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Islam and the cultural conceptualisation of disability

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This paper aims to provide an analytical perspective of Islamic philosophy on disability by examining some texts from the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as differentiating between cultural practice and real Islamic perspectives. Despite the fact that Muslims share the same beliefs and principles, people's attitudes and understanding regarding these concepts, and their reactions to individuals with a disability, may vary depending on the intensity of a person's faith, as well as their socio-economic status, level of education, awareness and, more importantly, their cultural context. Indeed, special emphasis will be given to cultural differences and their influence on Muslims' understanding and practice of Islamic philosophy within this context, where cultural perspectives play a crucial role in framing attitudes towards disadvantaged people.

Keywords: Islam; Muslim; culture; disadvantaged people; intellectually disabled

Introduction

Dissatisfaction with the medical model led to a shift in considering disability as located mainly within the child, to focus more on social factors and the cultural reproduction of inequalities within society (Barton, 1981; Tomlinson, 1982). It is estimated that there are 650 million individuals who are disabled as a result of mental, physical, and sensory impairments (United Nations, 2006), and approximately one-third are children in developing countries with little or no access to education (World Bank, 2007). As most Islamic countries are considered to be developing, and most people are religious in these countries, there is a huge overlap between local cultural values and religious ones. There is a pressing need to study the Islamic perspective on disability, as well as the impact of local culture on this issue.

This paper, then, deals with Islam and disability. It is essential to provide a clearer picture and a deeper understanding of Islam in general. This is because providing an account of the principles and practices of Islam is crucial in order to help understand how people's behaviour towards individuals with a disability is shaped. This will be followed by an illustration of Islam's perspective on disabled people. Finally, cultural differences in terms of applying Islamic values within the context of disability will be examined from three different cultural perspectives – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Brunei Darussalam – as it is difficult to distinguish between the cultural and religious practices of Muslim people in each respective country (MWSC, 2006). Indeed, an in-depth look into the notion of disability in Islam will help in understanding the development of special needs services within the context of Islamic culture. Throughout this paper, the term 'disadvantaged people' is used, as is stated in the Qur'an when referring to individuals with a disability.

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Islam

Islam is considered one of the three main religions in the world. The word Islam means submission to God's will. Muslims believe that one should surrender to the will of God by obeying the laws and commandments of Allah (the Arabic name for God). These laws are based on the belief that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His messenger. This is the first pillar of Islam. The four other pillars are: prayer (five times a day), fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, giving alms (2.5% when the money a person has reaches a quorum, and when one year has passed), and pilgrimage to Mecca, the Holy City, once in one's lifetime. In addition, Muslims have six pillars of faith: faith in Allah and the Angels, the Holy Book (the Old and New Testaments are considered to be Holy Books, but the Holy Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be their only Holy Book, and the only source of Islam), the Messengers and Prophets (e.g. Abraham, Moses and Jesus), the Day of Judgement and Predestination.

Muslims believe that their Holy Book, the Qur'an, is the direct word of Allah, revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in Makkah via the Angel Gabriel when he was 40 years old. Prophet Mohammad spent 13 years in Makkah, preaching about Islam, but he had not had any real success, and he was forced to move to the northern town of Madinah. From that time, Madinah became the second Holy City of the new Islamic state. The Prophet Mohammed's teachings, actions, sayings (*hadith*), virtues, opinions and ways of life were known as the 'Sunnah', the second source of Sharia Law after the Qur'an. As such, it represents the ideal in terms of putting Qur'anic verses into practice (Morad et al., 2001; Hasnain, Shaikh, & Shanawani, 2008). Indeed, the Qur'an states clearly that the Prophet is not only the messenger of Allah but is also a teacher at the same time: 'Just as we have sent among you a messenger from amongst yourselves, reacting to you and teaching you the book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know' (2, 151).

When the Prophet Mohammed passed away in 682, Islam had spread to most of the Arabian Peninsula. Later, Islam arrived in Africa, Asia and eastern and southern Europe. Nowadays, Islam is considered one of the largest and fastest-growing religions in the world. Islam is also one of the sources of legislation in many Islamic countries; and in others, such as Saudi Arabia, it is the only source.

The Islamic perspective on the concept of disability

Islamic philosophy has a positive attitude towards needy individuals and those who are in a disadvantaged situation. The Qur'an and the Hadith not only declared the existence of disabilities as a natural part of human nature, but also provided principles and practical suggestions for caring for disabled people, as well as discussing the significance of such caring. Even though the aims of this study do not include discussing Muslim peoples' efforts to establish and provide caring services for needy individuals throughout 14 centuries, the study will, however, provide some examples that might give a snapshot of the existence of such efforts since the beginning of Islam. Thus, such explorations into Islamic history might provide some enlightening facts that help enhance understanding of the current situation.

