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# Caring for *Fiṭra*: A Point of Encounter Between Islām and Montessori's Conception of the Child's Inner Potential

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**Abstract**

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in the Iranian provinces of Ostān-e Tehrān, Ostān-e Fārs, Ostān-e Bušehr, and Ostān-e Sīstān va Balūcistān and a noteworthy interview with a prominent *Āyatullāh* of the theocratic government, this article examines the environmental pressures acting upon *fiṭra* with the aim of highlighting both the educational opportunity to harness its potential and—as a distinctive contribution—the significance it may hold within Maria Montessori's spiritual sensibility. As research results reveal, inspired by the thought of the Italian pedagogist, for just over a decade a few pioneering Iranian educational psychologists have been assisting Muslim teachers in shifting their focus toward children's intrinsic motivation and respect for individual learning needs. Despite longstanding reluctance from the theocratic government, the syncretic approaches they have been promoting may prove effective in caring for the child's *fiṭra*. In the article, Islamic psychology and Montessori's perspective are juxtaposed, and tensions between educational needs and state concerns regarding the socio-political implications of such adoption are critically explored. The author concludes by reflecting on how adopting ideas from a different cultural milieu and adapting them to local educational contexts, far from implying submission to external intellectual hegemony, may unexpectedly yield positive learning outcomes.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Islamic religion, while *Šarīʿa* outlines the favourable conditions required to maintain order and foster inner purification (Baig, 2024), *fiṭra*[1] concerns the profound spiritual essence and propensity for good and devotion to God that is innate in all humans (Rassool, 2024). Understood as a natural disposition, it consists of the human being's instinctive awareness of God and self-surrender to Him and "man's inborn (De Souza, 2024), intuitive ability to discern between right and wrong, true and false, and, thus, to sense God's existence and oneness" (Asad, 1980/2003, p. 697, fn. 27). In etymological terms, the Arabic noun "*fiṭra*" may be translated as "origin", "disposition", or "instinct" (Ab Rahman, 2012), while "*iftār*", which shares the same root as "*fiṭr*", refers to the unfolding of new horizons that accompanies the end of an existing situation and the beginning of a new one (Tahir-ul-Qadri, 1985/1999, p. 6). Arabic lexicographers present a wide-ranging meaning of the root "*f-ṭ-r*", from which the term "*fiṭra*" derives. That is to say, "to split, to cleave, to crack, to bring forth", or "to produce, to create". When applied to objects such as camel, clay or dough, the verb "*faṭara*" signifies "milking", or "pressing and squeezing in order to bring out something". In the Holy Qurʾān, it appears eight times in the sense of "create" or "constitute", while its active participle form is used six times to describe God as the "Creator" (*Fāṭir*) of the heavens and the earth. In Islamic legal literature (*fiqh*), the term "*fiṭra*" is even used to signify the set of practices observed by the earlier prophets: the same recommended habits which the Prophet Muḥammad followed and prescribed for his community as well (Arif, 2023, pp. 79–80).

In its more commonly accepted sense, *fiṭra* represents the primordial nature of humankind (Qurʾān, 30:30). Intrinsic to it is the inclination to strive towards a "humanity" that is not the prerogative of a select number of individuals, nor of specific cultures or religions, but rather characterizes the people of every time and place. Among its features are humans' characteristics such as thinking, believing, conveying their thoughts to others, recording their experiences, producing information, seeking the truth, loving, falling in love, creating civilisation, making future plans, using their rational potential, inclining to beautiful things, making new inventions, adapting to new circumstances, and so forth (Charlesworth, 2024; Gonzales et al., 2025; Hadi et al., 2024; Jämsen et al., 2022; Noguchi & Mong, 2021). The intellectual and philosophical trends that took place in the history of humanity, together with discoveries and the creation of civilisations, are the results of these features (Bor & Şahin, 2018, p. 1767). According to Syamsuddin Arif (2023), *fiṭra* may correspond to what modern psychology calls "instinct" (biological *fiṭra*), defined as the inherent tendency of a living organism to exhibit a particular complex pattern of behaviour (p. 81), or as the natural inclination to embrace Islām (theological *fiṭra*) and submit to the will and law of Allāh (p. 83). It may be interpreted as the sound nature by which an individual intuitively knows what is true and what is false, or as something within us that acts as an internal judge of the worth of all our

[1] In Fārsi, the Arabic-Qurʾānic term "*fiṭra*" is rendered as "*fiṭrat*" (or *fetrat*). Although the research was conducted in Iran, in the present article, the author chooses to use the original Arabic-Qurʾānic expression.

actions, and influences how we behave by making us experience guilt and shame when we do wrong (epistemological *fiṭra*; ethical or moral *fiṭra*) (Arif, 2023, pp. 87–89). From an ethical perspective, it may also be identified with the inclination to help others without feeling obligated by duty, loyalty, or religious reasons (p. 91).

Through *fiṭra*, the belief in the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) becomes integral to one's innate nature (Mohamed, 1995, p. 3; Alifah et al., 2015, p. 37). The Qurʾān itself hints at a common human inherent endeavour to recognise the Divine power behind creation as a form of "remembering" of the *fiṭra* covenant (Ellethy, 2022, p. 75)—namely, that foundational pact which affirmed Islām's monotheistic nature (Sajjādī, 2010).

As the primordial nature that God conferred upon humankind, *fiṭra* implies a connection with the Divine that manifests itself in every single soul. It represents the spiritual inclination inherent in children before they receive any religious education. This assumption is confirmed in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḫārī*[2], wherein Abū Huraira attributes to Muḥammad the teaching that all children are born with *fiṭra*, even if their parents decide to bring them up within Judaism, Christianity, or Magianism (al-Bukhārī, ca. 846/1994, p. 338). By virtue of such *ḥadīṯ*, according to Islām, it is important to provide education to children from an early age, so that they may soon develop a spirit of monotheism, piety, and faith towards Allāh, in accordance with their nature.

