

## Teaching Islamic Religious Education in Turkish State Schools: Overview, Developments, Challenges, Considerations

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**Abstract:** In the 2000s, the Ministry of Education in Turkey introduced a new paradigm in Religious Education. This made for a significant development in the Turkish educational system as the mandatory curriculum was to be used in state schools under the heading 'Religious Culture and Ethics'. This article attempts to address this paradigm in the context of the profound changes in Turkish academia in recent years, typified by developments in theology and pedagogy. An overview of the curriculum will be given, noting its basis as a particular type of approach to study Islam in state schools. Several issues in the framework of the study, the cultural context, historical background, the changes in pedagogical approaches, and the content knowledge of the curriculum will be examined. The study advocates an RE that offers students not just knowledge, but also opportunities to reflect on the meaning of life and on the big existential questions. The transition from a focus on knowledge to an orientation towards a quest for meaning will be identified. In that process, mapping a worldview of the Qur'an based on an approach called 'theology for the individual' is regarded as one of the most important skills aspiring teachers require to be successful in classroom. The study concludes by presenting examples of pedagogical content knowledge from the Qur'an in meaning making.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, Islamic Religious Education, Turkish RE System, Teacher Training, Worldview of the Qur'an, Theology for the Individual Approach

**Zusammenfassung:** In den 2000er Jahren führte das türkische Bildungsministerium ein neues Paradigma für den Religionsunterricht ein. Dies stellte eine bedeutende Entwicklung im türkischen Bildungssystem dar, da der obligatorische Lehrplan in staatlichen Schulen unter der Überschrift „Religiöse Kultur und Ethik“ verwendet werden sollte. In diesem Artikel wird versucht, dieses Paradigma im Kontext der tiefgreifenden Veränderungen in der türkischen akademischen Welt in den letzten Jahren zu betrachten, die durch Entwicklungen in Theologie und Pädagogik gekennzeichnet sind. Es wird ein Überblick über das Curriculum gegeben, wobei dessen Grundlage als eine besondere Art von Ansatz für das Studium des Islams an staatlichen Schulen hervorgehoben wird. Im Rahmen der Studie werden verschiedene Aspekte, der kulturelle Kontext, der historische Hintergrund, die Veränderungen in den pädagogischen Ansätzen und die inhaltlichen Kenntnisse des Lehrplans untersucht. Die Studie plädiert für einen Religionsunterricht, der den Schüler\*innen nicht nur Wissen vermittelt, sondern auch die Möglichkeit bietet, über den Sinn des Lebens und die großen existenziellen Fragen nachzudenken. Der Übergang von einer Konzentration auf Wissen zu einer Ausrichtung auf die Suche nach dem Sinn wird aufgezeigt. In diesem Prozess wird die Erarbeitung einer Weltanschauung des Korans auf der Grundlage eines Ansatzes, der als „Theologie für den Einzelnen“ bezeichnet wird, als eine der wichtigsten Fähigkeiten angesehen, die angehende Lehrkräfte benötigen, um im Unterricht erfolgreich zu sein. Die Studie schließt mit der Darstellung von Beispielen für pädagogisches Inhaltswissen aus dem Koran bei der Bedeutungserstellung.

**Schlagwörter:** Religionsunterricht, Islamischer Religionsunterricht, Türkisches Religionssystem, Lehrkräfteausbildung, Weltanschauung des Korans, Theologie für den individuellen Ansatz

## I. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, significant transformative shifts have occurred in education, particularly in religious education. As an integral component of Türkiye's educational framework, religious education has consistently held a prominent position on the national agenda, undergoing diverse changes. In the context of Türkiye as a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population, the government actively shapes and regulates religious education to align it with the principles of secularism. Noteworthy contributions to this ongoing process have been made by the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University, in particular by Prof. Dr. Beyza Bilgin, the founder of the Discipline of Religious Education in Türkiye, along with her colleagues and students (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2004, pp. 671-732; Selçuk, 2020b).