One such role-model is Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, the third Muslim leader, who provided a blind man with housing near the mosque after the father of the disabled boy complained to Omar about his son being unable to reach the mosque. A further example was in the second Islamic state in Damascus, when the Umayyad caliph, al Walid ibn Abd al Malik, established the first care home for intellectually disabled individuals. He also built the first hospital which accommodated the intellectually disabled as part of its services. He also assigned each disabled and needy individual a caregiver (Aljazoli, 2004).

These examples are solid evidence of practical assistance being given to the less able in Islamic societies in the past. Indeed, Islam gives a great deal of attention to all groups within society; each has their own rights, including individuals with a disability. Bazna and Hatab (2005) conducted a study with the objective of examining Qur'anic texts in order to understand disability in an Islamic context, based on some examples of physical conditions, such as blindness, deafness, lameness, mental retardation and leprosy. An example of such is in the Qur'an (48, 17):

There is not upon the blind any guilt or upon the lame any guilt or upon the ill any guilt. And whoever obeys Allah and His messenger – He will admit him to gardens beneath which rivers flow: but whoever turns away – He will punish him with a painful punishment.

Bazna and Hatab (2005) concluded that the generic term 'disability' was not mentioned in the Qur'an; the term 'disadvantaged people' was being used to refer to those with special needs. In fact, society's civil responsibility is illustrated in the Qur'an, which stresses that society is responsible for taking care of such individuals and is responsible for improving their conditions. Disadvantaged situations (lack of some physical, economic or social characteristic) are believed to be a result of barriers produced by society. Social pressures are put upon those individuals who have special needs to access the social services that are available to them.

The Sunnah also supports the notion of social responsibility towards individuals. A few examples of this are found in the following two Hadith. According to Prophetic tradition, mentioned in Sahih Muslim, 'The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, feeling, is that of one body; when any limb aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever' (32, 6258). Another Hadith narration from Sunan al Tirmidhi states 'the person is not one of us who is not merciful to our youth nor respectful of our elders'. Cooperation, solidarity, compassion and respect are some examples of Islamic principles and manners that the previous Hadith provided to support the idea of society's responsibilities towards each others as indicated in the Qur'an.

Rights of disabled people

Previous paragraphs discussed the notion of disability and its existence in the Qur'an and Hadith texts. In fact, the idea of individuals being in a disadvantaged situation was clearly stated. Therefore, the following paragraph will provide some examples of where both the Qur'an and Hadith exemplify disadvantaged people's rights and society's duty to care for them, along with some historical references in Islam.

Disadvantaged people's rights are mentioned in the text of the Qur'an on several occasions. For instance, their civil rights in terms of marriage and inheritance are clarified in the Qur'an:

and do not give the weak-minded your property, which Allah has made a means of sustenance for you, but provide for them with it and clothe them and speak to them words of appropriate kindness. (4, 5)

And test the orphans [in their abilities] until they reach marital age. Then if you perceive them to be of sound judgment, release their property to them. And do not consume it excessively and quickly, [anticipating] that they will grow up. And whoever, [when acting as guardian], is self sufficient should refrain [from taking a fee]; and whoever is poor – let him take according to what is acceptable. And then when you release their property to them, bring witnesses upon them. And sufficient is Allah as accountant. (4, 6)

Another Qur'anic verse in the same chapter tells us 'and concerning the oppressed among children and that you maintain for orphans [their right] in justice' (4, 127). In order to fully

understand texts interpreting the Qur'an, '*tafsir*' such as Ibn Ashur (1973) and Tantawi (1928) are required, as they are mostly in Arabic rather than in English.

From the sources and texts mentioned above from the Qur'an, the following can be deduced:

- First, '*weak-minded*' is a generic term that could comprise several groups, such as very young children, mentally retarded and mentally ill individuals, and so forth.
- Second, the texts lay down the idea of guardianship for disadvantaged individual such as the weak-minded or orphans.
- Third, this guardianship is subject to a sense of duty, fairness and kindness. In addition, guardianship ceases once the individual can be held accountable for their own decision-making ability.
- Finally, there is a reminder from Allah that all wealth provided by Him is for the maintenance of the community as well as of individual members.

Indeed, the texts discussed previously, along with others that are mentioned in the Qur'an, have helped Muslim scholars and jurists to generate legislation regarding disadvantaged individuals' rights and society's duties towards them.