The first environment in which a child receives this form of education is necessarily the family. This means that the primary responsibility lies with the parents, who are obligated to nurture, guide, and provide appropriate teachings, especially in terms of religious education (Alifah et al., 2015; Rizal, 2018; Uswatun & Rohayati, 2023). Parents play a strategic role in their children's growth, and it is their duty to begin exploring their offspring's potential by monitoring their activities, warning them when they make mistakes, and transmitting religious values within the context of daily family life (Ansori, 2023).

In newborn children, *fiṭra* is intact but not yet perfectly actualised. As conveyed in the *ḥadīṯ*, they are exposed to their surroundings, which inevitably affect its expression (Kiayi, 2021; Harmidi et al., 2024). Since the traits of the parents have a significant impact on those inherited by their children, the role of the family becomes crucial in creating a pious environment, nurturing a positive image of religion and faith, and preserving and developing the gift of *fiṭra*, so that children may acquire a noble character (Herawati et al., 2021). Social and ethical consciousness itself, which represents one of the most salient dimensions of human development, emerges during childhood. As children acquire values and social norms through interaction (Raḥmānī Bījārī & Neẓāmzādeh, 2019), the domestic sphere assumes a pivotal role in the transmission of values, the shaping of personality, and the regulation of behaviour. When grounded in dialogue, respect, and sharing, the family environment fosters the acquisition of relational competences. By serving as a mediator, parental example plays a pivotal role in shaping the child's ability to participate in collaborative learning processes, while simultaneously fostering the

[2] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḫārī*, *ḥadīṯ* 23:680.

comprehension and assimilation of new perspectives. It further contributes to the formation of cultural identity (Alak, 2025)—a dimension of undeniable relevance, since, within a properly Islamic framework, it is through the preservation and transmission of culture that both the individual and society may attain well-being (Bhat, 2016).

It is worth noting that the term "parents", as used in the cited *ḥadīṯ*, has been interpreted (Asad, 1980/2003) as not confining the responsibility for influencing children solely to primary caregivers, but rather as extending it to the broader social environment surrounding the child. In other words, it encompasses the agency of both sets of people theorised by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological theory: a "microsystem" consisting of the groups with whom the child is in direct contact and a "macrosystem" formed by the culture and values of the broader social sphere.

Although it acknowledges that there can be no change in Allāh's creation (Qurʾān, 30:30) and that *fiṭra*, in itself, cannot be altered (Javid, 2024, p. 173), Islamic psychology observes that, despite their inherent orientation towards good, the behaviour of human beings is significantly influenced by external factors. Together with intrinsic factors such as heredity and personality, external factors—such as the family, the school, and the community—contribute meaningfully to the child's developmental trajectory (Alifah et al., 2015; Al Afify, 2018; Kiayi, 2021; Harmidi et al., 2024). Therefore, although the physical and psychological aspects a child possesses play a crucial role, innate and environmental factors are deeply intertwined and difficult to separate due to their strong interconnection (Rismando, 2024).

The human being, in general, is exposed to continuous sensory and cognitive pressure which, according to Islamic thought, veils their perception of truth (Sajjādī, 2010). This means that, even though virtue or knowledge of the good may be considered both innate and acquired, the conscious realisation of this inborn endowment of the soul depends on circumstances and interaction with the surrounding environment (Mohamed, 1995), which inevitably extends its influence to the child's religious devotion (Fitrianah, 2019; Herawati et al., 2021), as well as to their physical and psychological development. This constitutes the principal rationale behind the need for sustained effort, consistent guidance and careful oversight.

The potential given by God to humans is meaningless if not explored and used properly (Ansori, 2023). *Fiṭra* "is like gold and oil hidden in the earth's bowels" (Ghalib, 2023, p. 78) and, like gold and oil, needs to be revealed and brought to light. As our native inclination towards the good, it must be protected and nourished in order to attain its full potential (Ab Rahman, 2012). Accordingly, education may serve as a pivotal instrument in preserving and tending to it with care.

Although there is keen awareness surrounding the issue, traditional Islamic educational systems do not always succeed in responding to the needs of the child in modern society, despite the significant role they have always played in the transmission of knowledge. Intent on bridging this gap, and having recognised the considerable impact of education on the development of children's mental abilities, creativity, and problem-solving capacity, a new sensitivity has gradually emerged over the past three lustres

among educators and psychologists in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This shift reflects a growing inclination towards the adoption of innovative and engaging educational methods. The approaches in question aim to stimulate critical thinking, active participation, and the ability to cope with difficulties, which in turn help refine logical skills, strengthen children's self-confidence, and enhance their capacity to deal with more complex situations (Oubâlâsi & Hosseini-Nasab, 2015). Throughout the time span considered, some Iranian studies have confirmed that an adequate and stimulating educational environment, along with teaching methods based on interaction, autonomy, and active learning, can improve learners' inventiveness and emotional balance, while learning environments that encourage reflection, discussion, and active exploration have the merit of contributing to the development of independent thinking (Oubâlâsi & Hosseini-Nasab, 2015).

Data from fieldwork conducted by the author complements the aforementioned observations, additionally suggesting that the intention of "caring for *fiṭra*" necessarily presupposes an educational framework capable of seeking to activate and refine the latent potential of the individual, together with their inborn talents. Hence, in order to succeed in this challenging task, Iranian psychologists and teachers may be motivated to explore reliable methods and appropriate techniques originating outside the Islamic tradition, such as the one proposed by Maria Montessori, which, in just over a century, has convincingly proven its efficacy across diverse cultural contexts.

As a distinctive contribution to their endeavour, the present study explores the theoretical resonance between the Islamic concept of *fiṭra* and the Montessori conception of childhood, and reflects on the potential of the latter's pedagogical method to care for the child's *fiṭra* and support its early formation. Furthermore, by intentionally posing two provocative questions, the paper aims to stimulate critical reflection on the implicit reasons that have fuelled the longstanding reluctance of governmental authorities to accept the introduction of Western or syncretic approaches into the country, even when these appear to be objectively suited to the context.

