Rationality and autonomy are foundational concepts in Anglophone or ‘Western’ countries that originated from the Enlightenment period. When compared with ‘Western’ ideologies, non-Western belief systems such as Islam do not appear, at first glance, to place as much emphasis on the value and attainment of rationality and autonomy. This may lead some people to conclude that Islam necessarily marginalises or even suppresses its believers’ development of rationality and autonomy. This paper compares the concepts of rationality and autonomy in both the Enlightenment period and Islam. It is argued that there exist Islamic traditions that promote the inculcation of ‘normal rationality’ and ‘normal autonomy’ within a convictional community from which beliefs develop. However, the extent to which Muslims are encouraged to cultivate and exercise their rationality and autonomy would depend, among other reasons, on the specific interpretations of rationality and autonomy privileged by the Islamic tradition they belong to.

Keywords:
autonomy; Enlightenment; Islam; liberal democracy; rationality

Introduction

Among the foundational values in liberal democratic societies are rationality and autonomy. A liberal democratic society essentially refers to a society where its political culture is underpinned by the liberal ideal of equal freedom of citizens (Jonathan 1997). Such a society aims to “cultivate the capacity of future citizens to think for themselves: to deliberate, judge and choose on the basis of their own rational reflections” (Carr 1995, 75). By thinking for themselves, individuals will be empowered to form authentic convictions about the life they regard as most worth living as well as bring their contribution to the guidance of society on the basis of individual deliberation (Puolimatka 1997). It follows that rationality and autonomy are the critical faculties for human beings in a liberal democratic society to make sense of and interrogate existing and new beliefs so that they could act responsibly on their convictions.

Liberal democratic societies are commonly found in Anglophone or ‘Western’ countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and other European countries. The relationship between ‘Western’ countries and liberal democracy can be traced back to 18th century Europe where Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John
Locke expounded on the various principles that formed the basis of liberal democracy. When compared with ‘Western’ ideologies, non-Western belief systems such as Islam do not appear, at first glance, to place as much emphasis on the value and attainment of rationality and autonomy. This may lead some people to conclude that Islam necessarily marginalises or even suppresses its believers’ development of rationality and autonomy. Such a perception is reinforced (rightly or wrongly) by Islamist organisations and leaders who advocate indoctrinatory beliefs that imperil the acquisition of rational autonomy (Tan 2011a).

**But what does Islam teach about the value and development of rationality and autonomy?** This paper compares the concepts of rationality and autonomy in both the Enlightenment period and Islam. The first part of this paper elucidates and critiques the Enlightenment concepts of rationality and autonomy. This is followed by an exposition of an alternative interpretation by drawing upon Thiessen (1993)’s notions of ‘normal rationality’ and ‘normal autonomy’. The second part of the paper relates the various meanings of rationality and autonomy to Islam and Islamic traditions.

### The Enlightenment Concepts of Rationality and Autonomy

The dominant understandings of rationality and autonomy in a liberal democratic society originate from the Enlightenment period in the 17th and 18th centuries. An Enlightenment concept of rationality presupposes the existence of standards of critical thinking and evidence that are taken to be binding, universal and objective. Under this conception, rationality stands over and above all to be the sole arbitrator for all disputes. Carr (1995) elaborates as follows:

> For Kant, as for other Enlightenment thinkers, to engage in rational enlightenment of human thought was to think in accordance with universal principles of rational justification that are independent of particular historical or cultural circumstances and that exhibit the capacity of all human beings for rational objectivity and truth. … Once freed from the restraints of prejudice, dogma and tradition, humanity would have finally completed its long period of immaturity and individuals could become the autonomous subjects of their own development. Human reason would then become an objective historical force guiding the conduct and organisation of social life and making the world a better place (76).

Within the Enlightenment paradigm, reason trumps the traditional reliance on religions, cultures and customs as external determination is jettisoned in favour of self-direction. Galston (1995) observes that “appropriate relationships to conceptions of good or of value, and especially conceptions that constitute groups, are held to originate only through acts of conscious individual reflection on and commitment to such conceptions” (525). The Enlightenment concepts of rationality and autonomy are predicated on the idea of abstract individualism where rationality disassociates the individual from any external influences. Liberal democracy as an ideology began in the 19th century where the ‘individual’ was understood as someone who existed apart from society and ‘society’ was understood as nothing more than the aggregation of isolated individuals pursuing their private ends (Carr 1995, 83). That the value of individualism was championed and
embraced during the Enlightenment period was due to the belief that people needed to be individually free from the political, social and economic restrictions at that time.