Right of protection

Another aspect of the Qur'anic view of the human rights of disadvantaged individuals is the protection of honour. According to the Qur'an:

O you who believe, let not people ridicule [other] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other offensive names. (49, 11)

The message that might be learned from this Qur'anic verse is that basic human rights such as respect should be applied when dealing with both disabled and non-disabled individuals, by avoiding over-generalising and under-estimating others.

The Qur'an emphasises the notion of social responsibilities and duties to provide such individuals with their basic needs such as food, safety, care and shelter. As indicated, the Qur'an states:

there are not upon the blind [any] constraints, nor upon the lame, nor upon the ill, nor upon yourselves when you eat at your [own] houses or the houses of your father or the houses of your mother or the houses of your brothers or the houses of your sisters or the houses of your father's brothers or the houses of your father's sisters ... (24, 61)

As disadvantaged people used to be abused before Islam, Islam provided Muslims with theoretical verses (the Qur'an) and practical examples (the Prophet's actions) to show the importance of providing protection.

Social rights

The Qur'an distributes the burden of rectifying inequity in society by making it obligatory that Muslims give a small percentage of their income to charity or Zakat. Those who are disabled are considered as having a rightful share, and giving charity is a constant reminder to Muslims of a form of social justice (Miles, 1995). Dispensations may be made to those with disabilities, for example from the duties and responsibilities of a Muslim, which include daily prayers and fasting in the month of Ramadan; these can be waived or reduced on the grounds of limited performance or the lack of mental maturity (Bazna & Hatap, 2005). Hassan (1992) suggests that the needs of individuals with disabilities are met not

only out of pity but also as a gesture of seeking goodwill from God. Those who are critical of the charitable response to disability argue that this approach may lead to a paternalistic view that devalues and discourages self-motivation amongst individuals with disabilities (Oliver & Barnes, 1998). However, in her description of disability in Egypt, Hagrass (2006) points out that in Islamic countries this view of disability is quite appropriate as it encourages and instils a sense of social responsibility. The distribution and giving of alms on a regular basis ensures that the welfare of individuals with disabilities is taken care of.

Inclusion is also another example of Islam's concern for those who are in a disadvantaged situation. The Prophet used to visit the sick, pray for them and console them, instilling confidence in their souls, and lifting their hearts. He would often go to someone, on the outskirts of Medina, for example, in order to respond to a simple need of this person, or to perform prayer in the house of an afflicted one. An example of this was Etban ibn Malik; he was a blind man from Ansar. He said to the Prophet: 'I wish that you, O Messenger of Allah, would come and pray in my house, so that I could take it as a place of prayer'. The Prophet promised to visit him and perform prayer, saying: 'I will do, if Allah so wills'. Etban said: 'Allah's Messenger and Abu Baker came early in the morning. Allah's Messenger asked for permission to enter, which I gave'. Without sitting, he immediately entered and said: 'In which part of your house would you like me to pray?' I pointed to a certain place in the house, so the Messenger of Allah stood and started praying and we, in turn, stood in a row and prayed with Him (al-Bukhari & Muslim cited in Muhammad Mus'ad Yaqut, 2007).

Therefore, one can learn from the Prophet's behaviour that visiting the sick in general, and the disabled in particular, for the purpose of relieving their suffering, are legislated for in Islam. Since disadvantaged individuals may also be withdrawn, isolated, pessimistic, and are perhaps more likely to suffer from psychological illness, including disabled people in social occasions, such as visits and marriage, is highly encouraged in Islam.

Previous examples have exemplified the existing notion of disability in the Qur'an and Sunnah. The following sections will consider the Islamic perspective on disability rehabilitation, Muslim's attitudes towards disability, and the development of disability support services in Islamic history.

Rights of treatment and rehabilitation

From the Islamic perspective, rehabilitation can take two forms – preventive and remedial. Having said that the Qur'an and Sunnah shape Muslims' perspectives and behaviours, these two sources help to identify the several texts that have been used by jurists to generate laws and regulations. These laws and regulations concentrate on the prevention and treatment of disabilities. Prevention can take the form of medication or changing one's lifestyle. Treatments for disabilities are many and various, and include medication, rehabilitation, and spiritual medication. The following will discuss some further examples of treatment methods and will provide examples of texts, along with meanings, so one can understand the basis on which Islamic rules were generated.

