

Islam Today 4 Education

A number of key issues need to be addressed when exploring the subject of Islam and Education, especially in UK contexts. These include:

- the roles of mosque ‘schools’ (at various levels)
- Islam and religious education in the state sector
- the teaching of Islam at university level
- resources and the representation of Islam
- gender issues and education.

The purpose of this section is to introduce some of the themes within the Islam and education debate in the UK, focusing on the school sector. It is a substantial issue in its own right, and some of the key issues can only be touched upon in this module. In the following discussion, the emphasis will be on the personal experience of Muslims in various education systems, based on the writer’s fieldwork in the UK, especially the concept of ‘Islamic education’.¹ It should be read in conjunction with the suggested materials (listed below).

Learning about Islam



Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore (photo: Gary R. Bunt)

The *madrasa*, or mosque school (as frequently defined in the UK context), may provide facilities for children and youth to learn about Islam out of school hours. The term ‘school’ should be used with caution, because whilst there are many formally organised institutions with purpose built areas in mosque complexes, tuition can take place in public amenity space or individual homes. Concern has been expressed in Muslim communities regarding the

perceived 'low quality' of education provided in some mosques and *madrasas*, although some people believed that 'something is better than nothing'. It was identified that there is a need to move away from 'ad-hoc-ism', towards recognisable standards of achievement for students in the *madrasas*. It was also suggested by some that 'understanding Islam' meant more than mastering recitation of the Qur'an, and should incorporate actual understanding of the meaning of texts. The content of such studies are contextual, being focused on culturally, religiously and linguistically specific forms of Islam – there is no set 'curriculum' within such educational contexts, and in some cases the focus may not extend beyond engendering a familiarity with the Qur'an and basic Muslim practices.

In this writer's own research, it was one interviewee's belief that students in *madrasas* should be taught about their fundamental rights within British society, in order to preserve them against anti-Islamic values. Such changes could be effective within a national *madrasa* framework, if there was co-operation between different 'Islamic interests'. There was an impression that systems of teaching had been 'imported' - along with their teachers - without being structurally adjusted to accommodate British-born and raised Muslims. National development of new systems would require the input and experience of trained professionals, with the likelihood of encountering resistance amongst established educational interests within *madrasas* and mosques. This is a significant area for future Islamic decision-making processes and policy in the UK

The comments of teenagers, who had attended an inner-city *madrasa* in Leicester, on the quality of the education they received, reflect some of the difficulties. Three male youths [Umayr, Haroon, Zayd] were interviewed by the writer ['G.B.']: two had attended classes on 'learning the Qur'an', at the insistence of their parents (the third had learnt at home). They reflected and encapsulated criticisms heard elsewhere about *madrasa* education:

G.B. Did you learn what the Qur'an actually means, rather than simply recitation?

Haroon Sometimes we don't learn the meanings. We would like to learn more. We've got a new priest [sic], who tells you the meanings of the Qur'an.

Umayr Priests tell you the meaning of an important part. But it is hard to learn all of it.

G.B. Do you feel that the imams and teachers should be selecting what portions you understand? Shouldn't you have the choice to be able to read about any issue, and then to make up your own mind?

Zayd We learn progressively. First learn the Qur'an by rote, and then understanding and meaning.

G.B. What about if you were taught Qur'an in school?

Zayd If schools had a facility whereby you could learn Arabic, then we'd be successful in school, and in praying in Qur'an.

G.B. Shouldn't the *madrasa* teacher teach these things?

Umayr Well, they have big classes, and there is not enough time.

Haroon Also we speak Gujarati and Urdu. Arabic should be learnt in the mosque, though, not Urdu. Then we would understand the *khutba* [sermon] fluently.

Zayd There is a lack of priests and mosques. Arabic speaking is not for the lower class. It's for *hafiz* (those who have learnt the Qur'an by heart) only.²

Whilst not reflecting the experience of every mosque school in Britain, these comments are indicative of several issues connected with decision-making priorities in Islamic environments. As well as recitation, *understanding* the meaning of the Qur'an held significance for these youth, who had access to English language translations of the meaning of the Qur'an, but sought to learn the Arabic text as part of the National Curriculum, seeing it as 'more useful' than - for example - French and German. They believed it would enhance their overall educational performance, and could even be useful in the workplace.