**A Critique of the Enlightenment Paradigm**

The major assumptions of the Enlightenment paradigm are that rationality and autonomy are abstract and *a priori*, and that human beings are disembodied rational autonomous subjects. However, these assumptions are questionable as it is not clear that “universal principles of rational justification that are independent of particular historical or cultural circumstances” exist. On the contrary, it is arguable that the cultivation of rationality and autonomy necessarily presupposes the existence of a surrounding framework that supports and sustains, and against which personal values are elaborated and modified (Jonathan 1995; Tan 2008). It is also fallacious to assume that human beings are disembodied rational autonomous subjects. Rather, human beings are part of a convictional community, and the individual’s wants and needs are naturally embedded within communal forces. Religious and cultural communities therefore play a defining role in influencing the way individuals interact with each other and make choices in life (Carr 1995).3

It follows that rationality and autonomy are necessarily located within a community that emphasises human beings’ dependence on others. A proper understanding of rationality and autonomy should therefore be situated within the context of an *ideological framework* – a point that is glossed over in the Enlightenment paradigm. Comprising a substantive set of practices, beliefs and values, an ideological framework offers the ‘developmental structure’ – a well-defined domestic space for the child before he or she can begin to question (Puolimatka 1996; also see Puolimatka 1997; Tan 2004). Given that a rational discussion of any issue presupposes acceptance, at least for the duration of the discussion, of some framework of beliefs in virtue of which truth assessments can be made, the elimination of such frameworks from discussions “not only cannot ensure autonomous rational assessments of the issues involved, but it actually renders such assessments impossible” (Laura and Leahy 1989, 263).

An alternative to the Enlightenment concepts of rationality and autonomy are what Thiessen (1993) terms ‘normal rationality’ and ‘normal autonomy’. There are two main characteristics of normal rationality and normal autonomy. First, following our critique of the Enlightenment conception, normal rationality and normal autonomy are situated within a convictional community from which beliefs develop. Normal rationality and normal autonomy reject the Enlightenment presuppositions of rationality and autonomy as abstract and *a priori*, and human beings as disembodied rational autonomous subjects. Instead, they recognise the limitations inherent in human beings’ attempts to achieve objective rationality that is context-free. Normal rationality holds that the “justification of beliefs, while important, is intimately linked with the psychological and sociological conditions under which beliefs develop” (Thiessen 1993, 237).

The acknowledgement of tradition-embeddedness for rationality applies to the concept of normal autonomy too where a person’s freedom of thought and action is conceived within a contingent historical context and is consistent with one’s choice to submit to another person or a supernatural being. Together, normal rationality and normal
autonomy hold that terms such as ‘justification’, ‘evidence’, ‘critical thinking’, ‘liberty’ and ‘personal choices’ are not context-less and ideology-free; rather, they are dependent on historically concrete languages and practices, and take place in specific settings.

But the accent on the ideological underpinnings of rationality and autonomy does not mean that rationality and autonomy are relative and subjective. Thiessen (1993) posits that “normal rationality incorporates some elements of the traditional liberal ideal of rationality such as an understanding of the various forms of knowledge, a concern for evidence for beliefs held, and the acquiring of intellectual virtues like critical openness” (237). This brings us to the second characteristic of normal rationality and normal autonomy: there are different degrees of rationality and autonomy along the continua of normal rationality and normal autonomy.

It is helpful to further understand ‘normal rationality’ by differentiating weak rationality from strong rationality. Runzo (1989)’s distinction between internal and external questions regarding worldviews is instructive (also see Haworth 1986). According to Runzo, internal questions refer to questions that must be decided on the basis of some particular worldview that is taken for granted. Internal questions are part of the ‘criticism internal to a tradition’ – a process of examining the basis of our beliefs and values by assuming the truth of the other beliefs and values that we have acquired as a result of growing up within that tradition. On the other hand, external questions are concerned with the acceptability of one’s existing worldview against alternative worldviews. Applying these two types of questions to the concept of rationality, ‘weak rationality’ refers to the ability and willingness to justify one’s beliefs based on internal questions whereas ‘strong rationality’ refers to the ability and willingness to justify one’s beliefs based on internal as well as external questions.