Changing of lifestyle

Islam warns individuals against anything that might affect him or her negatively. Harming one's body is prohibited because one's body is viewed to be on trust from Allah. According to the Qur'an, 'And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction' (2, 195). 'Destruction' in this verse indicates and includes a

variety of human behaviours such as being addicted to alcohol or tobacco, due to the negative effects of these kinds of addiction on the individual's health and environment. Addictions could be discussed within the context of acquiring disability, since, for example, there is scientific evidence of the side effects of such habits as smoking and drinking on foetus health during and after pregnancy. Moreover, being addicted to alcohol might lead the alcoholic individual to be mentally ill and classified as disabled. These examples are provided in order to clarify the meaning of 'destruction' in the Qur'an. However, examples of behaviours that might be harmful are varied, and are beyond the scope of this paper.

In Islam, the notion of protecting a person from throwing himself or herself into harm's way is both an individual and a social responsibility. It is the individual's responsibility to evaluate his or her behaviours and weigh the consequences of their actions. Changing one's lifestyle to a healthier lifestyle to prevent illness or disabilities is a must. Moreover, the previous verse has also inspired the idea of societies spending public money to offer facilities to serve its population in areas such as education and health, as well as legislation to support this. An example of Saudi Arabia and Jordan implementing legislation aimed at preventing disabilities is seen in the current action of both governments: in both countries it is now compulsory for those intending to marry to be medically cleared of having some serious genetically inherited diseases. Although this example indicates the important role of society in protecting people and increasing awareness of disability and its potential causes, taking the result into account is optional.

Medicine

Using medicines for preventive and remedial purposes and conducting research into finding more medicinal treatments or cures are some of responsibilities of mankind, according to a narration from *Sahih Bukhari* by Abu Huraira. The Prophet said: 'There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its treatment' (Ibn Qay'em, 2003, p. 18). The following Hadith, taken from *Sunan Abu Dawud*, also clarifies and stresses the importance of medication:

I came to the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) and his Companions were sitting as if they had birds on their heads. I saluted and sat down. The desert Arabs then came from here and there. They asked: 'Apostle of Allah, should we make use of medical treatment?' He replied: 'Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease, namely old age. (Abu-Dawud, n.d., no. 3855)

Thus, the vast majority of Muslim jurists agree on using medicines for both immunisation (preventative measure) and medication (treatment).

Immunisation: physical and spiritual

A recent study of jurists' perspective on the physical and spiritual treatment of disability in Islam found that disability is a condition that could be both prevented and treated (Ghaly, 2008). The Council of Islamic Fiqh concluded that mankind's responsibility is to use vaccination as well as medication. Indeed, jurists provided a detailed explanation of medical usage in various situations to urge people to take medicine.

Another perception of immunisation is in the form of spiritual immunisation via '*Tahseen*', which means 'fortification'. This method does not relate to any kind of physical medication; it is about spiritual treatment performed by using specific prayer supplications. According to Muslim belief, these supplications are an effective defence that helps in protecting the individual from being vulnerable to bad things that might happen to him or

her. There are various texts from the Qur'an and Hadith, which can be read on a daily basis, covering different aspects of an individual's life to protect him or her against dangers. For example, these prayers should be performed when waking up, before sleeping, eating, after eating, leaving home, and returning home, and so forth. Therefore, Muslims perform a variety of supplications daily before and after doing any activity, believing that Allah will help and protect them. The Prophet Mohammed taught Muslims to say, for example:

O Allah, grant me my body, Oh, grant me my hearing, O Allah, grant me my sight, there is no god except You. O Allah, I seek refuge with You from disbelief and poverty, I seek refuge in You from the torment of the grave. (Al-Qahtani, 1989, p. 21)

In addition to the *Tahseen* (spiritual treatment) mentioned above, other types of treatment, from a variety of sources, can be implemented on many levels. According to the Qur'an (17, 82): 'and we send down the Qur'an, which is healing and merciful for the believer'. There is some controversy over the meaning of this passage. Some claim that the Qur'an provides healing for both physical and spiritual illnesses, believing that the Qur'an is a spiritual treatment that helps in easing the fears, worries, and stress that are symptomatic of mental discord and brings individuals closer to Allah and strengthens individuals' trust in Him (Al-Sharawi, 1998).