## METHOD

This essay is informed by both bibliographic research and empirical fieldwork, the latter personally undertaken by the author with a qualitative ethnographic method and the use of in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Candra Susanto et al., 2024; Nascimento et al., 2022; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021; Swain & King, 2022). Interviews and meetings were authorized by the Iranian government via the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO Tehrān), which checked and certified the fieldwork carried out during the months of January, February, and March 2017. The research was conducted by the author at kindergartens and primary schools in the Iranian provinces of Ostān-e Tehrān, Ostān-e Fārs, Ostān-e Bushehr and Ostān-e Sīstān-Balūcistān. It also benefited from the kind participation of Iranian clerics, preschool teachers, university professors, psychologists, and philosophers of education from Imam Khomeini's Education and

Research Institute, Al-Mustafa International University, Shiraz University, and the Cultural and Research Center Āyatullāh Rashād.

The field study was designed by the author with the aim of shadowing and collaborating with independent educational psychologists who, through private workshops held across the country, were pioneering the training of primary and preschool teachers in the use of materials developed within the method and in Maria Montessori's conception of childhood. It investigated the compatibility between Islamic sensibilities and the Montessori perspective, and considered the potential of her pedagogical approach to support a form of care attuned to the child's *fiṭra*.

The researcher's knowledge of Islamic culture, combined with a close study of Montessori literature, was subsequently employed to formulate a scientifically grounded rationale intended to legitimise, in the eyes of the theocratic government, the benefits of embracing Montessori pedagogy within the Islamic Republic. This specific phase of the field research aimed to safeguard the security of the Iranian actors involved in the pioneering project by presenting to the Šīʿite clergy the affinities between Montessori's conception of the child's inner potential and the Islamic concept of *fiṭra*—a comparative analysis intended to mitigate resistance and, consequently, to facilitate the introduction and dissemination of Maria Montessori's educational approach throughout Iran. For the same safeguarding reasons, prior to publishing the contents of the present article, the author chose to wait for the unfolding of events, the loosening of governmental restrictions, the gradual opening of the first institutions explicitly adopting the Montessori method, as well as the publication of scholarly works in Fārsi reporting the results of research conducted within the country by psychologists of Iranian nationality.

The study was conducted ethically and transparently, with full respect for all participants and stakeholders involved (Colonello, 2021), including the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which formally authorised the author's presence in the field and extended to her the discretionary opportunity to carry out research.

For transparency, prior to concluding her fieldwork, the author submitted to ICRO Tehrān a formal report containing detailed information regarding her movements within the country and the individuals formally interviewed at the academic institutions visited.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Is *fiṭra* a trainable disposition?

According to Islām, the principal task of education is to nurture the personal growth of a human being. Islamic education does not merely focus on the transfer of information between teachers and students; it also aims to form characters, suppressing individuals' negative tendencies (Gidayani et al., 2022), and shaping personality in accordance with Islamic teachings: namely, prioritising moral and spiritual values (Sunarto et al., 2024). From this perspective, the school is viewed as a formal educational institution expected to provide guidance, teaching, and training, enabling children to holistically and optimally develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potential throughout the learning process (Alifah et al., 2015; Kiayi, 2021; Bahrun

et al., 2023; Warsah et al., 2024). The same potential that *fiṭra* represents has a positive impact on human development if managed properly, and education, when aware of the concept of human nature, may lead to "humanize humans" (Harmidi et al., 2024).

As a privileged means of maximising human potential, such a form of education should be capable of fostering physical and spiritual growth in order to generate "well-rounded individuals" (Napitupulu, 2022; Warsah et al., 2024). However, for this goal to be realised, parents and educators should grasp the potential of children to influence future ideals and civilisation, and provide a supportive environment (Nuranisa et al., 2025).

It is worth remembering that Muslims are asked to be constantly engaged in increasing their learning and understanding—"from the cradle to the grave" (*min al-mahd ilā al-laḥd*). ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (599-661 A.D.), who was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet and the first ʾImām, according to *Iṯnā ʿašariyya* (Twelver Šīʿism), is said to have suggested the pedagogical recommendation to strive for progressive transformational growth. In *Ġorar al-ḥikam* (Ibn Abi Talib, 2012), we find verses rich in metaphor, poetically revealing that

> 109. The best of all knowledge is that which reforms you. 110. The best knowledge is that which is accompanied by action. 111. The best of knowledge is that by which you reform your right guidance, and the worst of it is that by which you corrupt your Hereafter. 112. Take from every knowledge the best of it, for indeed the bee partakes from the most beautiful of every flower, so two precious substances are produced from it: in one of them is a cure for the people (i.e. honey), and the other is a means of illumination (i.e. wax) […]. 144. Every time the knowledge of a person increases, his concern for his soul increases, and he exerts his efforts in training and reforming it. (par. *Knowledge*, aphorisms 109–112, 144)

In meeting the challenges implicated in attaining higher levels of development, if the influences emanating from the environment are recognised as agents of disturbance, distraction, or corruption, guarding over *fiṭra*, and doing the most in our power to care for it, become key. From this perspective, it is vital to provide forms of caring education that take both the macro and micro levels of the social system into account. In other words, the fact that external forces influence the trajectories of individuals offers an urgent rationale for developing an educational approach that helps to safeguard the "natural disposition" of humans that Islām holds in such high regard.

This need for education to care for the inherent, divine essence of the human being unequivocally emerged during an interview with a leading exponent of Šīʿite religious education who holds a teaching role at one of the major academic institutions in the Islamic Republic. During our meeting in Qum, focused on the Islamic concept at issue and how education might best care for it, the eminent Āyatullāh ʿAbbās Kaʿbi[3] explained

[3] Iranian Āyatollāh ʿAbbās Kaʿbi currently holds the position of Vice President of the Security Committee of the Council of Experts and of the Qum Seminary Teachers' Association, having previously served as one of the twelve members of the Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The *Āyatollāh*

to me that *fiṭra* is at the root of human beings' interest in pursuing goodness, following God and seeking justice. As the *Āyatullāh* pointed out, due to its intimate relationship with the divine nature of the human soul, it inspires the loftiest and noblest values and the will to avoid harming others. In his opinion, it is our responsibility to care for, protect, and educate our *fiṭra* and one's own family may serve as the primary context for initiating such training.