Parallel to the distinction made for rationality is the variation between minimal (or weak) autonomy and maximal (or strong) autonomy. Accordingly to Steutel (1997), minimal autonomy refers to autarchic freedom where a person freely accepts, is motivated by and orders his or her life according to a normative orientation (or what Wittgenstein calls ‘world picture’). Maximal autonomy, on the other hand, is obtained when a person not only freely accepts, is motivated by and orders his or her life independently according to a moral orientation which one has accepted for oneself after reflecting critically on the validity of these moral rules. Arguing along the same line is White (1982) who avers that a weak sense of personal autonomy (which corresponds to minimal autonomy) describes an autarchic person who freely engages in rational deliberation on the alternatives open to him or her within a tradition-directed society. A person with strong autonomy (which corresponds to maximal autonomy), on the other hand, is not just autarchic but is capable of critically reflecting on his or her own tradition and its basic social structures (also see Gray 1983).

From the above discussion, we may conclude that a person with maximal/strong autonomy exercises one’s agency by being intrinsically motivated by the norms of one’s convictional community. These norms are broad, flexible and open to interpretation, rather than specific, rigid or dogmatic in interpretation (Alexander 1997). They encourage the person to define who he or she is and how he or she wants to live one’s life as a member of the community. In short, there is no contradiction between one’s adherence to a convictional community and one’s exercising maximal/strong autonomy. The person’s decision is based on a life he or she has chosen for oneself after a careful
deliberation and thoughtful reflection of one’s own community as well as the alternatives open to him or her.

The Islamic Concepts of Rationality and Autonomy

How similar and different are the concepts of rationality and autonomy in Islam from those in the Enlightenment period? Rationality and autonomy are not foreign to or neglected in Islam. In fact, these concepts are underscored in Islamic teachings (Tan 2009, 2011). It is noteworthy that the Qur’an frequently calls for the use of reason in one’s search for knowledge. Al-Attas (1999) points out that Islam defines a human being as a rational being with “the capacity for understanding speech, and the power responsible for the formulation of meaning – which involves judgement, discrimination, distinction and clarification, and which has to do with the articulation of words or expressions in meaningful pattern” (15). Commenting on the need for the development of intellectual abilities, Ramadan (2004) asserts that “to be Muslim entails struggling to increase one’s abilities, seeking tirelessly to know more, to the extent that one might say in the light of the Islamic sources that, when it comes to the cultural dimension ‘to be Muslim is to learn’” (80).

Rationality is promoted to students in Islamic education through rational sciences (al-‘ulum al-aqliyyah) (also known as ‘intellectual sciences’) where knowledge is derived from human being’s capacity for reason, sense perception and observation (Alatas 2006). Historically, an Islamic form of learning that spotlight on the inculcation and demonstration of rationality was popular among Muslim scholars back in the 9th century. Known as disputation, this refers to a process where one confers or reasons on some point, disputes, and argues for or against a given subject. As early as 855 A.D., during the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, Muslim scholars held ceremonial disputations at the caliphal court in honour of foreign emissaries (Makdisi 1974). These sessions were at one time so popular in Islamic education that whenever any two students met, they began to discuss and argue with each other on certain topics (Mansoor 1983; Tan and Abbas 2009). Such ‘verbal sparring’ sessions were the norm and public sessions among opposing councils became the main preoccupation of students and scholars during the 12th century.