Therefore, one can conclude that, first, rehabilitation from the Islamic perspective consists of both physical and spiritual medication, whether preventive or in the form of medication. Second, Muslims believe that one should put one's trust in Allah, along with taking a course of treatment. These two principles were generated from several sources in the Hadith and the Qur'an. Examples of these are found in the Qur'an's verses:

And when I am ill, it is He [Allah] who cures me. (26, 80)

Say 'never will we be struck except by that which Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector.' And upon Allah let the believers rely. (9, 51)

Right of education

Disadvantaged people have a right to be educated and their abilities should not be underestimated. This right is illustrated clearly in the Qur'an: 'He [the Prophet] frowned and turned away because there came to him a blind man, But what would make you perceive, [O Mohammed], that perhaps he might be purified, or be reminded and the remembrance would benefit him?' (80, 1–3). Allah rebuked His messenger, Mohammad, when he turned away a blind man asking the Prophet to teach him about Islam. This is because the Prophet was busy pursuing people of nobility to become Muslim. A deep analysis of the situation reveals several lessons that can be learned from the verse. These lessons are:

- Individuals have a right to be treated equally: everyone is equally important, whether disabled or not disabled.
- Individuals have a right to be educated regardless of disability.
- Individuals have a right not to be underestimated because of their ability.
- Individuals have a right to be included within society and to have an effective, valuable role within it.
- Obligations are placed upon disabled individuals to seek out the proper resources for education, for example, and not to underestimate their own ability and societal role.

As a result of Allah's reprimand, the Prophet was more welcoming to this blind man whenever he saw him. The Prophet even entrusted the leadership of the city of Madinah, the second holy city in Saudi Arabia, twice to the blind man (Bazna & Hatab, 2005;

Ibn Ashur, 1973; Miles, 2002; Tantawi, 1928). Furthermore, the Sunnah supports the notion of equality discussed earlier within the Qur'anic text and made it clear that there is no difference between people in terms of their physical appearance, their colour, race or nationality. They are all treated equally and differ only in terms of the amount of faith they may have. It is stated in the Qur'an: 'Indeed the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous' (49, 13). This idea is also highlighted in the Prophetic Hadith, mentioned in *Sahih Muslim*, in which the Prophet said: 'Verily Allah does not look at your bodies nor at your faces but He looks into your hearts' (32, 6220).

Marital rights

Marriage is another example of disadvantaged individuals' civil rights. The Qur'an states that this right is for all Muslims: 'Among His signs is that He created you wives from among yourselves that you may find repose in them' (30, 21). There has been an intense debate recently among Islamic scholars and physicians over the idea of whether the intellectually disabled should be allowed to get married. For example, in the first conference (in 2002) held by Mental Retarded Society under the supervision of Al Azhar University in Egypt, some scholars argued that it is acceptable, and is the right of people disabled in this way to get married. This is because sex is an innate driver and should be met. They suggested that marriage will help in controlling any sexual behaviour that might be practised and exhibited inappropriately by such individuals. Moreover, an Egyptian senior jurist, Ali Juma'a, stated that people with a mild intellectual disability have the right to get married and have their own families. It might wise to indicate here that his verdict was based on the right of equality within Islam for all human beings in meeting his or her basic needs (Dar Al-fit Al-Masriyyah, 2005). However, it was also felt that marriage should be under certain conditions and with a guardian's supervision.

Some scholars saw marriage as a responsibility more than a sexual practice, and feel that, therefore, 'mentally weakened' individuals are not capable of managing this responsibility, even with guardianship (Asharq Alawsat, 2002). This debate is still ongoing, and jurists have different interpretations and opinions. Miles (2002) stated that the debate among Muslim scholars and jurists over mentally weakened individuals' civil rights has existed in Islamic history for centuries, long before Europe existed.

Application of Islamic perspectives

A Muslim's general attitude towards disability is generated from their faith and the beliefs on Allah. In fact, there are general principles found in the basic principles of faith that frame the Muslim's attitudes towards disability. These include:

- Believing in '*qadar*', which is 'the belief in preordination (fate or destiny), which supports the idea that what is meant to be, will be, and what is not meant to happen, can never occur' (Hasnain *et al.*, 2008). This is stated in the Qur'an (9, 51). Based upon this principle, disability could be regarded as an act of God and it is part of individual's '*qadar*'. Indeed, believing in '*qadar*', it is an extension of believing in Allah and His divine wisdom and plan.
- Believing in the concept of 'reward and punishment', both in this life and the hereafter, is a vital principle that insists on an individual's being responsible for his or her behaviour, not only in terms of actions but also in terms of the motives and intention behind these. Violating Allah's laws has its own consequences, not only in this life, but later on, in the Day of Judgment.

It is stated in the Qur'an that 'whosoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whosoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it' (99, 7–8). In fact, several other Qur'an and Hadith narrations promises both those who are in a disadvantaged situation, and those who are taking care of them, rewards, both in this life and in the hereafter, for their patience. Indeed, this promise usually motivates people to support the disadvantaged, whether they are strangers or close relatives.