As the high-ranking cleric pointed out, this form of education begins the moment children "open their mouth". The way a mother speaks to a child, the lullabies she sings and the love she displays are of considerable significance in shaping the child's education. Equally important are the parents' interests, beginning with the movies they watch, the pleasure they take in art, the degree of responsibility they express in their matrimonial relationship, and the emotional regard they show for one another and for others.

Allāh endows humans with *fiṭra* from their time in the womb. In line with the *Āyatullāh*'s reflections on the foundational role of family in nurturing *fiṭra* and significantly influencing the embryo's developmental trajectory, contemporary Islamic psychology likewise underscores the significance of early parental influence—including a couple's readiness, or lack thereof, to accept the prospect of pregnancy; the parents' reception of their newborn; parenting patterns; emotional stimuli, and affective touch (Rismando, 2024).

Spiritual development and psychological growth are two fundamental aspects in the formation of human personality, and the dynamic interaction between these dimensions carries significant implications for Islamic educational psychology, which seeks to integrate Islamic values with contemporary psychological principles. In pursuit of this objective, Islamic psychospiritual therapy integrates traditional Islamic healing practices with modern psychological approaches, merging structured intervention programmes that combine cognitive-behavioural techniques with Islamic principles, such as the recitation of *ḏikr* as a mindfulness-based stress reduction technique (Syafii & Azhari, 2025). The ultimate goal of psychospiritual therapy is to restore patients to a state of connection with their *qalb* (heart), the locus of inner guidance (Skinner, 2019), and, by incorporating psychospiritual principles into curricula and teaching methods, education may be more effectively tailored to learners' needs, while supporting the regulation of emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration (Warsah et al., 2024).

As Āyatullāh ʿAbbās Kaʿbi further observed, beyond the conscious parental presence, a subsequent pivotal factor in a child's developmental path is the learning environment shaped by the school system. Reflecting on this issue, the eminent Iranian cleric explained that, along with the cruelty of governments, the current way of life is weakening *fiṭra* rather than strengthening it, and noted that social management contributes not only to its corruption but even to its destruction in children and adolescents. This amounts to an injustice towards younger generations, whereas, by

generously shared his time and expertise with the author during a video interview held in Qum within the framework of the fieldwork, on 22 February 2017.

contrast, humanity deserves systems that cultivate its highest values and promote goodness in both being and action.

As Sayyid Ibrāhīm Sajjādī (2010) observes, in the original state of *fiṭra* the human being is potentially the perfect vicegerent (*al-khalīfah*). However, due to forgetfulness, people tend to exploit the power and privilege granted to humanity for selfish ends. The power of intellect and will, bestowed upon humanity by virtue of its status, has been employed for evil and destructive purposes precisely because its role as a servant of God has been neglected. According to the Iranian researcher (2010), culture and media can shape both the mind and the heart to the point of rendering the human being incapable of seeking or recognizing the truth. From his perspective, the decline of *fiṭra* is also driven by factors such as population growth, the pursuit of pleasure, material abundance, satanic temptation, and attraction to what is inauthentic. According to Sajjādī (2010), education should therefore take on the responsibility of providing learners with an environment that respects their natural inclination toward truth, fosters attentiveness to their inner voice, and, above all, preserves their original disposition. It should encourage them to distance themselves from harmful cultural and environmental influences and to rid themselves of the inner barriers described in the Qurʾān as seals upon the heart (*ṭabʿ*), spiritual rust (*rān*), and mental shackles (*aghlāl*) (Qurʾān, 2:7; 6:46; 7:157; 45:23; 83:14), all of which interfere with the educational intention of caring for *fiṭra*.

Childhood is considered the golden age for strengthening and nurturing *fiṭra* as the child's imagination, curiosity, and capacity to absorb spiritual values are exceptionally active during this stage. In this regard, *fiṭra*-based education emphasizes the importance of enjoyable learning methods tailored to the child's nature (Alifah et al., 2015, p. 38).

As the *Āyatullāh* himself pointed out during our interview, children should not be forced to turn away from their natural inclinations; rather, their talents should be appropriately trained.

**Fostering Talents**

According to Āyatullāh ʿAbbās Kaʿbi, the fostering of talents is beneficial and serves as a means of guiding children to do good for their society, regardless of what specific role they will play once grown up. "It does not matter if the child is going to be a doctor, an engineer, a businessman, a farmer, a cleric, or a teacher. To direct oneself towards *fiṭra* means to direct one's talents towards the good. According to their *fiṭra*, every human finds their path to God", he confidently asserted.

In the *Āyatullāh*'s opinion, respecting the inner nature of the child, and electing to guide it towards goodness and perfection, reflects respect for the Divine Will Itself. Getting in touch with God, he clarified, is not necessarily confined to a church or a mosque: it is an intentional choice. In this sense, the intention to follow the propensities of *fiṭra* and the decision to deploy one's talents to further the good are among the many paths leading to Allāh.

We should not think of talents as spontaneous and crystallised expressions of peculiar individual qualities. Rather, they should be understood as modes of expression that, once recognised, must be refined and improved through practice and constant effort.

In classical Greek tradition, such virtues were embodied in the concept of "*areté*" (*ἀρετή*), or the ability to make efficient use of one's predispositions by means of exercising and applying them. The Greek concept of "*areté*" further encompassed the meanings of "esteem", "honour", and "splendour" and presupposed the putting into practice of expertise. The "virtuous one" was perceived as possessing self-mastery and the ability to regulate desire, with free will exercised in full awareness of the facts—without being unduly swayed by external conditioning (Natoli, 2010). The most esteemed men of a Greek *pólis* (*πόλις*) "were expected not only to take part in the governance of the city-state, to be able and courageous soldiers and athletes, to be wise managers of their personal affairs, and to be generous to their friends, but also to be literate and to have some musical ability, to list just a few 'excellences'" (Paxton, 1985, p. 67), and "*paideía*" (*παιδεία*) served as the holistic educational framework within which *areté* was fostered. Human excellence thus came to define the "*kalòs kagathós*" (*καλὸς κἀγαθός*), the archetype of the noble and virtuous citizen: one whose outward appearance reflected inner moral integrity, civic responsibility, and cultivated character.

Just as great athletes, violinists, or yogis must consistently devote time and effort to maximising their results, similarly each individual life trajectory may be read as a performance that is deserving of education and constant investment.

