

UWTSD

Islam Today (HPRS7006)

Name: Sharon Chua (Student ID: 2116272)

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

Introduction

Education is an important component of the Islamic faith for all Muslims and must reflect faith that ties in with their everyday living. Shah, citing A.S. Abdullah mentioned that “learning is *fard* (incumbent) upon every Muslim as a religious obligation” unto God.¹ With at least 2.2 million Muslims in Britain, and “one in three British Muslims under the age of fifteen,” representing a huge segment of the future workforce in UK, education matters especially on Islamic schools² remains a matter of critical consideration for the government.³ However, education for Muslims set within a non-Muslim majority country is a challenging and complicated affair. Often, the issues of “racism and discrimination,” “minority consciousness,” “religious identity,” “national integration,” and “national identity” are hotly debated and juxtaposed where education (secular or religious) is concerned.⁴ In particular, the question of the importance of Islamic schools for Muslims remains a contentious one in a pluralistic, multicultural British society today.

¹ Saeeda Shah, ‘Islamic Education And The UK Muslims: Options And Expectations In A Context Of Multi-Locationality’, *Studies In Philosophy And Education*, 33.3 (2014), 233–249 (p. 234).

² According to Hefner, Islamic schools in UK consist of four major categories, “faith schools,” higher educational facilities for Islamic studies, Deobandi-style “houses of learning,” and informally structured halqa study circles. See Robert W. Hefner, ‘Introduction: The Culture, Politics, And Future of Muslim Education’, in *Schooling Islam: The Culture And Politics Of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 1-39 (p. 28).

³ Ceri Peach, ‘Muslims in the UK’, in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (UK: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 18-30 (p. 25-26); Tahir Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism and Multicultural Politics: The British Experience*. (London, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 65-66.

⁴ Nasar Meer, ‘Muslim Schools In Britain: Challenging Mobilisations Or Logical Developments?’, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 27.1 (2007), 55-71; Peter Mandaville, ‘Islamic Education In Britain: Approaches To Religious Knowledge In A Pluralistic Society’, in *Schooling Islam: The Culture And Politics Of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 224-241 (p. 225-226); Shah, ‘Islamic Education’, p. 238.

With the increasing rise in Islamophobia following the post 9-11 Twin Towers attack in 2011 and post 7-7 London Bombing in 2015, Islamic schools have come under greater scrutiny. There is a nagging fear that Islamic schools are becoming spaces for the fermentation of Islamic radicalism, and thereby posing a security threat to the country.⁵ There is also a growing concern that Islamic schools with their emphasis on Islamic curriculum will obstruct the path for Muslims' integration to the British society at large.⁶ However, this paper argues that there is an important place for Islamic schools, particularly faith schools in UK to meet the growing aspirations of young British Muslims to identify with the global *umma* and to be better integrated into the British society.⁷ This paper will also argue that besides the importance of the continuing presence of faith schools, higher educational facilities for Islamic studies also plays a critical role in serving as a bridge to promote interfaith understanding and dialogues, leading to better interracial relationships in the UK.

Faith Schools Counter Discrimination and Provide Better Environment to Develop and Uplift Younger British Muslims

Young British Muslims want to be respected both as British citizens and Muslims.⁸ Yet, many studies have shown that Muslim learners in UK in State-run schools are among one of the worst off among other ethnic races "academically, culturally and linguistically, and a high proportion of Muslim learners are leaving British schools with low grades or no qualification."⁹ This is indeed a matter of grave concern, considering many of these young British Muslims are going to form the future workforce in UK. Several factors have contributed to this grim situation of the young school going British Muslims. Firstly, the UK school curriculum traditionally is euro-centric and Christian-centric in nature and does not aim at generating interfaith awareness nor dialogue among her students.¹⁰ Secondly, Abbas opined that "discrimination, low teacher expectations, a lack of Muslim role models in schools and wider societal experiences of a sense of lack of belonging" all caused Muslim learners to be disillusioned with the

⁵ Mandaville, p. 226.

⁶ Alison Scott-Baumann, and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor. *Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 10-11; Mandaville, p. 226; Meer, 'Muslim Schools in Britain', p. 56.

⁷ Hefner, p. 28; Mandaville, p. 239.

⁸ Shah, 'Islamic Education and the UK Muslims', p. 237.

⁹ Ibid, p. 238.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 241, p.244.

state education system to provide and protect them with a holistic and safe environment to excel academically and spiritually.¹¹ This not only exacerbated the worsening national identity and integration problems that these young Muslims have in their host country but also widened the socio-economic gap between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in UK. Thus, faith schools are increasingly being seen as a solution to the educational underachievement issue of the young British Muslims in State-run schools.¹² Furthermore, faith schools whether independent or state-funded have shown better results in the academic performances of Muslims and this have given the impetus for more faith schools to be funded by the UK government.¹³

Faith schools are increasingly being seen to be able to provide a curriculum that is compatible with the UK school curriculum while meeting the religious and cultural needs of Muslims.¹⁴ According to Meer, the good success of two faith schools in the primary level, Islamia in London and Al Furqan in Birmingham has fuelled the increase in more faith schools (primary and secondary levels) being funded by the state.¹⁵ These state-funded faith schools have to adhere to stringent standards set by the UK Department for Education and Skills.¹⁶ Mandaville also noted that in 2011, the UK Association of Muslim Schools (AMS) were also looking to ensure that all their teachers earn the “government recognized Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).”¹⁷ In faith schools, racism and discrimination are greatly reduced, and Muslims are given fair opportunities to excel.¹⁸ This helps to improve their self-esteem and motivation to do well academically. Culturally, faith schools can inculcate Islamic values and ethos to their students thus building up their Muslim identity. Linguistically, as faith schools has teachers with bilingual and intercultural skills, they helped those who are weak in English and bridged the gap and help them socialise better into the British English-speaking society.¹⁹ Faith schools have also incorporated “virtues of citizenship’ and “civic education” in their curriculum to help Muslim students build better social

¹¹ Ibid, p. 241.

