

Multicultural Education: an Islāmic perspective

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History testifies to mankind's horrific potential to destroy itself. There have been many grotesque examples illustrating intolerance based on ignorance: the infamous Spanish Inquisition; the anti-Semitism of Christopher Columbus; the persecution of 'heathens' (including Jews and Muslims) in the name of Roman Catholicism; and the Nazi desire to create a 'master race' in Germany based on pagan values. Today, there are problems in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, India, Bosnia, and so on. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that religion is blamed for troubles across the world.

Unfortunately, ignorance continues to prevail. Just as it was easy to blame the Jews for the economic troubles in Nazi Germany of the thirties, so too it is easy to blame religion as the cause of so much suffering. Indeed, today we see a new 'scapegoat' emerging – the rise of 'Islāmophobia'. Much of the bigotry that leads people to condemn religion still exists. A Roman Catholic Cardinal, quoted some few years ago giving his response to a series of Religious Education (RE) textbooks, reportedly said, "It generates a falsely rosy picture of inter-religious relations." He went on, "The Divinity of Christ is only hinted at, the term Son of God is mentioned but left unexplained and the fact that Jesus is the only saviour and Redeemer of the human race is omitted." In fact, this series of text books has much to commend it and is a credit, in particular to those Catholics who were instrumental in its development. It clearly states in the foreword of its 'Teacher's Book': 'While [the series] draws principally on Catholic tradition it is open to any school community and to the religious traditions to which this may relate.' Indeed if it had fulfilled the wishes of the Cardinal it would have failed to meet its clearly stated objectives.

Such comments cause concern. For too long religion has been labelled as negative, so much so that there is considerable prejudice against its study as a subject. This is reflected in its demise in society generally, its gradual 'elimination' from the school curriculum, and the subsequent need for the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) to try to preserve its place in schools. One has to question the motives of the ERA. Is it really concerned about preserving the importance of religion? Or are the concerns of a small group of Christians paramount?

There are principally three motives for teaching RE in schools: the political, the religious and the educational. The political is largely concerned with maintaining the 'status quo', trying to revive the 'good old days'; the religious attempts to indoctrinate a particular faith; and the educational tries to ensure pupils are provided with the skills to make the most of their adult life as law abiding citizens. It is clear that the two former motives are doomed to fail as they are missing the real target of education – to educate!

I suggest that it is possible to present religion positively; encouraging people to think about religion favourably will help to create a more harmonious society. I am not saying that it will solve the problems of the world, but it will certainly go much further than the path of bigotry and intolerance. However, it is also important to recognise that religion by its nature deals with belief. Belief can be fundamentally divisive. It is therefore essential that we do not look just at the positive aspects, but also the tensions and divisions these differences cause. What we need to do is to learn how to cope with these differences; to learn how to set those essential guidelines necessary for people to live peacefully within a pluralistic society.

The second of the Cardinals's comments demonstrates another problem. We live in an age when we are all, children and adults alike, encouraged to question our beliefs and

actions. Gone are the days of strict dogma, replaced now by healthy questioning and reappraisal of life stances. Gone also are the days when pupils were expected simply to accept and believe. Adolescents, in particular, are astute; they see beyond bigotry. It is not surprising, therefore, to find approaches like the Cardinal's rejected by so many youngsters. Today's youth want and deserve a meaningful education, in the sense that they want to see a purpose and a value to it. They are entitled to this, as it does, after all, involve their lives. Pupils have 'voted with their feet' against the dogmatic approach to RE; to expect all pupils in a multicultural society to believe 'the fact that Jesus is the only saviour' is to belittle them. I do not deny the right of Christians to believe such a statement; but I do object to the blind belief that they have the right to impose it on others – this could only be bigotry.

My intention is not to robe bigoted attitudes to religion, but to re-examine the role religion can play in creating a more harmonious and peaceful society. I shall of course focus on Islām as a means of conveying a fresh insight into the values of multicultural education and the lessons to be learnt from it.