With regard to the purpose of caring for human inherent nature and training the child's talents, Āyatullāh Kaʿbi assumed that a school system can educate effectively as long as it truly cares for *fiṭra* and remains alert to the risk of overlooking or neglecting the soul and its relationship with God. He suggested that human beings need to be formed and educated in accordance with the perfection exemplified by the figure of the Imām, whom the Šīʿa views as the perfect man and leader: one who is familiar with the depths of human nature and sets out to illuminate the intellect of others, guiding them toward the right path, while fully respecting their choices and freedoms.

A key premise here is that the initial step in developing Muslims' *fiṭra* involves engaging with certain foundational questions raised by the *Āyatullāh*—questions that religion has historically sought to answer within its own epistemological framework:
Where do we come from? Where are we going to?
What principles govern our existence within creation?
And, above all—what can we do to fulfil our humanity?

**Bridging Paradigms**

In Western culture, the Latin verbs "*educĕre*" and "*educāre*", from which the term "education" is derived, are mutually complementary. While the latter may be translated as "to guide, to nurture, to grow", and implies the responsibility of educators to take care of children, the former refers to "drawing out, extracting, bringing forth", and implies attending to those natural talents of the child that the educator is expected to recognise

and support in their full development. Is it merely coincidental that the same root "*f-ṭ-r*", from which the term "*fiṭra*" derives, conveys such closely related meanings?

The task of education is to facilitate the recognition, appreciation, and expression of each individual's natural inclinations and intrinsic potential. By providing a suitable context in which the child's inherent disposition may flourish, such an approach would facilitate the concrete manifestation of *fiṭra* in everyday life settings and prevent children from losing their spontaneity and internalising inauthentic emotions, desires and goals that would inappropriately replace the original leanings of their souls.

In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized the importance of respecting the natural essence of each human being and the peculiarity of every individual's spirit within the context of education. In *Émile ou De l'éducation*, he formulated this insight in the following terms: "Prudent man, spy out nature for a long time; observe your pupil well before saying the first word to him. To start with, let the germ of his character reveal itself freely; constrain it in no way whatsoever in order better to see the whole of it. Do you think this time of freedom is lost for him?" (1762/1979, p. 94).

A source of inspiration to many twentieth-century educators, the Genevan philosopher can thus be regarded as the forerunner of educational systems that adapt to the child by responding to the unique qualities of each learner, rather than imposing a conformist and ultimately ineffective corrective model of education, which, in its inflexibility, risks robbing the children of their peculiar personal characteristics and preventing their essence from expressing itself fully.

Life has an intrinsic tendency to grow, expand, and express possibilities; if this natural propensity is suppressed, a destructive impulse arises, accompanied by the craving for power or submission (Fromm, 1941/2015, p. 231). The inability to act spontaneously, to express what one truly feels and thinks, and the consequent need to display a pseudo-ego both to others and oneself, will foster feelings of inferiority and weakness (p. 225). As Howard Gardner (1983/2016) reminds us, intelligence does not solely express itself in terms of linguistic, communicational, or logical-mathematical skills, which underpin the ability to analyse problems and deductively identify solutions. It also manifests itself through spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, naturalistic, philosophical-existential, and even spiritual abilities, which can appear at different levels of development and operate synergistically.

In a similar vein, contemporary Islamic psychology holds that every human being possesses the right to grow in alignment with their developmental tasks.

From its earliest foundations, Islām has promoted measures aimed at fostering optimal personal growth. Among the rights accorded to the child within the Islamic tradition are the guarantee of physical and emotional safety, the provision of kindness and attentive care, moral guidance from caregivers, and the nurturing of cognitive-emotional stability through the cultivation of comfort, self-confidence, and constructive thought. Children are also entitled to education and the development of practical skills appropriate to their stage of growth, as well as the right to nurture their intellect, expand their knowledge, and deepen their cultural understanding through the acquisition of various

sciences essential for life. Healthy development further requires attention to physical well-being, first and foremost through proper nutrition, hydration, and movement-based activity. Nonetheless, children should be encouraged to engage in religious practices and to develop the ability to regulate their impulses and emotions (Rismando, 2024). Likewise, children's natural inclination represented by *fiṭra* "needs to be nurtured through education, direction, and learning from an early age to maintain their inherent purity" (2024, p. 125).

**Iqbāl's "*Ḫūdī*" versus Montessori's "Nucleus".**

Muḥammad Iqbāl (Iqbal, 1915/1920) opted for the expression "*ḫūdī*" to denote a form of individuality grounded in self-respect, self-trust, and the affirmation of one's being in service of life and the pursuit of justice. According to ʿAllāma Iqbāl, *ḫūdī* is conceived as a radiant core, a luminous nucleus, the repository of the multifaceted potentialities inherent in human nature. Its operation is processual and dynamic. Its inherent mutability reflects a deliberate effort to replace the static notion of "being" with the generative potential of "becoming": a concept that, in the thought of the Pakistani philosopher, extends beyond the individual to encompass the social sphere. The educator is thus expected to possess a nuanced understanding of the human attributes embodied by *ḫūdī*, as well as an awareness of the existential heights that may remain inaccessible should its development be neglected (Ali & Hussien, 2017). The principal aim of education, therefore, ought to be the holistic formation of the individual in the fullest sense. The cultivation of *ḫūdī* (Iqbal, 1915/1920), as the self-directed pursuit of individuation (Jung, 1928/2019) and the transcendence of egoic constraints in favour of the expressive wholeness of the Self, may be understood as an act of care directed toward the innate essence known in Islamic thought as *fiṭra*.

Iqbāl contends that the child already possesses a fully activated *ḫūdī*, an inner force driven by a desire for growth and self-realization. For this reason, children should be encouraged to engage with the sciences and the arts, which serve as vital instruments for the preservation and enrichment of life. From Iqbāl's perspective, *ḫūdī* constitutes a reservoir of latent capacities, inherently disposed toward formative and intellectually stimulating experiences. It is called to actualize itself, to assert its presence in the world through the full expression of its spiritual and cultural wealth. The nurturing of *ḫūdī* should therefore become the central axis of an educational philosophy committed to fostering its flourishing and optimising its performative potential (Ali & Hussien, 2017).