Like rationality, autonomy is valued in Islam where the aim is to help “all Muslims to enter into personal growth and, consequently to become autonomous in their lives, their choices, and, more generally, in the management of their freedom” (Ramadan 2004, 129). In particular, autonomy is a precondition for Muslims to fulfill their role as khilafa (vicegerent). The Qur’an states that: “It is He Who has made you [His] agents, inheritors of the earth (khala’if); He has raised you in ranks, some above others, that He may try you in the gifts He has given you” (cited in Al Najjar 2000, 21). Al Najjar adds that the very concept of khalifa presupposes the exercise of one’s free will to execute God’s intent and rules on earth:

Trust on the basis of free will is the only path for growth and perfection. Being given the choice to follow the self’s desires and be subjected to base (lower) motives, or to pursue the divine instructions and long for higher aspirations, enables individuals to overcome the soul’s hawa [vain or egotistical desire, individual
passion and impulsiveness] and achieve sublimation. It is a kind of psychological *jihad* leading to gradual growth and perfection through interacting with the universe, during which human beings observe Allah’s injunctions by enjoining right or refraining from wrong. This *jihad* climaxes with the realisation of *khalifah* (24).

With new circumstances emerging from social, scientific and technological advancements in the modern world, the exercise of rational autonomy has become more important than before for Muslims to respond to new experiences and live out their faith in the changing world. A meaningful application of the Islamic teachings to one’s life assumes that that person possesses the intellectual capacity and freedom to interpret and assess existing and new beliefs. On top of that, he or she needs to know the actualities of life in terms of the nature, type and consequences of an action, situation, problem or challenge. Take for example the Islamic concept of *jihad* that literally means ‘struggle’ and covers a spectrum of meanings. While Muslims are exhorted to practise ‘greater *jihad*’ against one’s inner desires in their daily lives (Hj Ali 2007), the autonomy is left to individual Muslims to consider options, adapt to changing time and place, and choose what they think is the best way to obey that injunction. It may mean, for instance, refraining from surfing some objectionable websites and selecting more suitable websites as alternatives. Overall, the positive attitude Muslims have towards rationality and autonomy explains, to a large extent, why the Islamic civilisation between the 9th and 14th centuries was characterised by scientific and technological syntheses (Moten 2005; Tan 2011a).

Despite the primacy of rationality and autonomy in Islam, it is important to note that Islam does not interpret rationality and autonomy in the same fashion as the Enlightenment paradigm. ‘Reason’, ‘intellect’ and other cognates are not regarded as universal principles of rational justification that are independent of particular historical or cultural circumstances in Islam. Neither does Islam view human beings as disembodied rational autonomous subjects. Rather, the Islamic concepts of rationality and autonomy are aligned with the paradigm of normal rationality and normal autonomy. Put otherwise, the concepts of rationality and autonomy in Islam are situated within a convictional community – in this case, an Islamic tradition – from which beliefs develop.6 Rationality through inquiry is important for Muslims to observe and learn from the phenomena around them as long as such inquiry is “within the fold of the Islamic law” (Alam 2003, 23). This context-sensitive understanding of rationality and autonomy is also noted in the recommendation of four world conferences on Islamic Education (1977-1982) where Muslim students were exhorted to “think precisely and logically but let their thoughts be governed by their spiritual realisation of truth as found in the Qur’an and the Sunnah so that their intelligence is guided in proper channels and does not stray” (Erfan and Valie 1995, 35). By learning about the proper places of things in the order of creation, Islamic education strives to lead human beings to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence (Al-Attas 1999).
Rationality and Autonomy in Islamic Traditions: Weak or Strong?

Although Islam generally promotes the value and development of rationality and autonomy, not all Muslims cultivate and express their rationality and autonomy in the same way and to the same degree. This is because there exist both weak and strong rationality as well as minimal/weak and maximal/strong autonomy within and across Islamic traditions. While all Muslims are invited to exercise their intellectual capacity and agency to understand and apply Islamic teachings, the extent to which they are encouraged and permitted to do so depends on the particular Islamic tradition they are in.

The diversity and plurality of Islamic traditions within and across societies account for the varied and competing views held by Muslims on rationality and autonomy. On the one hand, there are Islamic traditions that give their members a relatively limited scope in nurturing and exercising their rationality and autonomy. These traditions include certain Islamic communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan where their madrasas are guilty of just imperiling the students’ development of rationality and autonomy, but also of indoctrinating them with an ideology of intolerance, violence and hate (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004; Magouirk 2008). On the other hand, there are other Islamic traditions that attribute to rationality and autonomy a relatively more significant role. An example would be Muslims in the United Kingdom who, through the Islamic schools they set up and support, actively instill in their students rational autonomy. One such Islamic school in the United Kingdom equips its students to critically explore global issues and current affairs through student-centred pedagogies such as questioning techniques, student discussions, role-playing and drama (for more information, see Tan 2011b).

