

A Programme for Muslim Education in a Non-Muslim Society

SAHIB MUSTAQIM BLEHER

Any programme for Muslim education in a non-Muslim society, irrespective of regional or circumstantial variations, needs to address two basic questions: Firstly, what are the specific aspects of Muslim education, both in terms of values of contents and methodology, missing from the education programmes available in the environment of a non-Muslim society? Or, from the reverse point of view, what are the weaknesses of the prevailing non-Muslim education programmes which are overcome or, better still, avoided in a Muslim education programme? Secondly, after contrasting these two streams of education programmes, what are the obstacles involved in carrying out Muslim education, and are these obstacles affecting some aspects of a Muslim education programme more than others?

Most programmes of Muslim education in non-Muslim societies have been of a remedial nature and this has been the cause of their all too obvious limitations. Muslims faced with problems or difficulties have responded by searching for ways of redress, often without a clear vision of what they ultimately want to achieve. Doctoring the symptoms has been the standard approach of Muslims in the West and education is no exception. The underlying reason is that immigrant Muslims arrived with the intention to improve their social and economic situation through a temporary stay in an alien environment; their favourite response to education problems – if taken seriously at all – was to insist on the preservation of traditions brought with them from ‘back home’. Such a short-term and backward-looking approach was harmful more than helpful, and it has surely hampered the progress of a younger generation who, instead of being at the forefront of the introduction of Islāmic principles into non-Muslim society, have either lost part of their Muslim identity in order to gain worldly opportunities or *vice-versa*. There are, no doubt, notable exceptions but this article is more concerned with the general trend than individual cases.

To permit long-term planning for Muslim education in a non-Muslim environment, in which an immigrant Muslim population has long-since been transformed into a settled community, it is necessary to tackle the subject from the roots. Only by doing this can we gain an understanding and vision that will ensure a resultant education programme will achieve the permanence of Islām in non-Muslim societies; this must be the ultimate aim of our endeavours. The centre-piece of a Muslim education programme, therefore, has to be the worldview of Islām and the place of man therein. In Islām, it being a faith-based ideology of Divine origin, everything focuses on the Divine element which is always part of every situation.¹ This differs greatly from a secular worldview within which man is the master of his own fortune, free to use his abilities as he pleases, for better or for worse. Christianity, by having God resting on the seventh day, is, in theory, a Divine understanding of the world in which we live. In practice, however, it is much closer to the secular interpretation of events. In the Divine environment of Islām, man’s freedom is restricted not only by the freedom of other men but also by a sense of purpose in his actions. Islām’s approach to life situations is, therefore, harmonious and synthetic, fitting in with the created world in contrast to the secular, synthetic approach of dissecting, controlling and possessing which, instead of enhancing the good in creation, has an ultimately destructive tendency. Hence, in Islām fundamentalism is a positive concept, because the original foundations are good, being of Divine origin, whereas in the secular philosophy the upholding of fundamentals is regarded as a hindrance to innovation which

is a tool in the competition for supremacy.

The holistic approach of Islām represents the first major concept in Muslim education which is not found in non-Muslim educational programmes. The secular education model cannot do justice to the human beings it serves to educate, because it deals with various aspects of human nature in a fragmented way, ignoring their inter-relationships and denying the Divine origin of them all. Man is far more complex than to justify a reduction of the educational process to the cognitive element alone. The human being consists of a body, soul and mind and has understanding, feeling, character and patterns of behaviour. Any education programme which concentrates unduly on the cognitive aspects of the mind and neglects any or all of the other faculties to a lesser or greater degree will result in an adult who is markedly imbalanced; modern civilisation is ample proof of that.

This leads us to another key difference between Muslim and non-Muslim education: The former is geared-up to the perfection of the individual human being and the society of those individuals, solely for the pleasure of *Allāh*. Non-Muslim education is merely concerned with the usefulness of certain abilities which can be developed in a given context. In other words, in a secular education programme the human being, having been denied his Divine origin, is being dehumanised and mechanised into a subservient tool of temporary man-made processes which regulate his life more rigidly than any natural or religious law. Consequently, for the appointment of any member of society to a position of leadership and responsibility, professional specialisation is far more relevant than moral qualification.