The growth of Islām in Britain provokes mixed feelings. Some welcome it, others detest it, whilst many fall between the two. It is, therefore, difficult for someone not acquainted with Islām to acquire an objective view; it is not surprising to find people with mixed feelings. The art of educating is firstly to understand the position of the one being educated, and to move on from there. When approaching someone with superficial knowledge one might inadvertently promote rather than remove prejudice. This is, of course, one of the well-known dangers of what is referred to as 'tokenism' in education. An example would be devising a curriculum in which Christianity predominates, with only token lessons covering the other world faiths. Rather than educating it reinforces stereotypes. This is a danger in any top-heavy curriculum: instead of encompassing a healthy breadth of content, it breeds unhealthy narrowness, hardly useful for tomorrow's adult citizens.

It is important to realise that it is difficult for someone to be objective when they have been raised with a narrow viewpoint. It is easy to become condescending. Unfortunately, the attitude that only Christians will go to paradise whilst all others go to hell prevails. This attitude led to the persecution of non-Christians in the past. This is why I am deeply concerned by the above-mentioned remarks by a leading church figure such as the Cardinal. It is necessary to appreciate that attempts at solutions have been made by well-intentioned people from within this framework. This is why, all too often, we see other faiths being stamped with a Christian interpretation. It should be noted that many solutions and ideologies fail because they are based on narrow-minded ideals.

Looking back at the 1950s and 60s, we can see the beginnings of assimilation, combined with a growing realisation that people with different beliefs and cultural values were in Britain. Giddens describes assimilation as "the acceptance of a minority group by a majority population, in which the group takes over the values and norms of the dominant culture."¹ Put simply, this means, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' It is a one-way process whereby the minority group is expected to adapt to and adopt the culture of the majority. The assumption is that the majority culture is superior and that there can be no exchange or sharing of values between cultures; one cannot enrich the other. This surely is the sort of intolerance that breeds racism. Unless there is willingness to accept change on the part of the minority, there must be a degree of compulsion.

Assimilation denies the fact that religion often crosses racial boundaries; it is a common assumption, for example, that in Britain all Muslims are Asians, whereas Islām is to be found all over the world and is firmly established here in Britain.

Roy Todd writes: "Some people who migrated to Britain in the 1960s argue that their children will not submit to some of the racism which they suffered and instead will

challenge whatever hostility they encounter.”² His interpretation is realistic and this is exactly what happens with Islām; hostility towards Islām will always be challenged. A subtle point is being made here: Islām is not aggressive but it is defensive; it will not cause hostility but will certainly defend itself when attacked.

At this point it should be made clear that there is often a difference between what Islām says and what Muslims do, despite the fact that (unlike Christianity) there is clear guidance on virtually every aspect of life in the *Qur’ān* and the example (*Sunnah*) of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. Muslims are called to follow the path of *Allāh*, as shown in the *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah*:

*O you who believe!
Obey Allāh,
and obey the Messenger,
and those charged with authority among you.
If you differ in anything among yourselves,
refer it to Allāh and His Messenger,
if you do believe in Allāh and the Last Day:
that is best, and most suitable for final determination.*³

It is important to appreciate that there are certain values and norms from which Islām will not deviate (even if some ‘Muslims’ do), and it cannot be adapted or altered to any practice contrary to its basic teachings. In other words, Islām cannot be assimilated. Indeed, since Islām has so much that is morally superior to non-Islāmic practices prevalent in this society, I believe that in due course it is more likely that the majority culture will be assimilated within Islām (as has happened in Islāmic history).

Another approach for Muslims in Britain is separatism, defined as the encapsulation of minority cultures; withdrawal of minority groups; self-help and separate provision.

This approach is interesting and will probably be upheld by those wishing to have voluntary aided Muslim schools. They have a strong argument, and it is disconcerting to see the Government clearly operating double standards. It is the legal right of Muslims to apply for voluntary aided status for their schools. The strongly-held view is that the education system must be fair: either voluntary aided status is allowed for everybody, or it isn’t granted to anybody. The double standards come into the picture when aided status is allowed for some groups but not others, even though the latter are also taxpayers and citizens deserving equality. How can it be right for voluntary aided status to be granted to Jewish schools, in some cases before they had even opened their doors, whilst operational Muslim schools, fulfilling all the educational criteria for voluntary aid, find the official goal posts being moved continuously?

