final word on how to bring the ideas mentioned above into practice and they are free to think and rethink what works best for them according to their teaching styles, the students’ age and cognitive capacities, the nature of school community and their work conditions.

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1. We deal with the concept of democracy and its critique as it is viewed in Sunni and not Shi'ite Islamic writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wahabbism is an Islamic,puritanical movement established by Muhammad ibn Àbdl-Wahhab during

   the nineteenth century in the Arab peninsula. He wanted to purify Islam by focusing on polytheism (*shirk*), unity of God (*tawhid*), and discarding all kinds of innovation (*bid`a*). He believed in the significance of returning to a pristine and 'authentic' Islam and was skeptical of philosophy and rational reasoning (Saeed 2006). His philosophy was adopted later as the basic theology of Saudi Arabia (Leaman and Ali 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term Salafi refers to the pious forebears of *Salaf al-Salih* – that is, Muhammad’s Companions. It recommends the return to the pristine Islam lived by the first Muslims (Leaman and Ali 2008, 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Islamic fundamentalism is an ideology which claims 'that there is an essence of Islam, a single Islamic pattern that we can contemplate and study, and from which we can deduce the answer to any question that we may meet in the course of our lives' (Filali-Ansary 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, Islamist groups in South Asia share a more compromising attitude towards democracy compared to similar groups in the Middle East (Ayoob 2008; Khan 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shura* in the Quran (42:38) means that the righteous are managing their affairs through mutual consultation (Leaman and Ali 2008). In this discussion *shura* indicates that 'collective deliberation, rather than individual preference, is more likely to lead to a fair and sound result for the social good' (Parray 2010, 146) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For instance, the different liberties promoted by secular democracies lead to unethical behaviours and legislations such as the legitimisation of alcohol consumption, gambling, homosexuality, an interest-based economy and adoption. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This paper deals with the theological and theoretical arguments which criticise the idea of democracy and does not discuss, for instance, the pragmatic obstacles to democracy in Arab countries such as 'authoritarian political traditions, a history of colonial and imperial rule, and state domination of the economy and society' (Abou El Fadl 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The universal community of Muslims who follow Muhammad and the message of Islam. It can be also understood as the people living under the rule of a Muslim state (Leaman & Ali 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Khilafah* means viceregency and was abrogated at the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hasan al- Banna argues that 'the rule (*al-hukm*) - that is, the state (*al-dawlah*) - is counted among the annals of usual and the creed and not in the annals of the derivative branches (*al-furu*) and formulations of *fiqh*' (Belkeziz 2009, 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This concept is known as *wilayat al-faqih* in Shi'ite imami discourse, but this paper deals only with the Sunni perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Different Salafi groups may have different definitions of these qualifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. They agree on letting women participate in electing members of parliament and the head of state. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Moderation is defined by Ayoob (2008, 158) as 'the willingness to accept democratic norms of political participation [such as] non-violent opposition, respect for the results of free and fair election, and willingness to give up power if voted out of office'. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ijtihad* is a juristic tool employed to articulate Islamic legal positions on a specific issue using independent reasoning when traditional Islamic sources are silent on it (Khan 2003, 420). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Muslim secularists believe in the extensive embracing of Western liberal democracy including the restriction of Islam to the private domain (Parray 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Islamic state order based on Islamic law (Tibi 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Tibi (2004) criticizes the emphasis on Islamic *shura* because it represents an apologetic strategy through which Salafi Muslims pretend the acceptance of democracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644), ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan (r. 644–656), and ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–661) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Divinity, prophethood and the Judgment Day (Amarah 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. 'The word public here implies that reasons of policy and legislation should be publicly declared, as well as that the process of reasoning on the matter should be open and accessible to all citizens' (An-Naim 2009, p. 149) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. This means to show how democratic ideas (e.g. the rule of law, human rights, freedom, equality and justice) are embedded in the teachings of Islam. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. It is also referred to as Islamic revivalism, Islamic fundamentalism and political Islam. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Siegel (2010, 9) explains that conflicted cultures in a democratic society should 'embrace democratic ideals, principles, and a commitment to endeavour to resolve their conflict through participation in reasoned discourse and in democratic institutions and procedures'. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)