The year 1982 marked a significant juncture for religious education, particularly with the introduction of Article 24 in the constitution. This constitutional provision solidified the status of religious education lessons, mandating their inclusion and religious education as a compulsory subject for all students at every stage of state schools except for those adhering to different religions or faiths (Usta, 2020). Those who have different religions or faiths in the so-called minority schools have their own religious education, which serves the overarching goal of cultivating a multicultural and tolerant educational environment, concurrently promoting and enhancing religious freedom (Palgın, 2022).

The name of religious education courses was stated as 'Religious Culture and Ethics' (*Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi* in Turkish), mandated by law, from 4th to 12th grade (9 - 17years), and was initially provided for two hours per week in these grades according to the modifications of 1982. Since 2012, some additional selective courses, including 'The Life of the Prophet Muhammad', 'Basic Religious Knowledge', and 'The Qur'an', have been incorporated into the national program. In addition, religious education is also provided in Imam Hatip Vocational High Schools with a learning into religion approach based on the choices of families. However, this article primarily focuses on the mandatory religious education course taught to students in grades 4-12 (MEB Kanun, 2012). RE will be used, in this article, for short to refer to the course mandated by law.

The Ministry of National Education oversees this mandate through a department known as the 'General Directorate of Religious Education'. This department is responsible for both implementing and enhancing the curriculum, determining course content, and developing teaching materials (*Din Öğretimi Genel Müdürlüğü*, 2024). While the Ministry of National Education is providing formal religious education in schools, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (commonly known as Diyanet) extends its educational initiatives through various public education programs. These initiatives include enlightening society about religious matters, managing places of worship, and offering non-formal religious education in mosques and Quranic courses outside the formal school system. Nonetheless, this article specifically focuses on the aspects of religious education within formal educational settings.

Noticeable evolutions in religious education took place in the 2000s in terms of the goals and content of RE, in relation to students, school context, and curriculum development. It was introduced as the 'Ankara Model' and characterized as 'student-centered'. This approach focuses on the needs, experiences, and development of young people, shaping the curriculum with a deliberate emphasis on their cognitive, emotional, and social growth. The curriculum incorporates content and methodologies resonating with young people's lived experiences, aiming to create an engaging and relevant learning process which is responsive to their specific needs and perspectives and placing their experiences at the core of education (Doğan & Altaş, 2004; MEB, 2002). The main principles of the content of religious culture and ethics can be described in this way:

- *Religion gives meaning to human life.*
- *Religious and ethical values help living a life which is commensurate with human dignity.*

The model emphasizes that religion is a social phenomenon encompassing the communicational codes necessary for people to comprehend one another, as well as the nature of the relationship between God and humanity. Building upon these core principles, a theoretical framework was developed. The central concepts within this framework include respect for the value of being human, respect for different thoughts and interpretations, respect for freedom, respect for anything moral, and respect for cultural heritage. These principles collectively reflect the stance taken toward religious education. This theoretical framework serves as a guide for developing textbooks and facilitates communication with students on religious subjects (İlköğretim DKAB Öğretim Programları, 2000; MEB, 2002; Selçuk, 1998; 1999; 2002; 2006; Selçuk, Albayrak & Bozkurt, 2010; Selçuk, 2012a; Tosun, 2001).

The educational model of 2000 is designed to be non-confessional/ transdenominational and grounded in the principle of delivering religious instruction based on the primary sources of the respective religion. The content is intentionally crafted to be universally accepted by the followers of that religion, with the overarching goal of imparting information rather than advocating for any specific viewpoint. Notably, the curriculum avoids delving into diverse interpretations, practices, variations in denominations, or communities. Instead, it is designed to offer students a comprehensive understanding of the religion at a broader level (Tosun, 2008). Further, Religious Culture and Ethics, influenced by an approach emphasizing learning from religion (Kızılabdullah & Yürük, 2008), typically incorporates a comprehensive curriculum.

Embracing educational approaches like the constructivist approach, multi-learning, and student-centered learning, the curriculum emphasizes active student engagement. The course, following a constructivist approach, focuses on fostering critical thinking. Instructors were guided to prioritize teaching methods, religious language, and specific knowledge and skills aligned with the principles of the constructivist approach in teacher training and in schools (Kızılabdullah, 2008).