Cultural conceptualisation of disability

Williams (1961, p. 57) has defined culture as a 'particular way of life which expressed certain meanings and values, not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour'. As culture is not stagnant, it is affected by numerous factors such as politics and economics (El-Islam, 2008) and also religion. People's behaviours and attitudes might reflect their own understanding of their religion, but not necessarily the exact meaning of its values, where culture contributes in forming views of disability. Taking into account the fact that the writers of this paper are Muslims, their thinking has been shaped and influenced by different cultural norms. Two of them have been affected by Arab traditions (Saudi Arabian and Jordanian) while the third's influences are from the Brunei Malay tradition. Therefore, any attempts at providing 'local' views on disability have been influenced by the writers' cultural context, rather than providing a general concept reflecting solely Islamic philosophy.

Although Saudi Arabia is deeply rooted in Arab culture, as reflected in its identity, it is considered to be an Islamic country, due to the fact that its political system generates its rules of laws and regulations from Shariah Law. This is based on two sources of jurisprudence: the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah. Accordingly, the special educational needs (SEN) policy in Saudi Arabia (MoE, 2001) is based on Islamic rules, which state that education should be for all. The following are some highlighted examples of policies and the issues being addressed that are relevant to this paper. One such policy is that the responsibility falls upon the government to provide education. Enshrined within the policy is the government's responsibility in terms of respecting the human rights of children with SEN and providing for their basic human needs. Caring about children's spiritual, psychological and social growth is also regarded as being essential. The policy also includes identifying individual differences between children as being important, as this helps the children to develop their abilities and talents. The policy shows that SEN provision complements ordinary education and includes diverse provisions (MoE, 2001).

Jordanian ideology reflects various elements, among them Arab nationalism, Islamic conservatism, tribalism, and western modernism (Moaddel, 2002). These elements originally derived from Islamic heritage without concentrating on Islam itself as a main source of legislation. Despite the fact that there is more than one ethnicity in the country, Jordanian society is considered homogeneous and too diverse to be committed to one ideology. Based on this diversity, Jordanian policy on dealing with disabled children can be divided into two parts. Firstly, formal practice, where the Law on Disabled People, issued in 1993 and reviewed in 2007, urged the state to deal with disabled people equally and help them to benefit from their remaining abilities as far as is possible. It is to be noted here that Islamic values are absent, and that, instead, this law has taken into account voluntary work rather than that done by professionals. Secondly, there is an informal practice where people practise Islam as they understand it. It could be argued here that most of these practices are carried out by illiterate or less educated people. These practices are also common amongst non-Muslims, indicating the strong effect of local culture rather than religion.

Brunei Darussalam is described as a 'sovereign, independent, Malay Islamic Sultanate, governed by the principles of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology' (The Report, Brunei Darussalam, 2009, p. 8). Most aspects of Brunei life are dominated by Malay traditions and the Islamic religion. With regards to disability, Brunei Darussalam has neither an exclusion policy, nor a parallel system for education for all children with special needs (Khalid, 1999). As there are no separate or special schools, these children are taught in regular schools. Brunei Darussalam has no constitutional guarantee of the right to education or other human rights. However, it is the government's priority to provide its citizens with free education, and to ensure that Islamic values and the Islamic way of life are an integral part of its education system. Service provision for children with SEN is provided by The Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education. The Special Education Unit was established in 1994 (World Data on Education, 2006/07).

Traditionally, disability in some Muslims countries has been seen to have a moral or religious significance. Some cultures view disabilities as a blessing, while others seen it as a curse. In some Islamic cultures, for example, disability has been described as an example of the need to be 'fatalistic' in the acceptance of difficulties in life; Islam requires submission to the will of Allah. The presence of disabled child is seen to be a test of faith, although in earlier times some Middle Eastern cultures were known to bury children who had disabilities (Bazna & Hatab, 2005). Cultural perspectives, mixed with religious values, often lead to several courses of action, which may be falsely attributed to religious faith, such as embarrassment at having a child with a disability, attempting to explain the cause of the disability, and looking for fast solutions.

