

Islam Today

Written Assessment n. 2

In your view, how important are 'Islamic schools' for Muslims in the United Kingdom?

To understand the importance and peculiarity of Islamic schools in the United Kingdom, it is essential to make a premise on the British education system¹ and the role of religious teaching in non-denominational public schools. We will first analyse this aspect and then ask ourselves about the reasons that push families to opt for Islamic confessional schools.

The British educational context has historically been characterized by the “dual system”, that is to say, a partnership between the government and the churches to provide the nation's education system. Among the different types of state-funded schools, we find what are commonly called non-religious schools (most of which are community schools) and faith schools, the main ones of which are come under the Church of England, followed by Catholic schools². Within this panorama considering the British multicultural and multireligious fabric, it is essential to question the space that religions occupy in non-denominational public schools and the legitimacy and state of the art of the denominational schools, afferent to the different religions, Islam in particular. Within the non-denominational public school, the discipline responsible for religious teaching is Religious Education – RE. Although all schools must teach this discipline, it is not part of the national curriculum. Religious education is a component of the basic curriculum. It is compulsory for all pupils in schools run by local authorities aged 5 to 18 unless they are withdrawn from this course by their parents³.

From the beginning of the 1970s, there was more systematic talk of multi-religious schools. One of the main references in this area is Owen Cole's book “Religion in the multi-faith school”⁴, which represented a fundamental tool to help teachers deal with problems in religious diversity in schools. Among the official documents, the 1970 report *The Fourth R* also recommended further research into RE for the needs of immigrant children⁵.

A significant example of the changes taking place during this period is represented by the Birmingham Syllabus of 1975⁶, which recommended, in addition to the study of Christianity and other major religions, the study of non-religious “stance for living”, what we call today

¹ In this case we are referring to England and Wales, leaving out the case of Scotland, whose model differs.

² Lucenti, M. (2021). Religious Education in Italy and England. Comparative Perspective on School Textbooks and Teaching Practices. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, Volume 12, Issue 1.

³ Copley, T. (2008). *Teaching religion. Sixty years of religious education in England and Wales*. University of Exeter Press.

⁴ Cole, W.O. (1972). *Religion in the multi-faith school*. Nelson Thornes Ltd.

⁵ Copley, T. (2008). *Teaching religion. Sixty years of religious education in England and Wales*. University of Exeter Press.

⁶ Birmingham, City of (1975a) *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction*. Birmingham City Education Committee.

“worldviews”, like humanism or communism⁷. By the mid-1970s, the teaching of the main religions was implemented without controversy on the part of the teachers. Controversies focused more on teaching non-religious worldviews. However, as Parker and Freathy tell us⁸, the change in RE's program has been evolutionary and not revolutionary, in continuity with previous thinking and theorizing.

Today the most significant change concerns the proposals in 2018 in the Commission on religious education “Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE”⁹.

The commission proposes to redefine the identity of the discipline. Starting from the name which should become “Religion and Worldviews - R&W” instead of RE; a common program and not several local agreed syllabuses, and the abolition of the clause allowing children to be withdrawn from the course, to name only the most significant proposals¹⁰.

The teaching of religious education in England and Wales, therefore, not only takes into account the six great religions (the big six) - Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism - boasting a tradition in academic research on this topic¹¹, but also of non-religious worldviews, primarily humanism. Even within the framework of a religion there are always several points of view and interpretations that are emphasized. To give examples in the context of Christianity, the different points of view of Protestantism, Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, other evangelical and charismatic churches are commonly taught¹².

Certainly, there is no shortage of problems and criticalities¹³, however, non-denominational pluri-religious teaching is encouraging in the face of the situation in other countries, where, despite the multicultural context, religious education has a mono confessional and denominational nature¹⁴.

What then pushes families to opt for Muslim schools?

In 2007 there were 115 independent and seven state-funded Muslim schools in Britain¹⁵. The data is relatively meagre compared to the 4,700 state-funded Church of England schools, 2,100 Catholic schools, 37 Jewish and 28 Methodist schools¹⁶. It should also be emphasized how Muslim children “are disproportionately present in the British education system. Comprising nearly 6% (500,000) of the school population from the entire Muslim population of 3% (1.8 million) ...There is a striking contrast between the number of Muslim children and the number of Jewish children of school age (50,000)—who represent 0.4% of the school population.