These youth felt that there were also pressures to acquire knowledge in languages linked to places of ancestral origin, including Urdu and Gujarati. They were concerned that they did not understand the sermon, which was delivered either in Arabic, Urdu, or Gujarati - a problem compounded by a lack of educated personnel to teach them. They were dissuaded by the 'methodology' of learning the Qur'an, and provided examples of bullying and beating by *madrasa* teachers (an issue that has also appeared in the Muslim press): many contemporaries were disenchanted, and had stopped studying the subject. Educational achievement in school was believed to be a greater priority.

Criticism of religious teaching in these settings is consistent amongst several interviewees, including former teachers. However, some smaller, more insular community leaders expressed satisfaction (or complacency?) with the quality of religious education - whilst believing that this was not the situation amongst other Muslim communities. Rauf, a youth worker, noted that Islamic schooling within mosques was insufficient because of large classes, and because they took place in children's 'peripheral time'. Rauf indicated that, for the majority of children, given a choice about attending such schools or undertaking other activities, they would refuse.³

The provision of 'Islamic education' features strongly in demands for Muslim schools, where it can be incorporated into the school curriculum. There are a number of examples of Muslim schools in Britain, and the demands of the Islamia Trust for state-funded Muslim schools by Yusuf Islam placed the issue prominently upon the national education agenda. Several

educational platforms exist, within the Association of Muslim Schools, Muslim Educational Trust, Iqra Trust, Islamia Schools Trust, Union of Muslim Organisations, Islamic Foundation, UK Education *Waqf*, Muslim Parliament, and Islamic Academy. Fieldwork indicated frequent disagreement between members of these platforms, resulting in a lack of consensus. Education within state schools remains the predominant issue, given that many parents do not have access - geographically or financially - to privately-run Muslim schools: the majority of Muslim students are in state education. One interviewee stated that Muslims should seek greater participation within general education provision, and encourage the training of more Muslim teachers. Within UK Islamic environments, the status of teachers has been undermined by cultural pressures, and because of the relatively low income of teachers compared with other professionals.⁴

Demands for Islamic components within the state system are not universal or consistent in terms of priorities amongst those Muslim parents who prefer an emphasis on education that will enhance their children's economic chances, and future educational and employment opportunities. One interviewee, Hisham, a Muslim head working within a state school with a large Muslim studentship, believed it was important for Muslims to function within the mainstream of society, learning the National Curriculum, rather than being 'marginalised' within Islamic schools.⁵

The influence and quality of education contributes towards the shaping of Islamic decision-making processes in the UK. The political ramifications of education provision impact directly upon the future structures of Muslim frameworks in the UK, and the attitudes towards Islam expressed by generations of Muslims educated within the state system. Hisham noted that the different gender roles expressed within interpretations of Islam held implications for educational standards, and that these interpretations allowed males greater freedom of movement in wider society, whilst females remained in the home environment. This meant females had more time to study (at home), and were achieving superior examination results, which *could* be attributed to this factor. Hisham felt that males did - in certain cases - 'catch up later'. This comment, however, may also reflect a wider pattern amongst other groups of non-Muslim pupils. The relative academic success of female Muslim students contributed to changing parental attitudes, together with parents' own experience within the educational system: this had increased opportunities for female students to achieve at higher academic levels, such as college and university:⁶

"If the girls are properly disciplined during this age, then they should be O.K. to attend universities after they get their GCSEs. When girls leave school, they know how to conduct themselves in public and should have no difficulty in handling the cultural conflict, arising from growing up between home and schools."⁷

Higher achievement at non-Muslim institutions, and the issue of choosing appropriate places of education was raised within Syed ad-Darsh's column. Written by a scholar trained at the influential al-Azhar University in Cairo, this column was a feature of the Muslim magazine Q-News, answering

questions of concern to readers. Despite the concern that children might academically under-perform at a single sex Muslim school, Darsh still recommended that children attended the Muslim school, indicating that Islam took the priority:

"... we are here either by accident or by birth or by necessity."⁸

"Now you have become like them": Sex Education and 'Secularism' in a Muslim Context