The paragraphs above have described the environmental context within which a Muslim education programme operates and the purpose of such a programme. A third feature has to be the contents of the programme itself.

Knowledge in Islām has two branches: absolute knowledge based on revelation, and cognitive acquired knowledge ('the sciences' in the limited modern secular sense). Revealed knowledge, which has its own branches of study (the *Qur'ān*, *Sunnah*, *Ṣirah*, *Fiqh* and *Usūl al-Fiqh* and *Lughah*), is missing entirely from the non-Muslim education programme. The acquired knowledge which branches off into natural, intellectual, imaginative, practical and applied sciences, is being taught without an understanding of the relevance of each to the other and to humanity at large. It was the contents of the school curriculum which was recognised by Muslims in the West as a problem, together with the 'hidden curriculum' which resulted in behaviour by their children which they were not altogether too happy about.

Having thus outlined, in brief, the basic aspects that a Muslim education programme needs to take account of, what are the obstacles faced when trying to develop a Muslim education programme in a non-Muslim society and putting it into practice?

Given that the above description reflects the truth adequately, our first and greatest obstacle is not, as is popularly supposed, a lack of money, but our own lack of understanding and an improper attitude. As a Muslim community in the heartland of secularism we lack awareness of the underlying realities and display an essentially secular approach cloaked in Islāmic garments. This having been our approach in so many spheres of life, of which education is but one (albeit one of the utmost importance), it comes as no surprise to see that we have had, on the whole, more failure than success in the Islāmisisation of our environment. What is meant by 'secular' in this challenging statement is the absence of thorough devotion while we continue to give unmaintainable structures a glossy veneer to show our 'achievements' to the outside world. We could call it 'the Hollywood syndrome'; all show and no substance. We hope and pray that nobody shall see the emptiness behind the pretence of a shiny facade. In old Islāmic art, when working on the ornamentation of sacred buildings, the artist would produce his best work in a corner least accessible to the public eye so as to escape the praise of the observer; thus

his work was perfected for the praise of *Allāh* alone. This was the artist's charity, his chance for pure devotion, the sense of which we have lost, producing instead half-baked expressions for short-lived public consumption. We have succumbed to reprogramming as our attitude has been taken over by secular impressiveness; our work mirrors this metamorphosis. The result of our efforts no longer stands the test of time; little wonder, then, that it fails to convince. How, therefore, can we be so foolishly vain to believe that our work will ignite the revolution against secularism when, in fact, we are copying it day after day?

Pretence has become a common feature in the field of Muslim education in the West today. Underachievement in Muslim schools is blamed on a lack of support from a non-Muslim government. Does Islām only survive when it is supported by its antagonists? Muslim girls' schools are seen as an ideal opportunity to improve the girls' marriage prospects by way of guaranteeing her chastity, rather than as a means to equip young Muslim women with an understanding of a path through life which she will never lose. Parents are happy to off-load their responsibilities for the Islāmic education of their children to the local weekend school without showing any willingness to make greater sacrifices themselves or, at least, to adjust their lifestyles to provide a more Islāmic atmosphere at home. On the whole, we have reduced Islām to a religion in the secular sense while insisting in debate with non-Muslims that it is a complete way of life. Our mosques are still full on special occasions but they are no longer the property nor the expression of a thriving Muslim community.

It could even be said that the Muslim community no longer exists as such. It is stricken with fever and needs respiratory help itself, instead of being able to provide the support any family unit needs whilst trying desperately to hold on to Islām. The increase in family break-ups amongst Muslims, although still moderate in comparison to the rest of society, is a symptom of this painful reality. Isolation is the greatest obstacle to an Islāmic lifestyle today. People who try to opt-out of the rat race of pointless materialism soon find themselves pushed into a corner.