⁷ Parker, S.G. & Freathy, R.J.K. (2011). Context, complexity and contestation: Birmingham’s Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education since the 1970s. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 32:2, 247-26.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

¹⁰ Chater, M. (2020). *Reforming RE. Power and knowledge in a worldviews curriculum*. John Catt.

¹¹ In particular, the pioneering studies by Ninian Smart and Robert Jackson on religious teaching in contexts of cultural and religious heterogeneity.

¹² Lucenti, M. (2021). Religious Education in Italy and England. Comparative Perspective on School Textbooks and Teaching Practices. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2021.

¹³ For instance, teachers are often not well qualified in this field (Copley, 2008).

¹⁴ In my research funded by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), for instance, I compared the English context to the Tunisian and Italian one, the latter two being characterized by a religious confessional and mono-religious teaching.

¹⁵ Meer, N. (2007). Muslim Schools in Britain: Challenging mobilisations or logical developments? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 55–71.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Reflecting the particularly youthful national demographic of British-Muslims, where 33.8% are 0–15 years old and 18.2% are 16–24 years old (Scott, Pearce, & Goldblatt, 2001), in some local education authorities (LEAs) this translates into a significant Muslim presence amongst school districts and wards”¹⁷ (p.58).

Such data emphasizes the need for the education system to adequately respond to requests from families to provide their children with adequate Islamic education. Nevertheless, the question of Islamic schools and the specific request to be part of the state educational system, becoming voluntary aided schools, has been widely mediated, subjecting those in favour to question the arguments of the opposites. “The debate over the state funding of Muslim schools in Britain often appears polarised, as those on opposing sides are portrayed as holding fundamentally conflicting values and desires”¹⁸.

If some parent opts for supplementary services provided by madrasas and supplementary religious schools¹⁹, others instead turn to Muslim schools. The most important reasons underlying this choice are²⁰:

- the will of educating in an integrated system based on the values of Islam, so that the whole person can benefit from this context and the values linked to it, without "fragmenting" the affiliations;
- the demand by families for separate education for girls and boys from puberty onwards;
- the desire to train Islamic education experts and leaders in the British national context;
- a non-ethnocentric curriculum, where even Islam can find space and a voice in the matter;
- lower educational level of some Muslim children, such that attending a Muslim school could alleviate the identity and symbolic marginalization.

Other reasons deserve to be mentioned, including the problematic reconciliation between traditional school and Islamic instruction, which occupies most of the student's free time, becoming demanding for him/her and the families, in addition to the economic cost of which families must take charge.

Another study, analysing the choices of Muslim mothers regarding the education of their daughters²¹, highlighted the values and expectations of both mothers whose daughters attend a Muslim school and, conversely, mothers who have chosen the non-religious-based public school. In the first case, great importance is given to the coherence between school and family education. According to the interviewees, both should place themselves in continuity by reiterating the same values. This position is supported above all by the recent converts, who do not have sufficient tools to instruct their daughters on the contents and values of the new faith. The question of values is also central to the second group, convinced that only experiencing multiple categories of value in a context of religious and cultural heterogeneity can arm their daughters with the tools and skills necessary to live in a de facto plural society. Furthermore,

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Tinker, C. (2009). Rights, social cohesion and identity: arguments for and against state-funded Muslim schools in Britain. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Volume 12, 2009 - Issue 4.

¹⁹ Gent, B. (2018). *Muslim supplementary classes and their place within the wider learning community*. Beacon Books.

²⁰ Meer, N. (2007). Muslim Schools in Britain: Challenging mobilisations or logical developments? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1, March 2007, pp. 55–71.

²¹ Osler, A. & Hussain, Z. (2005). Educating Muslim Girls: Do Mothers Have Faith in the State Sector? In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain: Communities under pressure* (pp.127-143). Zed Books.

the values promoted by public schools are, in many cases, recognized as suitable and compatible with those of one's own religion, even if there is no lack of critical elements.

The interesting fact, which concludes our reflection, is that Muslims in general and women in this case do not represent a homogeneous group. So if the opportunity to attend a Muslim school, especially for identity and value issues, is important for some families, for others – the majority – the non-confessional public school is still an ideal place for their daughters' cultural and personal formation.

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