The contrasting approaches to and assumptions regarding rationality and autonomy among the Islamic traditions reflect an age-old debate among Muslims on the relationship between reason and revelation. Islamic traditions popularly described as ‘modernist’, ‘liberal’ or ‘rationalist’ generally subscribe to the view that revelation is not the only source for Muslims, and that human beings can use reason as a yardstick of morality. Back in the period between the 9th and 11th centuries, Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi, al Farabi and Ibn Sina, claimed that values were objective and could be understood through reason alone (Hourani 1985, as cited in Halstead 2007). The Mu'tazili theologians (from the 8th to 11th centuries) even maintained that reason, not revelation, was the starting point for human beings to know about God’s existence, salvation and their moral responsibility. They held that “speculative reason (nazar) was theoretically even prior to faith – a tool for bringing rational human beings to Islamic faith, from which they could discover the benefits of accepting God’s revealed religious duties” (Martin, Woodward and Atmaja 1997, 14). While the Qur’an and the Sunnah are still upheld as sources for norms of behaviour for Muslims, their scope is confined to spiritual and moral matters for the individual (Ramadan 2004). Contemporary defenders of the centrality of reason include Muslims such as Fazlur Rahman, Shabbir Akhtar and Mamadiou Dia who propagate reforms in Islam so as to keep pace with modernity (to read their writings, see Kurzman 1998).

Another debate among Muslims that is related to rationality and autonomy is the question of ijtihad (independent reasoning). First used by jurists in adjudicating legal matters, ijtihad involves interpreting the Islamic law as revealed in the Qur’an and the
Sunnah so as to keep them in line with the intellectual, political, economic, legal technological and moral developments of a society (Saeed 2006). *Ijtihad* is used when there is evidence in the primary sources of the *shari’a* (Islamic law) but neither the meaning of the evidence nor its authenticity is certain; the meaning of the text is certain, but the authenticity is not; the authenticity of the text is certain but the meaning is not; or there is no text at all relevant to the matter (Saeed 2006). As a legal term, *ijtihad* is commonly restricted to a *mujtahid* who is a scholar qualified to solve a legal problem or derive a ruling from the revealed texts. A person needs to be professionally trained to meet the strict requirements of a *mujtahid*, such as competence in Arabic, knowledge of the sciences of the Qur’an and *hadith*, mastery in the principle and methodology of analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) etc.

The issue of *ijtihad* has generated controversies among the Muslims. On the one hand, most Muslims agree that the ‘gates of *ijtihad*’ were closed about the end of the 9th century, with the consent of the Muslim jurists themselves (Hallaq 1984; also see Schacht 1964; Coulson 1964; and Anderson 1976). This conclusion is based on the presupposition that only the specialists in *shari’a* sciences are qualified to exercise *ijtihad* in interpreting the revealed texts, and their rulings had already been codified between the 8th and 11th centuries. However, there are other Muslims who counter that *ijtihad* should not be confined to the *mujtahid* or *ulama* (religious scholars), and/or that *ijtihad* should go beyond the legal and text-based contexts. Accordingly, they call for the ‘democratisation’ of *ijtihad* by allowing non-scholars to perform *ijtihad* (Saeed, 2006). Their argument is that any faithful Muslim of sound mind is capable of using *ijtihad* to interpret the revealed texts, rather than relying on blind acceptance (*taqlid*) of the teachings of the *ulama* (Martin, Woodward and Atmaja 1997). One Muslim who argues along these lines is Hashish (2010) who claims that *ijtihad* should be used as a main tool by Muslims to check political Islam within a framework of Islamic governance. In the same vein, neo-Modernist Muslims in Indonesia such as Nurcholish Majid and Abdurrahman Wahid advocate a context-based model of *ijtihad* that seeks to combine traditional Islamic scholarship with modern Western education (Saeed 2007).