Imagine yourself as the parent of young children imprisoned in a council house without a garden in a run-down inner-city district. The outside world is a raging monster waiting to eat up your children. There are no uncles or aunts living across the road you can send them to, something which would allow the children to see that Islām extends beyond your imagination (as well as giving you a rest from endless childish questions, quarrels and problems!). You send them to school and they come back as enemies who despise you and regard you as ignorant and a hindrance to ambitions their friends and teachers have put into their heads. You send them to Islāmic classes and the teacher beats Islām out of them or contradicts everything you have taught them about Islām. You send them to play with the children of your Muslim friends – not the lapsed, careless Muslim, but the good, active one who works so hard to spread Islām that he neglects his own family – and you get them back with a belly full of *Haram* sweets and a head full of super-hero comics and computer games. You try to take them on holiday to a Muslim country, to perform *Hajj* or '*Umrah* perhaps, and all they will learn (assuming they remember all that you have taught them, for example that cleanliness is an integral part of faith) is that Muslims have become bereft of faith. Faced with such a situation how on earth are you going to make them understand that Islām is supreme, the best...?

The obstacles to overcome whilst attempting to establish a Muslim programme of education are, therefore, more complex and more basic than we often wish to admit, and it is for that reason that a strategy of protection, of trying to keep our children away from bad influences, cannot work. Teaching Islām in a non-Muslim environment is essentially confrontational. The aim must be to equip our children with sufficient knowledge, character, stability, experience and support to come out on top in this confrontation.

From the earliest possible age the teaching has to be consistent, regular and systematic to achieve this aim. Children have to acquire confidence in *Allāh* as Someone Who will never let them down; confidence in the home as a place of security and confidence in their own ability to face up to any struggle. This confidence has to be put to the test again and again. There has to be success and failure and it has to be followed up by the parents and educators so that the child benefits from the experience. It is essential, when selecting real-life situations for follow-up interpretation and analysis, for there to be more success stories than failures so that the child is not prone to give up when things turn sour. In a society which, in the main, has deviated from the right path, a child has to learn to consider being different from many of their peers as a positive quality. Any attempt to help them assimilate and fit in with the crowd will subsequently impair their ability to assert themselves as conscious Muslims; whilst such efforts may be originally intended to minimise the hurt of early conflict, this will lead to lasting pain through the loss of a distinct identity. The feeling of not wanting your child to 'lose out' is utterly misplaced whilst at the same time you want him or her to be somebody who will 'change it all': you cannot change something of which you are an integral part and which, in turn, is an integral part of yourself.

It should not be difficult to realise from all of this that the child's early years are the most important, and that the preoccupation of Muslim communities in Britain with arrangements for secondary and further education is somewhat misguided. The emphasis ought to be on building good foundations. To undo the negative influences already affecting the personality of young adults is a very difficult task. Attempting to protect young people at the age of puberty from both society and themselves is, therefore, unlikely to be successful. In contrast, a properly developed Islāmic personality will only need a little extra help to cope with the challenges of the secular way of life. We cannot, of course, shadow human beings forever (not that this would be desirable even if we could), so pre-school and primary education has to become the focus of our efforts. It is an additional 'plus' that organised education at this stage of life is easier to arrange and more affordable.

The aim ought to be to install certain essential concepts within the personality of the child such that they become an integral part of his or her being. To fill children's heads with Islāmic knowledge in the sense of historic and factual information is of secondary importance. Whilst the main concepts of Islām cannot be separated entirely from this information, it is readily available in books and the child or young adult can acquire it at any stage. As a community, our deficiency is not so much one caused by a lack of knowledge (even though this may well be apparently so) but by a lack of understanding and the ability to form a sense of judgement. What is needed, therefore, is much more of an Islāmic socialisation process, rather than simply Islāmic teaching.