Islām, by its very nature, is separatist. Indeed, all faith communities are; beliefs do separate people and it is necessary to appreciate this. Encouraging greater autonomy for faith groups will lead to more harmony in society, not, as some people believe, the opposite. That this is so can be seen from the family unit, for example, which has proved time and time again to be the best foundation for a productive society. For the family group to work well it needs to have the freedom and privacy to operate at its own discretion. It is somewhat belittling to assume that any given community is incapable of governing its own affairs simply because it does not agree with all of the values of what is, as demonstrated above, an inadequate democratic structure.

It should also be borne in mind that religious values, per se, generally unite various groups against godlessness rather than divide them. The separatist approach has a lot to offer and deserves greater study instead of being summarily dismissed.

Another interesting approach is pluralism. Unfortunately, I have encountered Muslims who are too narrow in their understanding of what needs to be done in this respect.

Whilst some may advocate separatism and others pluralism, I suggest that we need both. In an ideal situation separatism would be the only viable system, but we do not live in an ideal world, so we must be pragmatic. There is a clear demand and need for ‘separate’ Muslim schools; the Muslim community’s desire for these schools should be respected. Yet we recognise that they can only cater for a small percentage of the Muslim population. There will be many Muslims who, for one reason or another, will prefer instead the local state ‘secular’ (for want of a better word) school. Their children also have religious needs which must be met, and pluralism can provide a solution.

In presenting the case for pluralism, there needs to be a clear understanding of what it is, as there tend to be many definitions depending on whether the word is applied to economics, politics or education, etc.

Giddens defines pluralism as, “a society in which several ethnic groupings co-exist, each living in communities or regions largely separate from the others.”⁴ This is an interesting definition as it begs the readers to rack their brains to determine the difference between ‘pluralism’ and ‘separatism’!

Angela Wood defines pluralism as, “Minority groups participating in a just society: equal rights with the majority; cultural status for all.”⁵

I tend to warm to this latter understanding. It is dangerous to conjure up an image of ‘ghetto’ groups being marked out for racist reasons; indeed, the root of racism is ignorance. I see Angela’s definition, with the emphasis on “equal rights with the majority; cultural status for all”, as being significant. The danger with separatism is that through separation it becomes more difficult to apply equal rights. Pluralism, however, should have built-in safeguards.

This all seems rather abstract, though; a clear, healthy model of pluralism in operation can be found in the development of ‘multicultural education’.

I would suggest that in any ‘secular’ state school, multicultural education is the only model that will adequately educate children as citizens of tomorrow’s world – a world that will undoubtedly be multicultural. I would even advocate the application of multicultural education in largely monocultural areas, since the wider world will increasingly become less monocultural. It should also be closely linked with the delivery of equal opportunities. Schools should become safe environments for all. Schools are ‘public’ places, where different cultures can merge and share their values – or not as the case may be. Just as a fly is attracted to dirt, so is a bee to honey. We need to learn that certain kinds of behaviour cannot be changed, and safeguards need to be built into ‘public’ environments to ensure general forms of offence should be removed; where they cannot be avoided then we should be taught how to respond appropriately. Equal opportunities should not aim to make everyone into a dull homogeneous whole. Humans are not like that; we are all different, but we should strive to provide equality of opportunity, to ensure that the rights of individuals and groups are not denied.

Recognising this, in education it would be wrong to allow one religion or ideology to predominate. This is probably my greatest criticism of the ERA as far as RE is concerned. The Act returns RE to the Dark Ages by assuming that this country is ‘in the main, Christian’ and that RE should reflect this ‘fact’. Many of the problems arising as a result of such a stance have been mentioned above. It is interesting to see that the Catholic Commission for Racial Justice has said: “Religions and cultures are closely interwoven and often religion is the very ‘soul’ of culture.” I think they’re right. To deny religion is to deny the soul of culture. The heart of the solution for co-existence, therefore, lies in the understanding of culture; in this, RE has thus an important role to play. It saddens me to see something so apparently important being treated as a token subject in schools. Could this be because Mammon is placed before God?