During the same period in which the Pakistani philosopher was composing his *Asrār-i Khūdī*, Maria Montessori's educational philosophy had already begun to take its first steps on Italian soil.

Maria Tecla Artemisia Montessori was born in Chiaravalle in 1870 and pursued her studies in Rome. She was one of the first women in Italy to graduate in Medicine (1896) and to work at the psychiatric clinic of the University, where she devoted herself to the rehabilitation of children with cognitive disabilities. She later obtained a degree in Philosophy, to deepen her understanding of Pedagogy through Anthropology and Experimental Psychology, and began teaching Pedagogical Anthropology. In 1934, due

to mounting tensions with the Mussolini regime, she felt compelled to leave Italy. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, she arrived in India, where she spent nearly a decade disseminating her educational approach and developing new pedagogical perspectives. She initially settled in Adyar, near present-day Chennai, and later relocated to Kodaikanal in the 1940s. She engaged with figures such as Gandhi, Tagore, and George Arundale, with whom she shared pacifist and humanitarian ideals.

In Maria Montessori's vision, humanity could be likened to an immense gallery of artworks, each crafted by human hands and bearing the imprint of its creator. To her, human beings resemble artisanal objects—each one distinct, shaped by its own inner motivation and intrinsic worth, and requiring time and care for refinement.

As with a work of art, the full beauty of a life cannot be perceived without first conceiving a design: an intimate process of creation capable of yielding something new and unrepeatable. For this reason, before presenting a piece to the public, the artist holds it close within the solitude of the studio, infusing it with personal essence. In much the same way, the human personality is formed through a quiet, interior labour.

An animal may be an excellent and agile runner if born of a gazelle, or a slow and clumsy walker if born of an elephant; it may be fierce if born of a tiger, or a devourer of vegetation if born of a rabbit. The human being, by contrast, embodies the surprise of individuality. Just as nature determines the shape of the head and nose, the colour of the eyes and hair, it is likewise nature that endows the child with intelligence and spiritual inclinations. For this reason, according to Montessori (1936/1985), one must allow nature to take its course, so that children may be free, in their own way, to realise their full potential.

Just as the generative power of future plants lies dormant within seeds, children already carry within them the genesis of the person they are to become, and can learn to nurture their innate seeds in the same way they are taught to care for a small garden or a potted plant, using a watering can suited to their strength and sized appropriately for their small hands. According to Montessori (1936/1985), even the simple act of planting a seed and quietly observing the sprout's emergence—while reflecting on life's transience and the slow rhythm that governs vegetal growth—can nurture in the child a serene equilibrium of consciousness.

Children require tools that support their intellectual development, strengthen perseverance, foster mental flexibility, and promote psychological balance. The practice of self-education, as encouraged by Montessori, enables them to connect with their inner needs for growth and to explore their personal inclinations.

The Montessori method allows the child to engage freely with a chosen object and to work with it for as long as necessary to fully absorb the learning experience. She argued that no adult can fully anticipate a child's inner needs, and any attempt to do so risks falling into the trap of projecting adult expectations onto the child. It is therefore essential that each individual be free to reveal their nature, acting spontaneously as their inner life unfolds and their unique dispositions take shape.

According to the Italian pedagogist, when children select the object with which they wish to work—one that corresponds to their psychological needs—they become calm, focused, and deeply engaged in the activity. They do not become distracted or tire quickly, nor do they quarrel with others out of competitive impulse. Instead, they channel their intellectual energies, initiating the gradual unfolding of their inner life. As she noted, "having come to appreciate silence and music, the child will do everything possible to avoid producing discordant sounds, from which their now educated ear instinctively recoils" (Montessori, 1916/2014, p. 130).

Since, as both the *Ḥadīṯ* and Islamic psychology observe, the human being is born with certain innate dispositions that are subsequently shaped by the surrounding environment and the education received, Maria Montessori (1916/2014) maintained that the educator's task is, first and foremost, to protect these forces without disturbing their natural expansion. Only then is the educator truly able to guide children toward an encounter with their inner essence. The teacher's role, she wrote, should not be "the concern of making the child learn things, but of keeping alive that light within him, which is called intelligence" (1916/2014, p. 209).

In Montessori's view (1916/2014), children are not passive recipients of educational directives, unconditionally and uncritically assimilating them as if they were empty vessels to be filled and shaped. Rather than absorbing information passively, children rely on their inner sensibility to discern, within a complex environment, the stimuli and conditions most attuned to their developmental needs. "In these sensitive relations between the child and his environment lies the key to the mysterious recess in which the spiritual embryo achieves the miracles of growth", she affirmed (1936/1985, p. 38). Accordingly, children—naturally observant—actively internalise what they perceive through their senses. External stimuli inevitably penetrate the intimate sphere of existence that constitutes the individual's inner sense of self. Therefore, educators should consistently support children's spontaneous formative tendencies, enabling their latent resources to emerge with minimal resistance and in the fullest possible expression (Montessori, 1917, p. 169).

This latter notion appears to be well supported within the framework of Islamic education. As ʿAbbāsalī Barāti points out, all Islamic teachings are informed by the concept of *fiṭra* and thus focused on human nature; accordingly, given that for Islām the goal of creation is the perfecting of mankind, "all of the abilities, all of the talents, all of the powers and possibilities and capacities of mankind should be known and should be developed" (Al-Mustafa Open University, 2019).

Maria Montessori was deeply respectful of individual variability, aware of the versatility of the human intellect and of the potential to engage in purposeful intervention to facilitate the emergence of children's talents. This led her, one century ago, to develop educational tools with both corrective and scaffolding functions, whose purpose was to allow children to refine their own abilities and independently train their will to learn.

As Montessori herself (1952) reiterated during a speech delivered at Adyar, what we receive as human beings is not offered to us as a gift, but rather as potential and, as such, needs to be self-exercised and enhanced.