The contents of the National Curriculum have been a cause of contention and discussion between Muslim educational lobbyists and educational authorities.⁹ The dialogue included conferences and the establishment of a consolidated charitable platform of (select) interested parties - the United Kingdom Islamic Education *Waqf*, chaired by Yusuf Islam of Islamia Schools Trust. The founding all-male board of twenty trustees included representatives from several Muslim educational platforms, in addition to educationalists and teachers. Amongst the issues of concern within the Muslim agenda, one priority has been provision of 'appropriate' sex education. There is no single 'Islamic' viewpoint regarding sex education. Views of interviewees ranged from parents/interested parties not wanting children and young adults to receive sex education, through to acceptance that it is part of the National Curriculum and has to be covered within a Muslim school (teachers also having to be trained to answer questions appropriately). The Muslim Educational Trust provided one approach, based upon an interpretation of primary Islamic sources, with which it has endeavoured to lobby Parliamentary and other authorities. It incorporated a 'sexual etiquette of Islam', a discussion on approaches to Local Educational Authorities, and advice on how parents can approach teachers and question them regarding sex education.¹⁰ The realisation that compromise is necessary - accommodating and balancing National Curriculum demands, the needs for awareness on sexual issues, the pragmatism of living in Britain, and the requirements of Islam - has led in some cases to conflict. This is not just between Muslims in Britain, but between platforms and individuals who maintain contact with Muslims overseas, as seen in this discussion with Mohsin Jaffar ('M.J.') of the Khoja Shia Ithna Asharis:

M.J. We had a conference on sex education. We were trying to prepare our response to sex education being given in schools. The imams from the Indian sub-continent, they protested. They said:

'What you are trying to prepare and bring to the attention of the children, it is not proper.'

So we said:

'We know better. Whether you like it or not, this education is being given. And they see these things on TV and they read about them in newspapers. They see it outside. Unless we prepared an alternative Islamic response to it our children go astray.'

G.B. Do you find that there is a two-way traffic - do you find that your concept of sex-education is going back to Pakistan or wherever?"

M.J. No. I happened to receive a telephone call from Karachi, and he was talking to me, saying that he thought I'd gone to the UK to try to make them better Muslims - 'now you have become like them in trying to prepare sex education!'¹¹

This provides an example of the difficulties and pressures experienced within the decision-making/opinion-forming frameworks of UK Islamic environments. The concept of sex education was seen as an anathema to the values of certain imams and authorities. It was recognised by some interviewees that Islamic resources exist regarding sex education - but that some authorities were selective in choosing to incorporate these views or ignore them completely. When the subject of sex education was raised in Pakistan, several interviewees determined that it was symptomatic of a 'Western' or 'secular' 'immorality'. One interviewee in the UK, a community worker with strong links to Muslim youth, asked where, if imams and other authorities were reluctant to provide advice, would the answers be found? Some Muslims considered that even writings on sexual issues, by otherwise 'respected' sources were 'too frank'.¹²

It could be asked whether this provides one indicator of a so-called 'tradition'-bound approach towards interpreting Islam? Is it indicative of the trend (suggested by several sources), that the geographical and chronological 'distance' between migrants (and their descendants) and places of origination has contributed to time-bound Islamic interpretations? One interviewee in Pakistan believed this was true, and that some Muslims in Britain had an 'incomplete knowledge' of Islam:

"The Muslims who have been in England some thirty to forty years before, they were not much learned, and the knowledge of Islam was not complete to them. So most of the people who were living there, in UK, they were labourers, working in factories - their knowledge was not complete. That is the reason they have narrowed down their minds, and do not want to change that. One of the reasons I came to England was to put the concept of Islam in a modern way. Muslims living in England, they should cope with contemporary situations."¹³

This opinion was directed at the 'average' Muslim, rather than individuals within areas of leadership or academia (even though people in those areas may incorporate the traits discussed). Other interviewees in Pakistan believed that levels of individual knowledge and scholarship about Islam were improving in the UK, and compared 'favourably' with those in Pakistan (whether that is a compliment or not is open to discussion).

'Qasim' was directly involved in decision-making processes at grass-roots level, centred on interpretation of the Qur'an. Qasim considered that his primary concern was linked to youth and Islamic education - particularly values associated with the family. According to Qasim, British schools were

not disciplined, and mixed gender classes led to ill-discipline and parental concern (this concern centred on girls obtaining boyfriends, rather than boys obtaining girlfriends.)¹⁴

Examples surface of practices described as 'Islamic' that are resonant of aspects of 'traditional' rural culture in the Indian subcontinent. Other Muslim interests on occasion, describe these negatively:

"The really backward-looking imams, who can't even speak English, have tried to take control of the mosques everywhere, from Walthamstow to Bolton. I heard one the other day saying that our children shouldn't read literature. Another said girls should not be educated after the age of 10. And people are listening to these crazy things, particularly those troubled that their daughters are getting too independent. One said that eating with knives and forks is un-Islamic."¹⁵

This reflects recognition of certain difficulties facing decision-making processes and Muslim interests in Britain, in particular conflict between different interpretative aspects of Islam. The impact of so-called 'traditional outlooks' has an impact on many Muslims, especially those educated within the state system. Decision-making based on 'traditional' concepts is likely to be further challenged throughout this transitional phase, without necessarily any reconciliation between interests and parties.