The same observation about the different extent to which a Muslim is encouraged and permitted to develop and express one’s rationality applies to autonomy. On the one hand, there are Islamic traditions that promote minimal/weak autonomy that severely limits their members’ deliberation and actions. There is no or little effort to encourage its members to order their lives after reflecting critically on the alternatives open to them. An example is an Islamic tradition in Indonesia that fosters a totalistic environment and handicaps the students’ cultivation of autonomy through its Islamic schools and related militant networks. A graduate of one such Islamic school testified that the atmosphere at his school was “one of unquestioning obedience” and the students were trained “to be robotic and not to question” (Macan-Markar 2010).

In contrast, there are other Islamic traditions that promote maximal/strong autonomy by encouraging their members to be aware of the legitimacy of other Islamic and non-Islamic traditions, coupled with the willingness to learn from these different and competing alternatives. This does not mean the Muslims have to give up or be doubtful of their own doctrines or practices. What it means, instead, is that their confidence in their beliefs does not lead them to become closed-minded or judgemental; instead they become well-informed, reflective and open-minded about other Islamic strands of thinking.
An Islamic tradition that advocates maximal/strong autonomy is the one exemplified by the State Islamic Universities (UINs for short) in Indonesia, such as the UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. A distinctive feature of these universities is for the Muslim students to consider, critique and compare a variety of traditions, both within and outside Islam (Tan 2011a). It is noteworthy that the curriculum goes beyond the confines of Shafī’i law to study other legal schools of thought such as Hanafī, Habalī, Malīkī, and Ja’fari law. It also goes beyond the usual staple of Sunnī literature grounded in the Ah’āri theology to include non-mainstream Islamic literature such as the theological school of Maturidis, Sufism, Shi’i and Mu’tazila schools of thought. The students are also exposed to the works of contemporary Muslim scholars known for their progressive views such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammed Arkoun, Muhammed al-Jabiri, and Hassan Hanafī. These scholars’ study transcends differences among the various schools of thought or interpretation; by guiding the students to go beyond one particular one Islamic school of thought (madhhab), students become more open and tolerant toward different religious interpretations as well as new thoughts on religion (Saeed 1999; Azra 2008).

Furthermore, the students do not just learn about other traditions within Islam: they are also introduced to ideas and thoughts from non-Islamic sources and systems. Rather than seeing ‘the West’ as an enemy, UINs welcome, to varying degrees, the academic, social, and cultural interactions with the Anglophone world in order to broaden the intellectual vistas of its students. Works by modern non-Muslim philosophers such as Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer are consulted. Students also study other religions such as Christianity and Judaism from the perspective of their adherents, and are given the opportunity to debate on the essential validity of these religions (Saeed 2008). Accompanying the inclusive curriculum and methodology are a conducive learning environment and ethos. Characterised by the freedom of thought and opinion, the students are not obliged to hold to any particular Islamic ideology, and are instead encouraged to make up their minds and substantiate their stand based on relevant texts and reasoning (Hasyim 2009). Saeed (2008) observes that the methods of teaching in UINs value “a degree of critical thinking, teach analytical skills and problem solving” and displays the importance of ijtiḥād (179). Rather than learning passively from lectures given by instructors who are viewed as dispensers of knowledge, UIN students engage in student-directed activities such as independent study through fieldwork and dissertation writing. The teacher’s key role is to facilitate critical discussions and guide the students to explore possible aspects of a problem.

In terms of reception, the students of UINs are generally appreciative and supportive of this approach to Islamic education. However, the modernist and pluralist educational efforts of UINs have not gone unopposed. Muslim individuals and organisations from more traditionalist and conservative traditions have criticised UIN’s rational and contextual approaches to Islamic knowledge (Azra, Afrianty and Hefner 2007). They charge that UINs and other Islamic schools who follow suit have departed from the ‘authentic’ Sunnah (normative practice of the Prophet Muhammad). Some Muslims scholars such as Hartono Ahmad Jaiz have also published works to refute what they perceive to be inaccurate and unIslamic teachings of Muslim intellectuals associated with UIN, such as Harun Nasution who was the professor of theology and rector of IAIN Jakarta in the 1970s, and Nurcholish Madjid (van Bruinessen, n.d.).
Conclusion