Critics still say that simply having identifiable groups does not guarantee equality of

opportunity: “Certainly the mere presence of identifiably different groups within a society is no guarantee of equal participation as citizens, equal life-chances, or equality of opportunity.”⁶

I would contend, though, that pluralism takes us down the road of equality further than any other.

There are various approaches found in religious education. They are:

1. The ‘confessional’, or dogmatic, approach. This is the assumption that only one way can be right. If two faiths oppose each other – along comes the Spanish Inquisition! The Cardinal’s ideas are an example of this method.
2. The anti-dogmatic approach, in which RE is treated as an academic, dispassionate and objective study. This is supported by groups such as the Secular Society. Very good if the coffin lid of RE is to be nailed down even tighter. Usually it encourages pupils to fall asleep during RE lessons!
3. The phenomenological, or undogmatic, approach, which sees the aim of RE as the promotion of understanding and uses the tools of scholarship in order to enter into an emphatic experience of the faith of individuals or groups. It does not seek to promote one religious viewpoint but it recognises that the study of religion must transcend the merely informative.

To sum up, I have outlined three possible approaches to education:

- i) Assimilation, a non-starter in my view;
- ii) Separatism, which is important and should be allowed and encouraged when the need arises; and
- iii) Pluralism, which should be applied to those not encompassed by separatism.

Of course, the argument and study do not stop there. Even within multicultural education several approaches have been used, with some variation between them. Space does not allow me to enter into detailed definitions (which can be found in established educational texts) but I would like to name a few which have been tried: multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial, immigrant, poly-ethnic and anti-racist. Most are self-explanatory, but there is one significant point to be made; these models are based on their application in a capitalist society and Islām is not ‘capitalist’. Islām will not actively promote Western capitalist values; rather it will denounce them as wasteful, discriminatory and highly-damaging to the well-being of society. Western capitalism promotes greed and unhealthy competition (hence the need for a monopolies commission!).

It is misleading to assume that Islāmic values will happily fit in with those applied in the West. It is rather like petrol and steam engines, both of which work efficiently when finely tuned but work less than well, if at all, when parts of one are fitted to the other. If you don’t know how each of these engines works, the result will be chaotic. However, in a strange way, to take the analogy further, these machines behave differently. The petrol engine may be faster and more convenient to use, but it pollutes more and may ultimately bring about more harm than good. So it is with Islām and the Western value-system but I have met very few who, without prejudice, have come to a state of understanding or appreciation of both. Autonomy for both must be allowed.

Muslims will not become British until we redefine the word ‘British’. If we mean British in the sense of ‘traditional British values’ then I would suggest that Muslims are, in fact, closer to those today than the supposedly-British are. The values of family life, honesty and integrity seem to be diminishing in various areas of British society today.

The following words of George Bernard Shaw give plenty of food for thought: “I have always held the religion of Muḥammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phase of existence which can make itself appeal to every age. I have studied him, the wonderful man, and in my opinion far from being an anti-Christ he must be

called the Saviour of Humanity. I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it much-needed peace and happiness: I have prophesied about the faith of Muḥammad that it would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow as it is beginning to be acceptable to the Europe of today.”⁷

I would like to conclude with the following:

*You are the best of peoples evolved for mankind,
enjoining what is right,
forbidding what is wrong,
and believing in Allāh.
If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them:
among them are some who have faith,
but most of them are perverted transgressors.*⁸

1. Giddens, 1989 CE, p. 735.
2. Roy Todd, *Education in a Multicultural Society*, p. 38.
3. *Al-Qur’ān*, chapter 4, verse 59.
4. Giddens, 1989 CE, p. 746.
5. Angela Wood, Schools Council, 1984 CE.
6. Roy Todd, *Education in a Multicultural Society*, p. 38.
7. George Bernard Shaw, *The Genuine Islām*.
8. *Al-Qur’ān*, chapter 3, verse 110.