The religious education programs in Türkiye of 2000 and of 2005 aim to foster students' individual, social, moral, cultural, and universal development through precise learning about religion and ethics. Grounded in the philosophy of 'lifelong learning' and 'learning to learn', the programs emphasize continuous development, adaptability, and perpetual openness to knowledge. Noteworthy principles include promoting tolerance, individual consciousness, rational and critical thinking, viewing humans as interconnected with the universe, and embracing different orientations within religion as a diversity enriching the understanding of religion across different eras and environments, rather than fostering discrimination (MEB, 2005).

The curriculum, moreover, addresses teachings on Islamic ethics, values, and moral principles, encompassing discussions on honesty, justice, compassion, and the cultivation of good character. Practical aspects of Islam, such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and other religious rituals, such as pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*), are also covered. While the course primarily focuses on Islam, it also includes major world religions like Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In this context, certain parts of the curriculum involve comparative studies of different religions, aiming to foster understanding and tolerance. In this context, certain parts of the curriculum involve comparative studies of different religions, aiming to foster understanding and tolerance. In addition to religions, students are informed about different interpretations of Islam such as the Alevi community, Bektashism and Jafarism. At advanced levels of religious education, students may delve into the philosophy of religion, engaging in discussions about the nature of God, human existence, and religious philosophy (MEB, 2010).

In 2010, a comprehensive update aimed to answer the question 'What kind of religious education?' by emphasizing the holistic nature of the human being, encompassing biological, social, cultural, and moral aspects as both the subject and object of education. The program prioritized values such as respect for

human rights, freedom of thought, individual freedoms, ethical values, and cultural heritage (MEB, 2010). In 2018, further changes continued to prioritize some pedagogical approaches such as constructivist learning, multiple intelligence theory, student-centered learning, and skill-based learning. This skills-based approach aims to help students interpret religious and moral concepts while developing fundamental skills like research, inquiry, problem-solving, and communication (MEB, 2018).

The Religious Culture and Ethics course in Türkiye is noteworthy for at least four key points. Firstly, it is mandatory, with no withdrawal or alternative options for Muslim students who choose not to enroll in the course. Secondly, the curriculum is interdisciplinary, fostering a relationship between social sciences and Islamic sciences to integrate theological content and new pedagogical approaches in education. Thirdly, the curriculum is non-confessional, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of Islam for all students. Fourthly, the course establishes a space for learning about religions and faiths other than Islam.

In this article, we focus on the question of the implementation of the program from the teacher training point of view. Studying teacher training is significant because teachers are the key agents in implementing the curriculum. Their personal perspectives of curriculum and classroom practices are crucial for understanding and meaningful learning. Consequently, the philosophy of teacher training should not be separated from the philosophy of the curriculum. Teachers are presumed to be the generators of knowledge in responding to the challenges of education.

Throughout the history of Turkish education, teachers have been regarded as ‘exemplary individuals’, ‘role models’, and the embodiment of desirable behavior (Şişman, 2011, p. 5). Until the final era of the Ottoman Empire, teachers were traditionally trained in *madradas*. The madrasa is not only a teacher-training institution, but also the main body of Islamic religious education, which has its origins in the Islamic religious education given by the Prophet Muhammad in the classrooms established next to the mosque (Doğan, 1997; Zengin, 2008). The shift toward innovative education movements led to the establishment of *Darülmüallimin* (Teacher Training Institute for the Education of Boys) in 1848, deviating from the traditional *madrada(h)* system. The Maarif-i Umumiye Regulation in 1869 outlined criteria for the appointment and promotion of teachers. *Darülmüallimat* (Teacher Training Institute for the Education of Girls) was inaugurated in the same year, categorized into different school levels. Today, the current practice involves the responsibility of faculties of theology or Islamic sciences in training religious education teachers for all levels. The cyclical nature of changes in the training of religious education teachers reflects the ongoing efforts to align educational practices with societal needs, constitutional requirements, and evolving educational philosophies (Aydn, 2005).