This paper has compared the concepts of rationality and autonomy in both the Enlightenment period and Islam. Returning to the question posed at the start of the paper, it has been argued that Islam does not necessarily marginalise or suppress the value and development of rationality and autonomy. On the contrary, there exist Islamic traditions that promote the inculcation of 'normal rationality' and 'normal autonomy' within a convictional community from which beliefs develop. However, the extent to which Muslims are encouraged to cultivate and exercise their rationality and autonomy would depend, among other reasons, on the specific interpretations of rationality and autonomy privileged by the Islamic tradition they belong to. Overall, the disagreements and contestations among Muslims on the definitions, interpretations and application of rationality and autonomy illustrate and reiterate the diverse and competing Islamic traditions that exist in the world today (for further readings on the different interpretations and application of rationality and autonomy in Islamic educational institutions across societies, see Tan 2014).

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References


Notes

1 Jonathan (1997) observes that the sociological subdivision of liberal democracies into corporate-statist, social democratic, and liberal only allocates the term ‘liberal’ to the last type of regime. However, she notes that “although this typology usefully represents different clusterings of political and social characteristics, each of the three types are overlapping clusters of features of the same phenomenon: it is that phenomenon I am referring to as ‘liberal democracy’” (28, fn 7).

2 It is important to clarify that the references to ‘the Enlightenment concepts of rationality and autonomy’ and ‘the Islamic concepts of rationality and autonomy’ in this paper do not imply that there is only one essentialised and homogeneous understanding of rationality and autonomy for the Enlightenment period as well as Islam. On the contrary, there exist multiple and even competing definitions and interpretations of rationality and autonomy in both the Enlightenment and Islamic conceptions. In the midst of such plurality of meanings, this paper focuses on a particular albeit dominant understanding of rationality and autonomy in both the Enlightenment period and Islam.

3 The renouncement of Enlightenment rationality is not equivalent to the repudiation of liberal democracy as an ideology. While the Enlightenment rationality has been dominant in the liberal democratic traditions, it is not the only formulation of rationality. Galston (1995) distinguishes two historical strands of liberalism, namely Enlightenment and Reformation liberalism. The first type emphasises individual rationality, autonomy and diversity between voluntary groups while the second focuses on group autonomy and diversity among involuntary or non-voluntary groups, usually religious ones. While Enlightenment liberalism expects students to be taught a sense of independence and to make rational choices, the other version is committed to see the individual’s wants and needs as embedded within communal forces. Also see Callan (1998) who differentiates ‘moral reason’ from ‘hyper-rationalism’ in the liberal tradition.

4 This paper does not assume that White and Steutel are in full agreement about their respective concepts on autonomy. But for the purpose of our discussion, it suffices to note the convergence between their views.
The term ‘Islam’ is understood in this paper as not just a religious system but also a cultural system. The two senses highlight different aspects of the faith although they are mutually exclusive. The former underscores Islam as essentially comprising shared foundational doctrines held by Muslims; the very word ‘Islam’ comes from the Arabic word al-Islam that means ‘surrender’ as well as the peace that issues from one’s surrender to God (Nasr 2002). Islam as a cultural system, on the other hand, encompasses complex networks of cognitive and behavioural dispositions that are political, religious, moral, epistemological and aesthetic in nature (Hanan 2005).

Nasr (2006) explains that there is a fundamental distinction between ‘reason’ and ‘intellect’: “In Arabic and other Islamic languages a single term, al-‘aql, is used to denote both reason and intellect, but the distinction between the two as well as their interpretation and the dependence of reason upon the intellect is always kept in mind. ‘Al-‘aql’ in Arabic is related to the root ‘ql, which means basically to bind, It is that faculty that binds man to the Truth, to God, to his Origin. … But ‘al-‘aql is also used as reason, intelligence, keenness of perception, foresight, common sense and many other concepts of a related order” (94). In this paper, I use the words ‘reason’ and ‘intellect’ interchangeably to refer to both meanings.

The term ‘Islamic tradition’ does not refer to the Sunnah (normative practice of the Prophet Muhammad) or hadith (report on the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). Instead, it is a social process of constructing and transmitting shared meanings for a community of Muslims in a locality (Tan, 2011). That ‘tradition’ and ‘transmission’ are etymologically related is highlighted by Nasr (1989) who points out that the word ‘tradition’ implies the oral and written transference of knowledge, practices, techniques, laws and other related forms.