The key concept is that of *Taqwā*, the awareness of *Allāh's* presence and the continuous responsibility we have towards Him in everything we do. To be able to reach the right conclusions, the children need to understand the chain of command or authority in Islām, where their actions are determined by the rules originating from *Allāh*, conveyed by the Prophet ﷺ and passed down and interpreted by the learned and elders. They need to understand that this third element in the chain, though demanding respect, can be challenged, but only on the basis of knowledge from the original sources. Alongside the awareness of *Allāh* and the relevance of His decrees for all of life's situations, the children need to have a proper awareness of themselves and their relationship with *Allāh* and the people surrounding them, past and present. Self-confidence has to be coupled with an ability for self-criticism, as the inability to accept criticism reflects an uncertainty of belief which leads to fanaticism. The most ardent dogmatic supporters of Islām have often signalled that their own convictions are weak simply by their inability to counter

criticism with calm and reason. Children, therefore, have to be trained in the skills of intellectual argument as well as patience and tolerance. They have to understand that questions and doubts, even disbelief, do not necessarily constitute an attack against their faith but are a result of ignorance. They have to learn to adapt the methods of argument to the prospective outcome. An awareness of *what* can be achieved needs to precede a decision over *how* it can be achieved and any progress then made needs to be monitored constantly.

These are lofty aims because they mean that our children need not only to be good Muslims but also, as they live in a predominantly non-Muslim society, they need to understand the way a non-Muslim thinks without being fooled by his superimposed logic. They need to be trained in the art of dialectics without being confined by its limitations. For example, they need to be sure that interest decreases wealth and charity increases it, notwithstanding the apparent contradiction of immediate mathematical calculation. They, therefore, must be able to express and reaffirm their faith in the truths known to them *and* prove their validity by way of empirical evidence within the wider economy and the repercussions upon the individual where the saver, having gained a few pennies in interest, will have lost pounds in ensuing inflation and debt taxation.

Are we ever likely to achieve such heights of human perfection? Is it not all we can do to hold on to the main rituals and cultural expressions of Islām, to carve a niche for survival? This indeed is the key question. Are we going to foster an inward-looking or an outward-looking attitude? Are we, as Muslims, standard-bearers and an example for others, witnesses for mankind² who order what is good and forbid what is wrong³, who care more for others (and that includes the disbelievers who depend on our guidance) than we care for ourselves, even if we are in hardship?⁴ Or are we content to remain a ghettoised minority as long as we are given certain privileges which permit us to live in accordance with our own way of life? Is there Islām without *jihād*, the endless, restless struggle for betterment? Is there any prophet of *Allāh* (peace be upon them all) who claimed simply to have been sent to look after just himself and those who follow him? Can faith be separated from action? Can religion be separated from worldly affairs? Can justice be selective? Can a Muslim turn a blind eye to what is happening around him and still be a Muslim? The answers to all these questions are known to anybody whose conscience has not yet died. The question, therefore, is this: can we still prove worthy of having been chosen for *Allāh*'s guidance?

Finally, we come back to the point about the right environment. We are rightly concerned that the environment of a non-Muslim society presents a negative influence upon our children. This is, however, only true in the absence of Islām as a living reality. The struggle of Muslims, even though in total isolation, to change this environment; the total devotion to live Islām, whatever the obstacles; the altruism of making the benefits of Islām available to everybody, whatever the criticisms; the life of *jihād* in the way of *Allāh*; the complete sacrifice of all personal, selfish ambitions to this cause; all provide the ideal training to impress upon a growing young Muslim. If we can get our children to be part of this, if they catch on, there is nothing in the world that can ever turn them away from Islām thereafter. First, though, before we sit back complacently to watch *The Message* on video, intending to give our children some Islāmic exposure, we have to live it ourselves. If the children are to take it seriously, the environment has to be real.

1. *Al-Qur'ān*, chapter 57, verse 4; chapter 58, verse 7.

2. *Ibid.*, chapter 2: verse 143.

3. *Ibid.*, chapter 3: verse 110.

4. *Ibid.*, chapter 59: verse 9.