As previously mentioned, ʿAllāma Iqbāl described human *ḫūdī* as a luminous "nucleus", a reservoir of unexpressed powers, and a repository of the diverse potentialities inherent in human nature, awaiting nourishment through formative and stimulating experiences. Montessori, for her part, believed that the possibilities for human development are virtually limitless, and that the only prerequisite for this process is the possession of what she called "the beginning, the nucleus" (1952, p. 8).

The idea of an inner core, once again, asserts its conceptual presence.

As human beings, Montessori further suggested, we need to rely on the inner force that connects us to the Divine—an intrinsic drive that resonates with the Islamic concept of *fiṭra*, and which, for Montessori, is discernible in the child and in the potential of the spiritual dimension that she viewed as an integral part of human experience.

**The Recent Interest of Iranian Psychologists in the Montessori Method**

As Iranian psychologists and educators have observed over the past decade, traditional models centred on frontal instruction and discipline—characterised by direct teaching and standardised assessments—tend to increase stress, reduce concentration, and limit children's creative and emotional expression, negatively affecting relational behaviour and academic motivation. In contrast, the Montessori method places strong emphasis on autonomy, exploration, and experiential learning, offering an educational environment grounded in positive relationships, freedom of expression, and activities that promote relaxation, emotional regulation, cognitive development, and resilience, thereby enhancing social and relational skills (Āzād et al., 2017).

Studies conducted in Iran suggest that, within Montessori schools, the design of educational environments reflects a deep understanding of children's needs, in accordance with a child-centred pedagogical perspective. By integrating natural light, harmonious colours, and flexible spaces, these environments enhance the learning experience and allow children to explore freely, choose activities based on their interests, and develop their skills independently. In these schools, orderly spaces, accessible materials, and carefully calibrated sensory stimuli contribute to cognitive and social development. Moreover, the welcoming of family co-participation in the design and management of school environments has proven effective in creating more inclusive educational settings (Alak, 2025).

According to the Montessori model, education is not simply a process of transmitting knowledge, but a path aimed at nurturing the child's inner potential and natural individual inclinations. The child is regarded as a complete being, capable of engaging meaningfully with their environment and endowed with an inner richness whose unfolding should be gently facilitated (Kiayi, 2021). It is precisely the respect shown towards children that fosters within them ethical behaviours such as honesty, cooperation, and respect for others, while also promoting both the development of social competences and a sense of personal responsibility (Raḥmānī Bījārī & Neẓāmzādeh, 2019)—a

responsibility which, when directed towards the social dimension, becomes foundational in the endeavour of building a civilisation (Nuranisa et al., 2025).

Interestingly, during the cautious and gradual adoption of the Montessori method in Iran, psychologists and educators soon directed their attention towards the use of Montessori tools to support mathematical learning and enhance communicative abilities in children with cognitive disabilities (Raḥmānī Bījārī & Neẓāmzādeh, 2019). Particular focus was also placed on children with visual-motor impairments and nonverbal learning disorders—namely, those experiencing difficulties in receiving, processing, retaining, and applying information, as well as challenges with attention and fine motor coordination, especially in tasks requiring precise and controlled muscular movements (Armun et al., 2022). The findings of the latter study, in particular, highlight that the use of hands-on educational materials, combined with the autonomy afforded to the child, is especially effective in promoting both motor and cognitive development. This result is achieved through intentional and structured activities such as lifting, transporting, and arranging objects, which are carefully designed to facilitate the acquisition of foundational concepts including weight, volume, and balance, while concurrently enhancing fine motor coordination.

Such experiences not only foster emotional self-regulation and social engagement, but also contribute to balanced growth and the child's holistic development.

In Iran, the use of Montessori tools has also demonstrated effectiveness in supporting children with severe congenital hearing loss and speech and language disorder secondary to hearing impairment, as I was able to observe during a brief period of fieldwork in educational institutions in Sarāvān and Gošt, located in the Sīstān va Balūčistān region near the border with Pakistan (Colonello, 2021), where the custom of endogamous marriages has contributed to a marked increase in the birth of children affected by such conditions—children who, understandably, encounter significant barriers when engaging with the standard textbooks prescribed for primary education by the Iranian Ministry of Education (Vezārat-e Āmūzesh va Parvareš).

**The Issue of Non-Conforming Educational Models**

Given this background, it becomes pertinent to consider how Islamic and Montessorian approaches to education meet at certain points, and how their goals can intersect. Nonetheless, a February 2013 article published in the conservative Iranian newspaper *Keyhān*, based in Tehrān, reported that the Montessori method was suspected of encouraging so-called peace-oriented curricula and the culture of reconciliation promoted by NGOs and the U.N., accused in their turn of setting out to discredit the "culture of resistance" and to defeat the Islamic notion of "no to oppression and oppressors" (Keyhān, 2013 February 28). Three years later (Keyhān, 2016 May 6), the method was once again erroneously accused of teaching dance and singing and of being part of international programs promoting the Western liberal order.

Although it does not conflict with Islamic values and even supports the spiritual education of the child, the approach of the Italian educational theorist has long been

viewed with suspicion by the regime, much like the introduction of Western thought into any other educational context within the country.

Some private schools that employ tools from the method have been active for many years in cities such as Tehrān and Eṣfahān, and have often been chosen by affluent families with ties to the government. Nonetheless, throughout this period, these institutions have not been officially recognised as Montessori schools.

What emerged during my fieldwork was, therefore, an unofficial and somewhat "camouflaged" adherence to the pedagogical prerogatives conveyed by the method, accompanied by a persistent reluctance to legitimise educational solutions that do not originate within a Muslim cultural framework. Such a condition exemplifies the recurrent contradictions that characterise the country, where the disjunction between unofficial practices and official discourse consistently mirrors the underlying tension embedded in dynamics of fascination and repulsion, proximity and avoidance—mechanisms that consistently contribute to the construction of a mystified Otherness, perceived as a threat to the preservation of collective self-identity. As a consequence, the pioneering initiatives documented during my research in private kindergartens have drawn the attention of the government led by the *Āyatollāh-hā*, increasingly concerned by the dissemination of educational models perceived as "non-conforming" to official ideological frameworks. This apprehension has risked being further intensified by the increasingly urgent imperative to reinforce centralised state control, aimed at monitoring the tensions that, in recent years, have unsettled Iran's socio-political landscape. These tensions have shaped a fraught condition which, paradoxically, has been further complicated by the *Rahbar*'s emphatic exhortations urging young people to pursue higher education with commitment. Such a call has, predictably, contributed to the emergence of an educated and self-aware generation, progressively more resistant to surveillance, restrictions, and punitive policies; in other words, increasingly unwilling to comply with the constraints imposed by the very clergy, whose undisputed apex is the *Rahbar* himself.