## 2. Setting the Scene: Competencies in Teacher Training and the Challenges

The requirement for religious education teachers to possess specific competencies aligns with the broader expectations for teachers in various subjects. These competencies encompass both general and specialized areas, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the teaching profession. In the realm of religious education, teacher competencies are divided into three overarching domains. Firstly, *Field Knowledge* involves a profound grasp of subject-specific religious and moral content, along with familiarity with pertinent theological concepts. Secondly, *General Culture and General Ability Knowledge* extends beyond the subject matter, emphasizing a teacher’s cultural awareness, general knowledge, and cognitive abilities. This holistic approach aims for a well-rounded training that enables educators to engage with diverse topics. Thirdly, *Professional Knowledge of Teaching* focuses on pedagogical skills, encompassing educational theories, teaching strategies, classroom management, and the creation of an inclusive learning environment. The official documents declare that religious education teachers must harmonize these competencies not only to possess in-depth subject knowledge but also to convey it

effectively through appropriate pedagogical methods. The outlined knowledge and skills for prospective religious education teachers cover a broad spectrum, ranging from basic concepts and societal mindsets to critical inquiry and the promotion of peaceful aspects, ensuring a comprehensive preparation for the complex task of imparting religious education. This comprehensive framework is designed to elevate the quality of education and to contribute to the holistic development of students (MEB, 2017).

Over the past 150 years, significant progress has been made in teacher training, but challenges persist in fully professionalizing the field. The variation in the quality of teacher preparation programs remains an issue, with some institutions offering comprehensive training while others fall short. Standardizing and ensuring the quality of teacher education across institutions is therefore an ongoing challenge. *Additionally, aligning teacher education programs with the evolving needs of the education system and a rapidly changing society is crucial. Mechanisms for continuous professional development need to be established to support teachers in keeping them up-to-date with pedagogical innovations, educational technologies, and changes in the curriculum and standards.* The recognition and status of the teaching profession also vary, highlighting the need to enhance prestige and societal recognition for the professionalization of the field. Developing fair and effective systems for teacher evaluation and accountability, addressing diversity and inclusion in teacher education, integrating technology, and preparing teachers for globalized educational contexts are among the persistent challenges that require concerted efforts. Moreover, the gap between educational policies aimed at improving teacher training and their effective implementation poses another persistent challenge, also requiring coordinated efforts to ensure policies translate into tangible improvements in teacher preparation.

Addressing these challenges requires ongoing collaboration among policymakers, educators, and teacher training institutions. Commitment to continuous improvement, research-informed practices, and a focus on the evolving needs of students and society will be essential in further professionalizing teacher training. All these challenges are significant aspects within teacher training systems and worth thorough discussions. Within the scope of this article, we would like to prioritize the discussion of the principle 'Alignment with Educational Needs' as a primary challenge.

When it comes to the most important educational aim of 'creating meaning in life', which was stated in the curriculum of the 2000s, RE continues to fail to secure either epistemic or existential meaning for both teachers and students. Meaning and purpose lie at the heart of any religion. Yet most teenagers today may not be prepared to accept beliefs handed down by tradition or by authority. They must discover the meaning for themselves. Search for meaning is the most universal quest and journey. It is indeed up to the individuals to construct their journeys. No one can take the place of someone else. The search is personal, but the journey is not private. It is becoming clear that RE is facing a significantly different world from that of the beginning of the 2000s when the program put forward the principle of 'creating meaning'. The landscape within which we teach is changing, as is the perception of our subject. We now realize, more so than previously, that people experience reality in many ways. Through media, economic exchange, the transfer of knowledge and technology, migration, travel, and the encounter with other cultures, religions become part of everyday life and a subject of education as well. People can relate to their faith, but education can no longer simply repeat the traditional answers to address the new questions and the demands of the time. The purpose of education is to offer signposts so that students can find their own way.