Embarrassment and justification

Parents who are shocked at having a child with a disability may resort to their religion to explain the problem away, using it as a form of protection from social stigma. A good example of these practices is when the parents of disabled children attribute the disability to themselves by considering the disability as a punishment from Allah (Hadidi, 1998) or God's bidding (Hasnain *et al.*, 2008), which should be obeyed. Some consider disability in the family as a curse from Allah for the parents and the family (Miles, 2002). The danger of following this approach is that some parents tend to depend on these beliefs to refuse treatment (Ghaly, 2008); especially early intervention services, or to deal with them, as they have siblings, without adequate care (Hasnain *et al.*, 2008). As early intervention is crucial in most cases of disability, parents who refuse to treat their children as a result of false beliefs may cause their children great harm by delaying their access to support services. Muslim jurists, quoting from the Qur'an, note that the Prophet Mohammed clearly stated that disability can be treated (Ghaly, 2008): 'Allah has not sent down any disease but He has also sent down a cure for it' (Al Asqlani, 1986, p. 5354). There is no contradiction between God's will and seeking treatment. In other words, some parents of disabled children use religious values as a safety net against anxiety and shock, and as an excuse for not taking any concrete action to deal with the situation.

The social embarrassment of having a disabled child appears to be a crucial factor in dealing with a disabled person in many Muslim families. In some cases where the disability is obvious and cannot be hidden from others, parents tend to provide various explanations. Envy (*Hasad* or evil eye) is at the top of these explanations, as many people believe that having a disabled child is the result of envy. Although envy has its roots in Islam (the Qur'an and Sunnah), it seems that parents use it as an argument which will be accepted by the surrounding religious community. Based on this belief, parents tend to deal with disability

within their cultural context. This includes using amulets (Hasnain *et al.*, 2008) and spiritual treatment. In addition, parents aim to avoid social embarrassment, stigma, protecting themselves and their children, especially females, by denying the disabilities, or hiding the child from society when the signs are obvious. Despite the fact that the Qur'an and Sunnah urge Muslims to deal with disabled people equally, parents often try to avoid stigma by not allowing their children to participate in social activities. For example, some Muslim families do not allow their disabled children to go to the mosque, fast or learn Arabic in some immigrants' communities in the West (Hasnain *et al.*, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 2004).

Disability has also been ascribed to supernatural or spiritual causes since early times (Hole, 1940). The literature in this area has been related mainly to discussion around mental disability, its aetiology and treatment. The 'evil eye' curse and other spiritual metaphors have been associated with sickness and disability in Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic religions (Miles, 1995). In some South Asian cultures, the view that black magic, the evil eye and/or possession by evil spirits (the Jinn) is the reason behind mental illness has a strong influence (Aminidav & Weller, 1995). Epilepsy, for example, has been described as being when spirits 'catch you and you fall down' (Fadiman, 1997). In Confucian cultures, there is a strong belief in fate, forbearance and the practice of seeking supernatural power through praying to ancestors (Cheng & Tang, 1995). In Morocco, it is thought that mental disabilities are an influence of possession by the Jinn and their vengeance (Stein, 2000, cited in Hurairah, 2009). Jinn possession is thought to be manifested through bizarre, multiple behaviours, which are considered in psychology or medicine as either psychotic or non-psychotic psychiatric disorders (Al-Habeeb, 2004).

One important theme here is the notion of curability, in that the belief in the unseen often leads people to seek treatments from mediums. A study by Razali, Khan, and Hassanah (1996) found that Malay patients attributed mental illness to interferences from supernatural agents or black magic and commonly sought treatment from traditional healers (*bomohs*). According to this view, modern medicine was only effective in curing physical illness, but was powerless against black magic or supernatural forces.

Another practice of mixing culture with religious beliefs is refusing abortion as a prevention method to help in reducing the disability rate. Muslim jurists have agreed that abortion is not allowed after the first 120 days of pregnancy, but it is permitted if it is the only way of saving the mother's life (Al-Qaradawi, 1997). However, it is traditional to refuse abortion, especially in working-class families, where the involvement of other family members in the lives of the parents' of disabled children is common. In these families, fathers and mothers in law have an important role in making the decision not to have an abortion, as it is against the Muslim's belief in God's will. Within the same context of reducing the disability rate, Hasnain *et al.* (2008) mentioned that most of these cases come from arranged marriages, where the marriage is a deal between two families rather than a marriage of two individuals. For example, the rate of first-cousin marriage is 32% and 26% in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, respectively. Apparently, this reflects Arab cultural perspectives, where blood relative marriage is preferable (Hamamy, Jamhawi, Al-Darawsheh, & Ajlouni, 2005).

Refusing vaccinations is another false practice by some Muslims around the world. For instance, Ghaly (2008) discusses a fatwa issued in Nigeria against vaccination, which a jurist disagreed with. Parents refuse vaccination on the basis of it being against God's will. It could be argued here that such attitudes are rare, as the majority of Muslim jurists see no contradiction between science and religion. In fact, this verdict was widely criticised and rejected by many contemporary Islamic scholars.