Despite clumsy attempts to reject and stigmatise Montessori approaches by certain fringe elements within the current regime—who have appeared to lack a clear understanding of the method's actual educational content—, over the past decade, in more than one region of the Islamic Republic of Iran, pioneering educational psychologists have successfully overseen the establishment of private preschool services and even primary schools whose approach emphasises caring for the intrinsic motivations and learning needs of each individual child, drawing inspiration from the philosophy underlying the method of the Italian pedagogist. Although they still do not formally constitute Montessori Institutes[4], the pedagogical approach of these institutions is de facto designed to nurture each child's unique and non-standardisable predispositions.

[4] The recent case of *Javāharī Barā-ye Fardā* demonstrates that, in today's climate, an Iranian kindergarten may nonetheless claim to operate under the oversight of CMTI Canada, which is an active member of MACTE—an international standard-setting and accrediting body for Montessori educator preparation. See https://javaheribarayefarda.ir/en/montessori-kindergarten

While standardised compulsory programs have a stunting effect, attractive promises of freedom coming from the outside can turn out to be deceptive, purporting to remove dependence and enslavement, but in practice simply shifting the individual from overt forms of bondage to more subtle and insidious ones.

*Sūrat al-Baqara* clarifies that there shall be no compulsion in the acceptance of religion (Qurʾān, 2:256). The freedom that enables the pursuit of intentional aims is essentially an inner state. Analogously, in Montessori education, processes of freedom are seen as springing from the deepest dimension of our being.

As *Sūrat al-Raʿd* recites, Allāh will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Qurʾān, 13:11). Hence the need for an intentional transformation.

The most constructive forms of change rarely arise through armed uprisings; rather, they emerge from quieter, more subtle revolutions. One such example may be aptly represented by thoughtful educational planning, attuned to the complexity of human development, which resists both coercive forms of indoctrination and the neoliberal imperatives of profit and competition that impoverish education by commodifying it (Colonello, 2022) and turning knowledge production into an equivocal marketplace.

## CONCLUSION

Albeit a child's *fiṭra* may remain ontologically intact, it can nevertheless be negatively influenced by inputs from the familial environment or the wider social sphere. Considering, as a background, the aforementioned prerogatives, fieldwork conducted by the author across the Islamic Republic of Iran highlights the potential for envisioning an educational approach aimed at safeguarding and nurturing this delicate, innate essence.

Childhood represents a crucial period for shaping and developing personality. Yet, ensuring a child's sound development and healthy growth has become an increasingly complex challenge for caregivers. In response, Muslim psychologists are exploring more reliable methods and appropriate techniques for fostering children's growth and development, and many of these approaches inevitably originate outside the Islamic framework (Tahir & Larmar, 2020). In the past decade, a pioneering effort to introduce a child-centred educational approach, focused on nurturing intrinsic motivation and respecting individual learning needs, has indeed been undertaken in primary and preschool settings across various regions of the country, led by educational psychologists inspired by Montessori's vision of childhood. Given the recent introduction of these syncretic methods, and considering the young age of the children involved, it is not yet possible to assess their effectiveness in fostering Iranian children's talents and caring for their *fiṭra*. Nevertheless, several questions inevitably emerge, potentially giving rise to broader debate and, at times, characterised by a marked rhetorical sophistication.

What socio-political impact might result from a reconfiguration of early education aimed at forming the generation from which future entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, writers, teachers, scholars of Islamic sciences, and national leaders will emerge?

Could the Revolutionary Government's distrust of new psycho-educational approaches within the Islamic Republic's institutions be justified by concerns that the form of education provided to children today might, in the long run, undermine the centralised authority of the ruling clergy?

Whatever the reasons behind such resistance, the historical inflexibility shown by the theocratic government in accepting recommendations from beyond its borders stands in stark contrast to the increasingly urgent educational needs emerging within the country. As stated by the interviewed *Āyatollāh*, there is an urgent need to invest in caring for *fiṭra* and in the development of children's individual talents. However, the centralised state school system is not currently structured to fulfil this purpose.

Such limitations have constituted one of the key motivations behind the efforts of these educational actors who, while remaining respectful of the country's religious and cultural foundations, seek to address the identified gaps by adapting educational approaches conceived in non-Islamic contexts to local cultural and pedagogical frameworks.

At times, hetero-cultural expectations and perspectives may be constructively reconciled, enabling the formation of strategic alliances in pursuit of shared objectives. Psycho-educational strategies, previously considered incongruent with local cultural paradigms, may unexpectedly demonstrate efficacy in advancing common aims.

The recontextualisation of ideas emerging from diverse cultural and religious milieus, or the recognition of their potential resonance and convergence of intent, does not imply a relinquishment of one's own epistemic foundations, nor a capitulation to the allure of otherness or the imposition of external intellectual hegemonies. Rather, it signifies a reflective and intentional engagement with shared conceptual affinities, regarded as generative resources for the advancement of psychological science in the context of childhood education. This process entails the willingness to be freely inspired by meaningful hetero-cultural experiences. It is the outcome of the spontaneous appropriation of strategies that naturally occur within the era of the "global ecumene" (Hannerz, 1996), in which society presents itself as a space of persistent interaction, cultural exchange, dialogue, and reciprocal influences.

The ability to treasure the experience of others does not compromise the distinctive character of one's own culture; on the contrary, it may open unforeseen pathways for rearticulating foundational values and foregrounding them with renewed clarity.

It is worth remembering that all investment in education guided by the aim of developing talents and personal cognitive, emotional, intuitive, ethical, and relational resources should not be viewed as solely nourishing the potential of isolated beneficiaries: far from promoting egocentric attitudes, such efforts may contribute to the prosperity and well-being of the broader society to which individuals belong.

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