A recent report by the Institute of Islamic Thought in Türkiye (İslam Düşünce Enstitüsü [İDE], 2021) defines religious education as guidance for individuals' search for meaning. It states:

Religious Education and training; it is an education that gives the most accurate answer to individuals' search for meaning and helps people make sense of their own existence, beliefs, life, the world they live in, death, and the beyond. This education guides a person to identify the good, the true,

and the beautiful, to develop good relationships with themselves, their creator, their family and society, to find and live morality, virtue, and virtue along with transcendent metaphysical values. Indeed, religious education is an education and information process that complements all other human education processes, seeks to deepen in sciences in a way that establishes a relationship between human sciences, social sciences, and even physics and metaphysics, and enables us to look at knowledge and existence. Whether people choose to live a religious life or not should of course be left to their own choice. However, it is important for social peace that a person has the basic knowledge of the religion they were born into, knows the belief values of the society they live in, and learns the religious practices. This can only be achieved with a sound religious education (İDE RE Report, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>.

It is worth noting that the report provides a formidable account of what religious education is intended to offer students from many angles. However, looking at the report and the paradigm change over the past two decades suggests that both policymakers and educators in the field are unclear about how to implement the goals of the curriculum. They believe in the benefit of religious education and its contribution to the students' development and social life, and they never wish to give it up, but, unfortunately, they have burdened it with many expectations and different competing imperatives. Among them are, for example, understanding religious and cultural heritage, citizenship education, cultural awareness, moral development, nurturing spiritual life, field knowledge, familiarity with relevant theological concepts, pedagogical skills which cover diverse educational theories, teaching strategies, classroom management, and the creation of an inclusive learning environment (MEB, 2017). While this is not the place to further elaborate these implications, it is important to note that the report which is couched in the language of meaning making is promising. Religion offers meaning to the full range of a person's life span, provides answers to the deepest questions, and offers hope and significance with regard to almost every aspect of life.

We might approach the question of how to assist students' development of skills which are relevant to the interpretation of their experience by asking if the study of religion itself promotes such skills. In looking at this question in terms of creating meaning the report advocates the production of new content knowledge:

Considering all these objectives, it is a necessity to restructure the religious education carried out in our country. Religious education should be provided with content that can produce meaning, morality, and values that can guide people's search for meaning, especially that of the young (İDE RE Report, p. 11)<sup>2</sup>.

What is expected from religious education is to respond to the challenges that are raised by the problem of what it means to be a Muslim in a rapidly changing world. In relation to this quest another educational question comes to the fore: How Islam should be taught so that Muslims are able to live a meaningful life and become full members of their society. *Expanding and deepening the conversations we have with ourselves and with others* requires special attention and sustained efforts. The prominent feature of the program is the bold educational goals that it sets itself. We experience the message of the Qur'an in new contexts. Yet, for many students their encounters with the text in RE are limited to memorizing some parts of the text and extracting verses to be used to justify moral issues and acts. Students need to communicate with the text beyond memorization or superficial reading to unpick and explore the multiple layers of meaning. Clearly, an important aspect of religious education is to offer students

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' translation.

<sup>2</sup> Authors' translation.

opportunities to think about the existential questions of life and to both develop their own understanding and be respectful of the views of others.

If we accept such a responsibility of religious education in schools, two comments could be made concerning the above evolutions. First, the realization of meaningful learning depends on pedagogical content knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge is more than just knowledge of the content. It is about the ways of formulating and representing the subject that make it meaningful to the learners. Pedagogical content knowledge includes what is taught and how a subject is constructed. It is about how that knowledge needs to be understood and how that knowledge actually creates meaning. At the core of pedagogical content knowledge is the idea that teachers transform their content knowledge for the purposes of meaningful teaching. Pedagogical content knowledge in religious education highlights the interaction between religion and pedagogy in the classroom which is also a complex learning environment. The determinant of the pedagogical content knowledge for teaching Islam is *partly about the hermeneutic understanding of the text, and partly about providing thoughts from the Islamic worldview that teachers and students can use to think about the meaningfulness of their own lives and that of others*. These two essentials are strongly related to the role of the teacher. Teachers' ability of presenting ideas in diverse ways, connecting content to context effectively, thinking about the meanings of the content in ways other than their own plays a crucial role here.