The paradigmatic 'Islamic education system' is not just about informing Muslims about living life 'Islamically' in Britain. It is also about creating an environment and an opportunity, in which 'indigenous', culturally-attuned leadership(s) will emerge at all levels:

"They [elders] are still operating the mosques as though they were still in Karachi... We want better educated imams with more modern views, and more say in the management. But they won't let us in."¹⁶

The issue of training for such a role is a difficult one, given the limited number of organisations providing specific courses for 'Islamic knowledge' in the UK: institutions includes the Muslim College in London, which runs a course for training imams (incorporating history, English language, and counselling components) and *Darul Ulum*, in Dewsbury, Lancashire (based on a Deoband model of training).

Conclusion

Education remains a 'live issue', associated with how Islam is taught, in Muslim and other contexts. There are key issues associated with notions of identity, the transmission of knowledge about Islam, and concepts of religious authority that can be addressed. On a more basic level, the ways in which Islam is taught at various levels in state-maintained schools is also one that is exercising many Muslims.

Further Reading

Lisa Bernasek and Gary R. Bunt, Islamic Studies provision in the UK: Report to HEFCE by the Higher Education Academy (HEFCE, 2012), http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rdo610/rdo6_10.pdf

Discussed in the Study Stills module, this relates to higher education provision.

Sophie Gilliat-Rae, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Muhammad Khalid Masud, 'Religious Identity and Mass Education' in Johan Meuleman (editor), *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards modernity and identity* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 233-47

Muslim Council of Britain, *Towards Greater Understanding: Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools* (London, Muslim Council of Britain, 2007) <http://www.mcb.org.uk/downloads/Schoolinfo guidance.pdf>

¹ Gary R. Bunt, Ph.D. Interviews drawn upon here include additional edited materials not featured in the Ph.D.

2. Umayr, Haroon, Zayd (pseudonyms), interview by writer, tape recording, Leicester, 1994.
3. Rauf, (pseudonym), interview with writer, transcription of notes, 1994.
4. Moeen Yaseen, Association of Muslim Schools of United Kingdom and Eire, interview by writer, transcription of notes. 1994. London.
5. Hisham, (pseudonym), interview by writer, tape recording, May 1994.
6. Hisham
7. Nighat Mirza, Head, Bradford Muslim Girls; School, quoted in: Mohammed Siddique, *Moral Spotlight on Bradford*, (M.S. Press, Bradford, 1993) 76.
8. Syed ad-Darsh, "What You Ought to Know," *Q-News*, 2-9 June 1995.
9. See: UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, *Need for Reform: Muslims and the law in multi-faith Britain*, London: UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, 1993. 82 pp. For a 'locally' oriented example of the problems related to a specific Muslim grouping and their children's see: Tazeen M. Murshid, "Needs, Perceptions and Provisions: The problem of

achievement among Bengali (Sylhetti) pupils," Chap. in '*Multicultural Teaching*', n.d. (London: Trentham Books, 1990). 12-15.

10. Ghulam Sarwar (writer) & Ibrahim Hewitt (editor of revision), *Sex Education: The Muslim Perspective*, London, The Muslim Educational Trust, 2nd revised edition 1992 (with supplementary 1994 update).

11. Mohsin Jaffar ('M.J.'), Khoja Shia Ithna Asharis, Stanmore, May 1994. It is not the purpose of this brief discussion to delineate the different intra/inter-Shia perspectives

12. Muammar (pseudonym), interview with writer, transcript of notes, 1994.

13. Maulana Abdur Rehman, Vice Chancellor, Jamia Ashrafia Madrasa, Lahore, Pakistan, trans. Aamer Yaquub, interview with writer, transcript of notes, May 1995

¹⁴ 'Qasim', (pseudonym), interview with writer, transcript of notes, May 1994.

15. 'Abdul', a Muslim pharmacist, interviewed by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "A New Islam for the West," *The Independent*, February 14, 1994.

16. Ehsan Massoud, Editor, Q-News, quoted in: Kathy Evans, "Radical time-bomb under British Islam," *The Guardian*, February 7, 1994.