Despite strenuous efforts to distinguish between cultural values and Islam, many malpractices continue in the Islamic world and among Muslim migrants around the world.

Some individuals might consult spirits, seeking advice as well as solutions to their problems (Singapore Paranormal Investigation [SPI], 2003). Malay witchdoctors or Christian faith healers have been asked to help children with Autism (Bernard-Opitz, Kwook, & Sapuan, 2001). Some Asian families who attribute disability to sorcery are also reported to have sought the services of Shaman for cures (Kalyanpur, 1999).

Witchcraft is still deeply embedded in thinking and perceptions in non-western ethnic and religious cultures and is also still sought as a method of treatment (Igwe, 2004). Islam, however, shuns the use of magic and witchcraft and considers it as '*sihr*', or acts that utilise the *shaytann* or demons and devils (Abdussalam-Bali, 2004). Hassan (1992) argues that acceptable Islamic treatments available for children with disabilities involve Qur'anic prayer and the belief that only Allah can heal. Islam discourages turning to spirits and mediums for supernatural cures, which are thought to divert belief in the healing power of Allah. However, Islam does allow for religious treatments, often involving religious men, thought to be closer to Allah because of their piety and wisdom, offering prayers through Qur'anic verses (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rhodes, Small, Ismail, & Wright, 2008). There are significant differences in terms of acceptance of treatment at different socio-economic levels: the higher the socio-economic status, the more likely it is that individuals will practise more authentic Islamic treatments and disassociate themselves from folklore. Similarly, Saul and Philips (1999) note that more rural communities have more firm beliefs in traditional values, as influenced by beliefs in ghosts, spirits and witchcraft.

Conclusion

This paper's aim was to provide an in-depth review of Islamic perspectives on disability via analysing several Qur'an texts and prophetic traditions. Based on the above review it can be concluded that Islam has provided the term disadvantaged people as a generic term that includes disabled individuals under its umbrella. This term reflects a holistic notion of the Islamic philosophy in relation to disadvantage individuals based on main Islamic values of equality and justice (Bazna & Hatab, 2005). Moreover, distinguishing the Islamic perspective on disability as stated in both the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition from the Muslims' practices toward persons with disability was central to previous discussion. Taking into account that most of Muslims people are religious, religion plays a crucial role in Muslims understanding and interpretation of having a disabled child in their families or societies. Thus, this understanding and interpretation could be seen as one of the most influential factors that affect the development of special needs provision. As different understandings of disability and its causes and treatment within the context of religious values, this can lead to very different views about educating disabled individuals.

The theory and the practice of caring for people with disabilities, and of inclusion, existed during the Prophet Mohammed's era. Islam urges non-disabled Muslims to deal equally with disabled people. The Islamic perspective declares the right of the disadvantaged individuals and establishes the responsibility and duty of society towards such disadvantaged members. In fact, Islam has provided vivid examples of equality in Qur'an and Sunnah. However, several cultural practices that have been discussed previously exemplify that there is a contradiction between Islamic perspectives and local culture. Disadvantaged individuals' current position can be explained by concerns of social embarrassment of having a disabled child, concerns of social exclusion and lack of adequate skills to respond to disabled child in the family that lead them to prefer special classes on regular schools (Elkins, van Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003). It is critical to notice that negative attitudes towards disadvantaged people are not exclusively

experienced by family members, but also by other members of society, many of whom see no contradiction between their behaviour and the religion they believe in. These views are important in terms of understanding the interaction between specific cultural contexts and Islamic philosophy, which can produce different models and conceptualisation of social and educational inclusion within an Islamic perspective.

However, little has been done to investigate the impact of Islamic philosophy on Muslims' practice of working with individuals with disability (Miles, 2000). Establishing such understanding would lead to the deployment of the spiritual techniques of the Islamic philosophy when providing disability and rehabilitation services. Therefore, the current paper could be seen as an effort toward bridging the gap of establishing such understanding that differentiate between the real Islamic philosophy toward disability and disabled individuals and the Muslims' understanding and the way they apply this understanding. Thus, much work remains to be done and more research is needed to enrich the literature in relation to this specific religious perspective and to inspire the services providers with some practical techniques that could be adapted and which emerge from peoples understanding, to cope with the challenges of disability. Future research has to take into account the cultural backgrounds of disabled people and their families, which appear to be critical in deciding the way the parents, siblings, relatives and society respond to having a disabled individual.

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