As noted, since 2000 the curriculum has pointed out the important role that meaning-making processes play in religious education. However, research has been limited due to the lack of answers to the question of how to address the pedagogical content knowledge of meaning-making processes and outcomes (Akıncı, 2005; Aydın, 2009; Bahadır, 2017; Meydan, 2016; Meydan, 2019; Yüksel, 2020).

We would like to engage with the developments and join the discussion about what makes meaningful learning by presenting some projects of the Ankara School of which we have been part. We believe that a new search for meaningful learning around the globe can become a way to protect the words of God (*Kalam-ullah*) from the often-incorrect representations presented by different media and motivate the desire to learn from reliable sources. Here we advocate for the inclusion of the communication with the Qur'anic text in this article and recommend the integration of worldview education in assisting this endeavor.

### **3. Communicating with the Qur'an: Theology for the Individual Approach**

The importance of creating meaning makes approaching the text of special interest. The Qur'an is the first source that comes to mind when one speaks about Islam. It has always played a key role in the formation of religious thoughts and visions and ways of life. Because Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the Word of God, the Qur'an is one of the important sources from which people derive meaning. Once education became 'a search for meaning', the angle or the vision of reading the text became wider. Literal reading of the text yields one type of meaning, a social, political, or ideological reading yields another.

Works on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an give hope for the future when we move to the school context and tackle the question 'what hermeneutics do teachers apply to develop students' capacity in exploring meaning?' Historical awareness of the text is central for bridging the gap between past and present and formulating pedagogical content knowledge which has the vision to communicate with the text and helps to gain deep understanding.

In the following we will unfold such an approach as a 'theology for the individual'. The call for a 'theology for the individual' is not a call for a new theology, but an invitation to understand the historical and contextual situations of the era when the Qur'an was revealed. It is a call for Muslims to understand the causes of the revelation and have a useful and insightful vision to enable committed Muslims to live

in a modern, democratic, and plural society. It is not a type of theology but a way of thinking about Muslims' existential wisdom in daily life. It is a way to interact with text and context. It considers the context as a very important source to study in the light of historical sources and the traditions on the so-called 'occasions of the Revelation' (*Asbāb an-Nuzul*).

The term 'occasions of the Revelation' is used to describe the situations, arising at the time of the prophet Muhammad, that are considered causal for the passing down of one or more Qur'anic verses or even an entire surah. Tradition considers the causes of revelation as a very significant source for understanding the message, as they contain information about the context (Buladı, 2012; Robinson, 2003; Serinsu, 2013, p. 223). Occasions of the Revelation can be a source for educational processes as well. Learning from the causes enacts conversation with and discernment of the text and supports the educational process with the accumulated wisdom of the past and moreover assists the teacher to explore meaning in relation to the spirit of the times (Selçuk, 2021, p. 241).

The main benefit of the method we follow is its ability to consider individual needs, expectations, and problems in their own authentic environment. Our approach does not, however, ignore or refute the main principles or premises of Muslim theology. We do, however, think that theologians should address the questions and challenges people face in their respective contexts or situations. Further, when education clarifies whether the content is an aspect of universal meaning or one of situational meaning, we can interpret the results more clearly. Thus, the distinction between the universal and the contextual will help us to better incorporate new research into the current body of knowledge while constructing content knowledge. The theology for the individual approach assists students in dealing with the tension between the 'universal' and the 'particulars'. According to the hermeneutical circle, the 'particulars' must always be understood in relation to 'the universal' and 'the universal' in relation to 'the particulars'. Thus, the theology for the individual comes to the fore.

The theology for the individual approach aims not only to make theological generalizations about Islam but also to facilitate learning by asking questions and reflecting on the underlying meaning and uncovering the spirit of the message of Islam. This is one of the outcomes of this approach.