¹² Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 241; Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 70.

¹³ Meer, *Muslim Schools in Britain*, p. 56-57; Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 242.

¹⁴ Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 71-74; Mandaville, *Islamic Education in Britain*, p. 230-231; Meer, ‘Muslim Schools in Britain’, p. 57-58; Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 242-243.

¹⁵ Meer, ‘Muslim Schools in Britain’, p. 57.

¹⁶ Ibid, 57.

¹⁷ Mandaville, p. 233.

¹⁸ Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 73; Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 244.

¹⁹ Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 73.

cohesion and enhance greater integration in to the British society.²⁰ Overall, faith schools have shown promising results in producing stronger educational performance and giving Muslim students a holistic environment to grow in their personhood and identity as Muslim and British.²¹ Thus, it is important for such faith schools to keep continuing on in the education landscape in UK to bridge the gap for the young British Muslims academically, culturally and linguistically. This will help them achieve their goal of being a “hybrid British-Muslim with greater social mobility and contribution to the society socio-economically.”²²

Higher Educational Facilities for Islamic Studies As A Bridge To Build Interfaith Dialogue and Strengthen Interracial Relationships

Hefner defines Higher Education Facilities (HEF) for Islamic studies as schools with “mix instruction in the Islamic sciences with academic study of culture and history.”²³ The founder of The Muslim College in London established in 1987, Dr Zaki Badawi, had opined that “Islamic classrooms in the UK should serve as incubators to ‘formulate the future of Islam in the homeland’ and Muslim communities in the West are best suited to be involved in this discourse.”²⁴ Higher educational facilities such as The Muslim College and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE) aim to provide graduate and postgraduate education in Islamic studies which examines the religion with an objective and critical perspective within the framework of social sciences and humanities in an Islamic environment.²⁵ In MIHE, teaching contemporary subjects such as “Islam in Europe” and “Islam and Pluralism” with an emphasis by Muslim scholars on the “permissiveness and compatibility” of Muslims to be active citizens in their non-Muslim host countries downplay religious and social differences and build social cohesion and integration.²⁶

Another important function of HEF for Islamic studies is to collaborate with secular universities as “such partnerships can provide an opportunity to develop cultural

²⁰ Mandaville, p. 232.

²¹ Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 73; Meer, ‘Muslim Schools in Britain’, p. 61-62; Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 243.

²² Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Islamic Education in Britain*, p. 3.

²³ Hefner, p. 28.

²⁴ Mandaville, p. 234.

²⁵ Mandaville, p. 235; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Islamic Education in Britain*, p. 134-135.

²⁶ Mandaville, p. 235.

mediation that will facilitate intercultural and interfaith understanding”.²⁷ For example, Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor noted the partnership between Al-Maktoum College in Dundee, Scotland, with Aberdeen University in the past and an ongoing partnership between the Islamic College with Middlesex University.²⁸ Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor opined that such collaborations between colleges of higher education help integrate theology with practical skills for the Muslim learners, “support British Muslims in their efforts to gain qualifications and promote multicultural understanding” among the students (Muslim and non-Muslims).²⁹ Besides collaborating with secular universities, HEF for Islamic studies’ collaboration with HEF for other religions also provide good opportunities for interfaith dialogues and understanding to take place. Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor highlighted a successful case study of the collaboration between MIHE and Newman University, a Roman Catholic foundation which has enhanced interfaith relationships.³⁰ Both schools have an open application policy and MIHE runs a chaplaincy course which is validated by Newman in 2015.³¹ Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor noted the following:

The chaplaincy course is successful and provides a bridge for students to develop understanding of other faiths. MIHE also runs classes for converts to Islam and has good relationships with local interfaith groups.³²

Therefore, HEF for Islamic studies should continue to play an important role as a bridge to build interfaith dialogue and strengthen interracial relationships in the UK society.

Conclusion

As Shah opined, the UK government needs to be cognizant of the growing demand for Islamic schools, in particular the faith schools (primary and secondary levels) among Muslim parents to develop their children holistically.³³ Thus, greater cultural sensitivity and support needs to be expressed by the government in action rather than in policy only to meet the educational needs of the Muslim community in UK. Faith

²⁷ Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Islamic Education in Britain*, p. 134-135.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 138.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 138.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 138.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 138.

³² *Ibid*, P. 138.

³³ Shah, ‘Islamic Education and the UK Muslims’, p. 243-244.

schools in terms of the ability to bridge the academic, cultural, and linguistic gaps for young British Muslims are good models for the government to learn from and implement in the state run schools which majority of young British Muslims are still attending.³⁴ HEF for Islamic Studies are also good grounds for the government to interact with and provide more support in funding collaborative interfaith learning and projects. Islamic schools (faith schools and HEF) are important players in the education landscape of Muslim education in UK. They are also critical partners for the UK government to work with as they share the same vision and objective of wanting to develop young British Muslims to become active citizens, who are better integrated into the UK society and with an improved upward social mobility.

(Word Count: 1548)

³⁴ Ibid, p. 243-244.

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