#### **4. Mapping an Islamic Worldview**

This approach has been tested in a project conducted in the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University that began in May 2011 and concluded four years later. It received support from the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TUBITAK) and consisted of five workshops, each lasting three to four days. The project was rewarding and productive and illustrated well that the theology for the individual approach integrated with worldview education has the potential to engage teachers of Islam actively as they engage their students and assist them in creating meaning for themselves and understanding others.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a systematic account of the Worldview Theory used in the project (A. Tosun, 2016; Valk, Albayrak & Selçuk, 2017; Valk & Tosun, 2016). If there is one which covers this, it is that it leads to a Socratic style of questioning; the method of asking 'and what does it mean for you?' showed that theological generalizations are not satisfactory. In repeatedly asking why one holds the views that one has, and what the sources of such views are, provided more solid grounding for the views that the participants of the project hold. The participants of the project joined in intense discussions with each other regarding the questions posed, raising further questions, testing deeply held assumptions, probing Qur'anic texts, confronting traditional understanding, and discerning between textual and cultural dictates. Insights from multiple perspectives, including theological, philosophical, historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives, deepened and expanded the discussions (Selçuk, 2009; 2012b; 2020a; Selçuk & Valk, 2018; Valk et al., 2017; Valk, Albayrak & Miedema, 2020; Valk & Selçuk,



2016; 2017). The insights from this project have some good applications that can transform how teachers construct pedagogical content knowledge and consequently how they can help their students see and exist in the world.

A brief introduction to the needs for meaning will be a helpful signpost to the way of presenting the basic principles of an Islamic worldview in creating meaning.

An interdisciplinary point of view suggests four basic needs for meaning: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. A person who can satisfy these four needs will probably feel that their life is satisfactory (Baumeister, 1991, p. 29). We present some responses from the Qur'an to pave the way for further discussions on the capacity of teacher training programs to address the quest for creating meaning.

*The first need is purpose.* This is the need to be able to interpret present events in relation to future events. It responds to some of life's ultimate or existential questions and gives expression to some of humankind's greatest fears and concerns: why we are here?, what is the meaning and purpose of life?, what are our responsibilities and obligations?, what is the purpose and what are the responsibilities of the human?, how do we gain a sense of right and wrong?, does a higher power exist?, is there a life after this life?

Big questions of life can be individual but also communal in scope, and incorporate various narratives, stories, sacred texts, symbols, and rituals. They deal with ontological questions—how we understand the nature of being. They deal with epistemological issues—how do we know what we know and what are our sources of knowledge? They deal with beliefs and values we all hold in common yet express in specific ways depending on circumstances.

At this point, what is clear from the perspective of an Islamic worldview is that since God created life, it has inherent meaning and purpose. The purpose and meaning of earthly life are to be in that place where humans can live fruitful and responsible lives in harmony with others and the natural environment.

Muslims come to know the meaning and purpose of life from the Qur'an, which is to know God through knowing themselves (*marifetullah*). To come to a more complete awareness and understanding of themselves, they turn towards the Divine, the source and ground of all of life. God instilled in the human awareness and knowledge of their own human nature (A'raf 7/172–173). God wanted Muhammad (Peace be upon Him [PuH]) to turn his face toward religion—creation—and asserted that only through following this path could he reach God (Rum 30/30). Humans came to recognize that they have an affinity with God yet discover that they can find God only in their hearts (Anfal 8/24).

*The second need is value*—that is, justification and legitimation. People need to be able to regard their actions as right and good. They desire to justify both past and present actions. Discerning responsibilities, therefore, requires careful reasoning, experience, knowledge of the context and even logical decision-making for them to bear their greatest fruit. It also entails a conscious desire to be responsible and to carry out one's responsibilities. Humans are decision-makers and must make moral choices. At every juncture, they are faced with new challenges, new situations, and new opportunities. But how will humans discern what is good and what is not good, what is the right thing to do and what is not? How humans decide the right course of action, and the criteria they use in doing so, is determined in part by the worldview they embrace. An Islamic worldview asserts that there is a difference between right and wrong. Discerning what that difference might be is a complex matter.

Muslims embrace a sacred text that assists them in discerning right from wrong. The Qur'an, as a revelation from God, becomes an authoritative source for Muslims in establishing what is right and what is wrong. The Qur'an does not, however, prescribe for humans what is right and wrong; it only reveals

principles. These principles serve as a crucial guide for giving assistance and direction in regard to right and wrong thoughts and actions. But these principles must always be applied to contexts that are seldom the same and are always changing. Muslims also recognize that right and wrong are socially and culturally developed and constructed.

*The third need is efficacy*—that is, a sense of being strong and capable of making a difference or having some impact on the world. Deprived of efficacy, people show many signs of distress and discomfort, including stress and learned helplessness.

The Qur'an speaks of God breathing into the human a breath of life—a breath from God—and thus the earth creature came into being (Hijr 15/29). Through this imagery, the Qur'an states that the earth creature is constantly dependent on God for the breath of life, that God is the source of all life, great and small. The earth is home to human creatures; it is where they live and have their being. That being, however, came into existence not by accidental and random evolutionary means. It came into existence through natural processes guided by the hand of God. God created humankind as a vice-regent (caliph), bestowed with certain authority, responsibility, and obligation for fulfilling its role on earth.

*The fourth need is a basis for self-worth*, which includes both self-respect and some claim to the respect of others. It is that unique combination of freedom and choice that gives to the human unique responsibilities and obligations. Humans are first of all responsible and accountable to their Creator—to God—for the life they have been given. They have a responsibility and obligation to live their life to the fullest, as creatures of the Divine and as understood according to the principles embedded in the Qur'an, in the place and context in which they find themselves. They have responsibilities and obligations to others, far and near, in their various roles as social, familial, political, and economic beings, concerned also for the welfare of those around them. As vice-regents, they are to care for the earth, to take from it all that is necessary for daily sustenance but not to abuse or destroy it in the process. Knowing oneself and others is an attempt to recognize where the differences lie and how to give greater understanding to those differences.

In a careful reading of the Qur'an, Muslims come to realize that differences between various religious worldviews are not something to be overcome; instead, they are to be respected. Other religious worldviews are not there to be eradicated, nor is there a compulsion to convert, for there is to be no coercion in Islam. If there is to be competition between different religious traditions, it should be focused on people increasing or enhancing goodness and benevolence in every sphere of life (Ma'ida 5/48). The Qur'an emphasizes that it is not religious differences but the quality of individual actions that should be the measurement of the validity of one's religious beliefs. Living in a secular society also results in some life changes for Muslims. But Muslims can make the social, cultural and political adjustments required in living in a secular society without losing the most important purposes of life: to live a life in relationship with God and to be a good person.

## 5. Conclusion

RE has undergone significant transformations in response to the country's secular principles since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Article 24 of the constitution of 1982 marked a crucial development, establishing RE as a compulsory subject for all students in state schools, except those holding different religions or faiths. The curriculum evolved in the 2000s with the 'Ankara Model', emphasizing a student-centered approach and incorporating learning principles based on expanded notions of respect and the skills of meaning making. Therefore, these objectives of RE require teachers to possess a deep understanding of religious content, cultural awareness, and effective pedagogical skills. However, challenges persist in fully professionalizing teacher training, standardizing quality across institutions, and aligning programs with innovative practices in society and education.

A critical challenge is the need for religious education to address the quest for meaning in students' lives. Despite the curriculum's emphasis on creating meaning, RE, provided by teachers in line with the training they receive, falls short, particularly in transforming the knowledge of Islam for the purpose of meaningful learning. To meet this challenge, the authors advocate for the 'theology for the individual' approach, incorporating worldview education to actively involve teachers. This way of learning entails a thorough examination of the Qur'an, placing significant emphasis on the awareness of its historical context and the circumstances surrounding revelations. Additionally, this approach raises the question of 'what it means to be a Muslim in this contemporary world' to form a bridge between past and today.

In conclusion, we hazard the modest prediction that integrating worldview education with the approach of the theology for the individual in teachers' professional learning will lead to new avenues of research that will allow us to investigate meaning making more thoroughly in the context of understanding oneself, others, and the deep meaning of the words of the Divine. This may furnish certain answers that can be satisfying for today but will invariably raise further questions for tomorrow.

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